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The Theology of Reconstruction:
White Southern Religious Leaders in the Aftermath of the Civil War

by

Zachary Woods Dresser

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APPROVED, THESIS COMMITTEE:

[Signature]
John B. Boles, Chair
William P. Hobby Professor of History

[Signature]
W. Caleb McDaniel
Assistant Professor of History

[Signature]
Jeffrey J. Kripal
J. Newton Rayzor Chair in Philosophy and Religious Thought

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Abstract

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The Civil War transformed American life like no event in the nation’s history. Historians are still working to understand the cultural reckoning following the war. This dissertation contributes to that goal by analyzing the response of white southern ministers, mostly evangelical Christians, to Civil War defeat and continued powerlessness during Reconstruction. These religious leaders responded to the spiritual and material needs of their parishioners in trying times by creating public theologies, which took into account both sacred and secular matters. Though they professed an apolitical stance, ministers addressed secular problems in moral terms that allowed them to offer religious guidance without explicit commentary on electoral politics. This theological approach to current events bore close similarity to twentieth-century liberation theology, in its stance that the South was poor and oppressed in relation to the conquering North. Correspondingly, white clergy depicted the South as God’s chosen people, even though they were suffering. By cultivating this relationship with the divine, southern Christians expected deliverance from unjust worldly circumstances.

Religious leaders identified common problems standing in the way of southern prosperity—most notably doubt, poverty, and educational inadequacy— but agreed upon no strategies for combating them. Denominationalism, race, and other differences worked against regional religious cohesion, limiting the efficacy of ministerial efforts toward uplift. This failure to cooperate for the benefit of the South demonstrates the relative weakness of
lingering Confederate identity in relation to religious belief and church affiliation.

Nineteenth-century southerners believed in a world governed by Providence and thus filled both civil and sacred institutions with religious significance. White southern theology incorporated practical as well as metaphysical and doctrinal considerations, responding to the needs of the present while using the wellspring of tradition as a source of hope for a better future.
Acknowledgements

As I sit in yet another coffee shop, it seems appropriate to begin this section by addressing the environmental factors that helped me finish this dissertation. Without the din of strangers’ conversations, jazz pumped into the background or bluegrass through my headphones, and incredible amounts of caffeine, this thesis would remain incomplete.

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loving influence has made me who I am today. Rebecca witnessed the highs and lows graduate school induced and put up with them valiantly. She has brought me love, happiness, companionship, advice, and a lot of books from the library.¹ I look forward to what our future holds.

¹ Rebecca also deserves recognition for bringing Pip into my life. He literally stood in the way of my typing daily. I completed this dissertation in spite of him.
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Introduction

In June 1865, only a few months after Confederate forces surrendered at Appomattox, William May Wightman addressed a congregation of the defeated in South Carolina. The Methodist minister’s sermon presented an unexpected thesis, declaring, “Progression is Man’s Glorious, Dread Destiny.” When all seemed lost, the pastor offered hope and guidance. To those listeners who were rebuilding, he suggested, “Home is before you, in the everlasting home.” To those whose family members, fellow soldiers, and friends had fallen in battle, the minister advised, “Friends are before you: you shall presently greet them on the shores of immortality.” Having “maintained for four years a life & death struggle,” southerners had nothing to be ashamed of and nothing to profit from dwelling in the past. Rather, Wightman encouraged his congregation, “Let us ... forget the past. Let us adjust ourselves, feeling, purpose and action, to the new condition of things. Let us stand unbending as the giant stem of the oak to misfortune.” At the same time, there was work to be done. God called Christians to respond to “the distress of those whom the fortunes of war have, to a large extent, cast upon our compassion & aid.” Mourning had its place in the course of defeat, but the war’s events must not continue to paralyze or depress the southern Christian. Wightman chided his audience, “Let us seek to do bravely the duty of the present day, leaving to the great controller of human events all results.”

_____________________

1William May Wightman, “Progression is Man’s Glorious, Dread Destiny,” June, 1865, William May Wightman Papers, Sandor Teszler Library, Wofford College. Spartanburg, South Carolina.
Throughout the South white religious leaders tended to the emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of their parishioners during the travails of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Messages like Wightman’s appeared in all regions of the South and in all denominations. Alabama minister Basil Manly spoke to Baptists about “Bereavement” a few months later, pointing believers to the Old Testament book of Lamentations to learn “the language of sorrow.” Ministers joined Manly in helping their congregations understand suffering. Loss was a normal part of the human experience. “Home [was] not secure from the invasion of death,” Manly preached; “enemies enter there sometimes.” Though these ministers also harbored Confederate sympathies and antipathy toward recently emancipated people, their activity comprised more than those reactionary beliefs. In an 1870 sermon on “The Christian Ministry,” Episcopalian William Porcher Dubose described the duties of those called to be pastors: “we must be men; suffering men, tempted men, men girt about with infirmity. ... [W]e must be able to sympathize.” Religious leaders acted according to this definition during the postwar era, defining the predicament of the South and offering guidance toward a better future. Their instructions often merged the spiritual and the political, and the result was a public theology designed for regional uplift.2

In the wake of the Civil War, white religious leaders developed theologies of Reconstruction, connected to regional history and religious tradition but adapted to present circumstances. These theologies combined spiritual and political elements,

undergirded by a providential narrative explaining the South’s prosperous history, downtrodden present, and positive future. Although white southerners were partially excluded from politics and struggling economically, few relinquished their belief in the divine chosenness of their home region. In the process of developing this revised regional identity in defeat, religious leaders deemed the South as simultaneously impoverished, oppressed by the conquering North, and chosen by God.

The theological questions posed in response to socio-economic problems and the language used in answer bear close similarity to the liberation theologies of the twentieth century. To be sure, white southerners’ conceptions of race jaundiced their definitions of oppression and poverty. In their minds, enslavement gave African Americans the soul-saving benefit of Christianity, rather than brutalizing, commodifying, and dehumanizing millions of human beings. After the war, northern refusal to seat southern congressmen represented the collapse of American democracy in ex-Confederate minds, but southern ministers accepted efforts to reinstitute slavery through black codes and disfranchisement as just and progressive. This dissertation argues that white religious leaders developed liberation theologies in light of postwar problems, but this thesis should always be understood in a qualified sense. Today, the hypocrisy in those white southern claims of oppression is patent, and, as such, these theologies cannot be considered in the same vein as the brilliant works of liberationists like Gustavo Gutiérrez and James Cone and the organizational activity done in impoverished communities around the globe.

Yet, thinking about postwar white theology in these terms possesses analytical utility. Recent scholarship has focused on bringing the full intellectual effects of the Civil
War into focus, and considering postwar religious thought as practical theology helps redress a historiographical slight. The scholarship on religion in the Civil War era tends to treat the institutions of the church and belief as a stalking horse for politics, producing an incomplete understanding of religion’s role in this period of American life. This dissertation aims to draw attention to the complexity of religion’s influence in trying times. Belief was not a given; it took hard work to maintain piety after the loss of a deeply religious war. Faith brought southerners together and reinforced definitions of northerners as “others” within the same nation. Visions of Christian uplift also tore southerners apart. Even if religious leaders approached problems with the same liberationist paradigm, agreement remained elusive. All could agree that Christianity formed the basis of human progress in both sacred and secular realms, but within that broad consensus white southerners remained at odds, debating theological concepts and political actions. Americans in both sections responded to the dramatic events of the Civil War by reaffirming their understanding of Providence in every aspect of earthly life.³ While scholars frequently distinguish between the sacred and the secular, most mid-nineteenth-century Americans saw the world in different terms. In their minds, divine agency permeated events. Recently, scholars in religious studies and history have asserted the primacy of belief in their studies, calling for an appreciation of the religious ideas of historical actors themselves rather than the application of modern theory.⁴ This dissertation hopes to advance this appreciation of


practical belief in the study of the Civil War era by demonstrating the pervasiveness of religious thought in the southern response to defeat and Reconstruction.

Scholarly literature on religion in the Civil War era has blossomed in recent years, following the 1998 publication *Religion and the American Civil War*. Those essays offered convincing proof that religion was a central component of life in wartime America and deserved further study. Yet much of the work that has followed retains an exclusive focus on the political aspects of religion. These histories have revealed the depths of the sectional schisms in American churches, showing that religious leaders pushed their respective causes forward through the bloodshed and reinforced the dangerous logic that God chose sides in a very human conflict.5

Even contemporaries noticed that the politicization of religion reshaped the work of churches in public life, and the postwar emphasis on the “spirituality” of the church in the South shows at least a partial retreat from religious activity in public life. However, historians of the Civil War and Reconstruction have followed these disavowals of politics too closely, perhaps as a result of their thorough tracking of wartime pastors’ overt activism. With criticism of the federal government outlawed after 1865, political language disappeared, and historians have largely taken ministers’ adoption of an apolitical stance at face value. For decades, scholars of the humanities have operated using expanded definitions of the political, which include all aspects of human life contributing toward the

construction and maintenance of power relations rather than formal electoral processes alone. Most postwar ministers faithfully abstained from championing a Democratic candidate from the pulpit, but their limited definition of the political allowed for commentary on a wide range of “secular” phenomena. Outside of the ballot box, public life was open for religious deliberation.

As a result of this either/or conception of politics, religion in Reconstruction appears in the literature as either starkly political in its celebration of the Confederate past or as singularly focused on internal development. The former understanding is most famously articulated in Charles Reagan Wilson’s *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920*. Wilson describes the creation of a Confederate identity in defeat that seamlessly merged regional pride, religion, and the memory of a conquered state. Here, religion gave form but not meaning. It provided the shape in the forms of ritual, liturgy, and sainthood, but these vessels carried political content. However, other scholars cordon off religious activity as having little or no political import. Daniel Stowell draws attention to the difficult process of “religious reconstruction,” in which church institutions came into existence in the case of African Americans and rebuilt in the case of white southerners. Politics is external to this process, serving only to exacerbate the divisions between northern, southern, and African American churches. Others have traced the workings of nineteenth-century values like progress and professionalization through southern
churches in this era, but, again, a stark divide between religion and politics persists in these analyses.⁶

This dissertation offers a revised understanding of the role of politics in southern faith by outlining the public theology created in response to the crises of defeat and rebuilding. Southern Christians responded to their times through the lens of belief and often answered secular problems in sacred language. The process of religious rebuilding itself had political import, as southerners fretted about the future of a society with crippled churches. A strong religious base would stabilize the South, making its political systems work, its economy prosper, and its schools preserve the best values of the past while preparing the way for virtuous progress. Although they paid lip service to the idea of spirituality, religious leaders possessed an uncanny ability to find moral implications in nearly any current event (and thus justify their intrusion).⁷

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⁷ The modern history of southern theology after the Civil War and before the Civil Rights Movement is remarkably undeveloped, and the aging work of denominational historians comprises most of the available guidance. These scholars often work with an agenda of documenting a history of orthodoxy, rather than a critical eye toward the phenomena of the past. In these books, religious leaders often appear as concerned only with the maintenance of denominational standards and doctrine, giving little attention to secular affairs. In particular, these historians’ attempts to support the doctrine of spirituality in the southern church have limited the investigations of historical theology.
Even the most bookish theologians regularly turned their attention away from the intricacies of doctrine and addressed the contemporary realities of Christianity in the southern states. Historians of American theology tend to neglect the practical aspects of religious minds, focusing on the grand metaphysical questions and doctrinal deliberations almost exclusively. For instance, Mark Noll and Brooks Holifield both treat academic theology as the only activity of religious minds worthy of inclusion in their lengthy surveys of American theological history.\(^8\) The use of liberation theology to interpret southern clerics allows for the inclusion of pastoral theology alongside systematics and political ruminations. The important guidance of white southerners through bereavement and recovery from a brutal war merit inclusion in the category of religious thought. In the following pages, southern theology appears as a vital enterprise that connected the resources of tradition with the pressing concerns of the present. Historians should follow current theologians in recognizing theology as the study of the practical and the metaphysical, public as well as internecine.

The chronology of this dissertation is somewhat fluid, fitting with recent discussions of the periodization of nineteenth-century United States history. In light of recent studies in many aspects of the era’s history, the strict end dates of the Civil War at 1865 and Reconstruction at 1877 seem to comport with little else than political formality. It is now standard to treat Reconstruction as “America’s Continuing Civil War,” to quote one recent book title. Intellectual historians take this idea even further, with Louis Menand arguing

that the war formed a crucial backdrop for the development of Pragmatism.9 Scholars of southern religion have been slow to adopt this downplaying of period divides. This study of theology confirms arguments made in other fields that the events and ideas of 1861–1865 reverberated far into the future.10 For white southerners, the prostrated position of their region during Reconstruction seemed directly connected to longstanding sectional tensions and the war. One piece of evidence in their conceptualization of the North as oppressor disappeared with the formal end of Reconstruction in 1877, but sectional equality clearly loomed in the distance. Southerners long distrusted northern motives, and years of


10 For a few of many religious histories that use the Civil War as a stark divide, see covering the antebellum era: E. Brooks Holifield, The Gentleman Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795–1860 (Durham; Duke University Press, 1978); Anne C. Loveland, Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800–1860 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980); Mitchell Snay, Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993). Studies of the Civil War itself often link the antebellum denominational schisms to wartime events, but end the story in 1865. See, for example, Mark Noll, The Civil War as a Theological Crisis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); George C. Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Scott, A Visitation of God. Works on religion in Reconstruction are few and generally begin in 1865. See Wilson, Baptized in Blood; Paul Harvey, Redeeming the South; Stowell, Rebuilding Zion; and Edward J. Blum, Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005).
denominational schism produced a theological distrust of northern piety that was difficult to remove. The 1881 Ecumenical Methodist Conference in London serves as an endpoint to this study, representing a turn toward global rather than regional concerns. However, sectionalism in southern religion lingered, carrying vestiges of the wartime and Reconstruction theology into the twentieth century.

The subjects of this study are white southern religious leaders, mainly evangelicals with a smattering of Episcopalians and Catholics. This category typically refers to ordained men serving as pastors, editors, or educators, but some laypeople appear when they speak to religious concerns or in a church context. In a region stripped of its institutions of power in war, these men occupied positions of institutional authority and served as leaders for downtrodden communities. Women surely aided in this process, especially in the construction of the religious home that was so important to nineteenth-century American belief, but their thoughts from the Reconstruction years are difficult to recover. The diaries that so many women wrote during the war stop soon after, for the most part. This same phenomenon makes the postwar religious life of southern men similarly opaque. Due to this lack of sources, this study focuses on the lives and thought of leading men in the southern churches. Newspapers, periodicals, printed and manuscript sermons, as well as some letters and books, form the evidentiary base. For the purposes of this dissertation, a “southerner” was someone associated with a southern denomination or a Confederate supporter. Historians in recent decades have emphasized the diversity within the South, speaking instead about “many Souths,” but my research showed remarkable similarity throughout the former Confederacy when it came to the consideration of Reconstruction’s religious meaning. Virginians and Arkansans asked the same questions, despite dissimilar
geography and an uneven experience of military occupation. Southerners along the gulf as well as near the Mason-Dixon line thought in terms of oppressive political and economic structures and understood Christianity as the means of deliverance from their troubles.

This dissertation proceeds topically rather than chronologically, with each chapter addressing a particular component of the theology of Reconstruction. Chapter One explains the notion of this theology as a liberation theology in detail. It explores the development of a white southern mentality of oppression in the last years of war and first years of Reconstruction. Religious leaders targeted marauding Yankee soldiers and unjust economic structures, while casting the southern people as God’s chosen, suffering people. The former Confederacy represented a modern Israel, occupying what southerners often called “our southern Zion.”

For the public theologies devised in the era to have any influence on southern lives, belief in the divine itself had to be secured. The second chapter examines two Old School Presbyterian leaders, focusing on their theologies of providence in order to understand how pious southerners kept on believing despite suggestions that God had abandoned them. Robert Lewis Dabney and Benjamin Morgan Palmer both asserted the urgency of orthodoxy in tumultuous times, responding to Confederate defeat as well as new ideas like Darwinism and positivism. A close analysis of their ideas shows that even the orthodox modified their standards of belief, if ever so slightly, to make sense of extraordinary circumstances. The Civil War era rocked the faith to its core, shaking even the steadfast. Yet, the resilience of belief was as impressive as the destructiveness of war, proving that religion, if anything, could lead southerners through the trauma of defeat.
This tremendous potential of religion and its institutions to lead the South through the recovery process met one of its most challenging obstacles in its own structures. As Chapter Three argues, the denominational shape of Christianity persevered, despite the allure of a regional faith, limiting the efficacy of any broad-based plans. The Confederate experience made southerners question the true boundaries of the faith, but attempts at interdenominational cooperation and even union demonstrated that the war could not destroy the centuries-old Protestant tradition of factionalism. During Reconstruction, notions that the southern denominations could unite, as the troops had in the trenches, foundered on the shoals of anti-Yankee, anti-Catholic, and doctrinal biases. This argument shows the limitations of historians’ notion of a Confederate civil religion surviving the war itself.\textsuperscript{11} In each of the following chapters, the separatism bred into the southern denominations emerges, preventing full regional cooperation in the implementation of religious leaders’ suggestions.

The next two chapters look at strategies religious leaders used to bring about regional uplift during Reconstruction. Aside from basic evangelization, ministers called most frequently for educational reform and a proper understanding of economics. Chapter Four covers religious considerations of education in southern society. Though all ministers agreed that some sort of educational reform needed to take place in order to secure the ethical and religious foundations of southern culture, there was little consensus as to what that reform should look like. Denominational disagreements reared their head in this context, and even within single denominations, boosters bickered over the type of

\textsuperscript{11} Wilson, \textit{Baptized in Blood}. 
education needed most—public secondary, college, or seminary. The final chapter
documentst religious interpretations of material circumstances. Ministers reflected on the
will of God in the midst of scarcity and helped parishioners understand how to exist with
little. Wealth spurred reflection, too, and clergy counseled those lucky, well-off
congregants in pious conduct. Yet, agreement again proved elusive. Religious leaders took
different sides when it came to an industrial or agrarian economy, and urban or rural
living. Southern churches offered similar coping mechanisms, but they could not unify all
believers in the changing times of the 1860s and 1870s. By the 1880s, the southern
theologies crafted in response to current events began to be subsumed in global evangelical
crusades, but the regionalism woven into the thoughts forged in the critical period of the
Civil War era persisted into the twentieth century in the form of continued denominational
schisms.
Chapter One

Liberation Theology in the Reconstruction South

In 1870 William M. Leftwich, a Methodist minister in St. Louis, published a book about the Civil War in his home state. It was not unusual for a minister to write about secular matters regarding the war. Virginia’s Robert Lewis Dabney, for instance, published a *Defence of Virginia* in 1867, and Albert Taylor Bledsoe, sometime Methodist minister, asked *Is Davis a Traitor?* in 1866. Dabney and Bledsoe both set out to prove southern righteousness, to exculpate the former Confederacy of any wrongdoing in the institution of slavery and the Civil War. They shared this project of defending the Lost Cause with many southern authors during Reconstruction, ministers and laypeople alike. But Leftwich had a different goal. Rather than celebrate the South’s supposed cultural superiority, the Missourian dwelt on the suffering present in the state since the war. His book, *Martyrdom in Missouri*, focused on the internecine conflict that plagued the state, exempting not even churches and clergy from the nonstop violence. Although southern guerillas committed atrocities, southern churches bore the brunt of occupying Union troops’ aggression. Northern churches and military conspired to make Missouri “the only State in the American Union to inaugurate and authorize a formal opposition to Christianity, as an institution and legalize the persecution of ministers of the gospel, as a class.” Leftwich described how, under this oppressive condition, southerners were targeted, with some ministers “robbed, arrested, imprisoned, and even murdered, for no other cause than that they were ministers of the gospel.” Adding to the injustice, those crimes were left unresolved as “Federal and State legislation shield[ed] those who committed the crimes of the war from legal
prosecution.” While honoring the valor of the persecuted Missourian clergy, Leftwich departed from the familiar celebratory tone of postwar writing. Instead, he lingered in trauma, urging his audience to confront past pains directly. As the Tennessee Methodist Thomas O. Summers wrote in a preface to the book, “[the southern clergy] owe it to the widows and orphans” to reveal oppression and suffering to public scrutiny, in the hope that justice would eventually be done. ¹

Throughout Christian history one of the primary tasks of the minister has been to comfort and to lead through adversity, as the shepherd does for the flock. But this dimension of the ministry is largely absent from historical studies of the white clerical response to Confederate defeat and Reconstruction. Some historians, such as George M. Fredrickson, argue that the politicization of religion during the Civil War led to a lessened public role after Appomattox. “Churches” in both regions, Fredrickson contends, “lost some of their earlier capacity to perform ... the ‘prophetic’ role of religion – criticizing and judging the secular order in light of a higher morality than can be found in the marketplace or the corridors of power.” Other historians prefer such dramatic Lost Cause apologia as memorial speeches and Yankee-hating screeds like Dabney’s to sermons and religious newspapers. The resulting historiography presents a skewed understanding of the minister’s place in postwar society. While ministers did play an integral role in the creation of the Lost Cause mentality in the South, their celebratory defense of the region was a role assumed only on special occasions. Sundays, however, came every week. That is to say the extraordinary circumstances of the period required the dedicated service of the minister in

¹ W. M. Leftwich, *Martyrdom in Missouri* (St. Louis, 1870), 4, 10.
his (and it was always his) traditional, pastoral capacity much more regularly than as a spokesman for the South. Exigencies put a severe damper on the ability of ministers to do their job adequately, with numbers of clergy and churches severely reduced by the war, but those remaining pastors worked tirelessly to provide for the emotional and spiritual needs of their parishioners as well as to chart the course for a rebuilding South.

Clergy, most living a life of penury themselves, tutored parishioners on how to cope with poverty during Reconstruction. Many did give the occasional oration praising southern valor and defending the South as moral victors in the Civil War, but their work always had another side, offering leadership through the travails of postwar life as well as in the Lost Cause movement. Many ministers donned the prophet’s mantle, but their bucolic visions were hellscapes by today’s moral standards. The paths they charted left whites at the top of a racial hierarchy and excluded Catholics and other non-evangelicals, but in the defeated South, even a regressive transformation involved a radical re-imagination of the surrounding world. There was also much about their message that is timeless—human—the desire for growth, for healing in traumatic times, for the alleviation of poverty, for dignity in the midst of suffering and oppression.

White southern religious leaders crafted a liberation theology in response to the needs of parishioners and a chaotic economy and politics in the wake of Civil War defeat. By framing nearly every aspect of Reconstruction-era conflicts with the northern denominations, the government and the military, as well as with freed African Americans, as a moral battle, clergy redefined the traditional boundaries of the church’s nonpolitical province. This move gave southern religious leaders the rhetorical upper hand over
northern churchmen and allowed them to voice opposition to Yankee domination and to speak out concerning the most pressing social issues.²

Charles Reagan Wilson’s *Baptized in Blood* has led the way in the interpretation of religion’s place in the postbellum South since its publication in 1980. Wilson borrows the immensely influential concept of civil religion from sociologist Robert Bellah for a theoretical framework. In his original formulation, Bellah describes civil religion as a widely shared set of beliefs that provide a “transcendent goal” for politics and the nation in general. Rituals such as presidential inaugural addresses and celebrated documents such as the Declaration of Independence channel religious forms and language, yet remain vague enough in their religious content to persist in a secular culture. Politicians’ invocations of God occur regularly, though rarely with any doctrinal specificity. This practice rests on the assumption that nearly everyone in the polity shares a basic set of beliefs, including but not limited to “the existence of God, the life to come, the reward of virtue and the punishment of vice, and the exclusion of religious intolerance.” This foundation of beliefs has influenced American definitions of their national identity and purpose since the founding generation, leading Americans to believe that their nationality carries moral and religious obligations along with the political. The result is a “civil religion” centered in the nation

that borrows Christian imagery and forms, existing alongside and not in competition with traditional Christian practice.³

Wilson applies Bellah’s notion to the Confederate nation and argues that the celebration of the Lost Cause in southern public life exhibited the trappings of religion, including myth, ritual, sacred texts, and a pantheon comprised of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, and other Confederate luminaries. The Civil War provided a definitive break in history, setting southern culture both apart from and above the nation’s. As a result, southerners understood their cultural heritage to provide a superior morality and conception of social order. Thus began a southern civil religion that dipped into the ingredients comprising the American version but splintered off in its own sectional direction. Wilson suggests that the participation of clergy in southern public culture lent a sense of the sacred to the shared values that comprised the Lost Cause ideology. “Without the Lost Cause,” Wilson writes, “no civil religion would have existed. The two were virtually the same.”⁴

Wilson’s equation of civil religion with the Lost Cause demonstrates the ambiguity of the concept, an indefiniteness that has brought both Bellah’s and Wilson’s formulations under scrutiny. Critics noted almost immediately that the concept raises as many questions as it answers. If civil religion is equivalent to a broadly shared culture, why is the


⁴ Wilson, Baptized in Blood, 15.
term necessary? What happens to those within the nation who don’t share that culture? Is civil religion merely politics co-opting religion? Even civil religion’s proponents have trouble nailing down its meaning. Gaines M. Foster counts five distinct definitions for the term and points out that similarity to religious ritual alone does not provide sufficient evidence for the presence of a religion. The Lost Cause provided meaning and solace for downtrodden southerners, Foster argues, but those who call that function religion “probably take the metaphors [of Lost Cause celebration as religion] too literally.” Scholars of religion have criticized so-called civil religion for having little veritably religious content. As political theologian Richard John Neuhaus argues, "nobody affirms an American civil religion." In other words, civil religion shares few qualities with established religions. Religions, according to Neuhaus, never exist without leadership offices, defined methods of participation, a statement of beliefs, or a specified moral code, among other features. All religions, in short, “are institutionalized in a coherent way, or at least there is a conscious effort ... to sustain the unique truth to which such a religion lays claim.” While Neuhaus may overreach in such a restrictive definition of religion, the point stands that beyond some vague language and metaphorical formal similarity, civil religion’s status as religion is dubious at best.⁵

Theologians and scholars of religion have given civil religion considerable attention, soon calling the term into question. Even in that first article, Bellah wavered between

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calling the phenomenon a religion or a “religious dimension”—two very different concepts. He later abandoned his original definition and spent much of his subsequent career clarifying, redefining, or skirted discussion of the term, preferring at one point to see the shared moral dimension of American culture as a “public philosophy” instead. Yet historians continue to use the concept, often uncritically. Even when the conceptual difficulties are acknowledged, it is common practice to continue using the phrase as if those barriers did not exist. George Rable notes the explanatory limits of civil religion in his recent history of religion in the Civil War, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, stating that it “is far from being the entire story.” Without further elaboration, he says, the concept of civil religion “would miss important exceptions, ignore significant dissenters, and overlook paths not taken.” Despite this caveat, Rable continues to employ civil religion to understand the ways “[r]eligious faith and civic belief reinforced each other” in American history. 6

While civil religion may yet be saved for later periods in American history by making room for diversity of belief, the mid-nineteenth-century South possessed an all-encompassing religious mindset that makes civil religion’s identification of religion-like


qualities a poor fit. Although the confrontation with Darwinism began soon after the war, it is safe to say that the vast majority of white southerners continued to believe in a world suffused by religion. Amid denominational diversity, southern Christians shared many fundamental beliefs, most importantly that of a divine Providence overseeing all aspects of life on earth. Southerners commonly professed that religion was the foundation of society, “which,” according to one Presbyterian minister, “like a thread of gold, will be worked into the web of life, and bind together the entire moral, social, and civic fabric.” As the private citizen cultivated devotion to the creed of his choice, that dedication “should also appear in the political and civil affairs of the country.” Southerners saw public life—like the natural world and scripture—as an arena for theological reflection. A theoretical framework flexible enough to include this common theological mindset is needed to comprehend the role of religion in the South following the Civil War.7

The flawed concept of civil religion has, however, done much good work for historians in bringing attention to the ways in which politics and religion intersect in public discourse. But given the recognized limits of the paradigm, historians need to employ other disciplines as well in critiquing civil religion, in order to develop more useful categories. While civil religion has been applied to the gamut of American history—from the founding to the present—new solutions need not strive for such historical universality. Particular moments often present distinctive facets that require an explanatory schema all their own. The period of recovery after the Civil War is one such era. By shifting our focus from the

Lost Cause *per se* to the thoughts and activities of the white South’s religious leaders, we can see the creation of a theology designed to respond to the twin crises of defeat and Reconstruction and equipped with solutions to bring the South out of its subservience to the conquering North. This message, combining spiritual, practical, and moral advice, promised to liberate southerners from political, economic, and cultural oppression even if it avoided proclamations that the South would rise again as a distinct and separate polity. Evangelical denominations joined in these pronouncements, tending to paper over theological disputes in favor of regional religious cohesion. This development does not fit in the category of civil religion; rather, it was a theology of liberation.⁸

Following Bellah’s work, scholars of religion have debated the most useful framework to use for the discussion of religion’s role in public life. Some, such as Bellah himself, insist that religion be left out of the matter entirely, focusing on morality and using the language of “public philosophy.” A relative few are willing to jettison religion as an explanatory category in this way, leaving “civil religion,” “political theology,” and “public theology” as the most salient options. In a recent article, Princeton Theological Seminary theologian Max L. Stackhouse attempts to cut through the confusion and multiple meanings and define each of these slippery terms. Stackhouse historicizes civil religion, explaining it as a product of the post-World War II mentality of global dominance in the United States.

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⁸ This is not the first study to employ liberation theology as an analytical tool. See John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794–1861* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003). Ernest argues that the first African Americans to write the history of their race performed a communal function akin to that of liberation theology. Authors such as David Walker and Frederick Douglass wrote history suffused with both politics and religion, which they hoped would forge a sense of common identity and purpose among African Americans.
As the course of globalization has cast the possibility of a single hegemonic culture into question, so has the assumption that an entire nation can be grouped into a single, if amorphous, religious character. In this light, civil religion appears little more than “society worshiping the image of itself.” While civil religion is correct in “the recognition that religious influence often becomes institutionalized in general sets of cultural convictions of the people, and reinforces patriotic values,” it leaves unanswered questions about diversity and the place of theology and everyday belief in public matters. The first proposed solution to this conceptual impasse was political theology. This approach, according to Stackhouse, tracks the work of religious thought within formal political channels, seeing the political process itself as the means through which religious concerns about the public are expressed and realized. Here, “religion” possesses specific content, a progressive and activist bent, and exists in dialogue with other sources of national identity—competing theologies and the political system, among others. Political theology features a critical bite missing from civil religion, where religious content appears completely beholden to the dominant culture’s status quo.9

Public theology, Stackhouse’s preferred terminology, also allows religion to serve as a social critic. Dissatisfied with political theology’s tendency to limit questions to the purview of political institutions alone, public theology’s supporters argue that the analytical focus should begin with the “religious community” as the center of the “fabric of society,” the arena most “decisive for every area of common life.” Religion, in this model, is

primary. Neither the social fabric itself nor the political powers-that-be are exempt from criticism from religious sources. Public theology mounts its challenges against the character of society rather than against the edifices of the state. Institutional planning is of minimal use when the morals of the populace are corrupted. Here, religion transcends cultural self-celebration in order to address social sin. This is not to say that a culture demonstrating a public theology necessarily abstains from self-celebration or locates all of its sinful aspects. No society meets those expectations, especially not the postbellum South. However imperfectly, religious actors work toward gradual progress rather than a utopian transformation. The most important characteristic of public theology that Stackhouse notes is that “the principles and purposes they advocate, however, do not stay in the religious community or in private associations. They work their way through the convictions of the people and the policies of the multiple institutions of civil society where the people live and work and play, that make up the primary public realm.” In this model, religion is the driving force of social action, “the most decisive core of civilizational life.” This model holds true in the defeated South. With political authorities removed and replaced by the Union army, ministers built on their wartime and antebellum role to become the postwar South’s cultural leaders, and they used this new platform to forge a public theology.¹⁰

Categorizing the South’s religious activity as both a public theology and a liberation theology requires some explanation, as the latter is usually considered a political theology. Liberation theology began with the 1968 meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference (CELAM) in Medellín, Colombia, and counts as its opening manifesto Gustavo

¹⁰ Ibid., 288, 291.
Gutiérrez’s 1971 book, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics Salvation*. After over a century of historical amnesia about political theology’s long pedigree, liberation theology directly challenged the late-nineteenth and twentieth-century liberal consensus that theology and politics were to remain separate for fear that one would corrupt or co-opt the other. Gutiérrez and others provided a reminder that, in reality, theology has never been divorced from politics. But liberation theology’s approach to politics evades easy categorization. On the one hand, its proponents have supported Marxist critiques of power, but they have also failed to articulate a coherent ideology of political institutional change. Informed by a mistrustful vision of government, many liberation theologians steer away from giving the kinds of answers an overtly political theology, according to Stackhouse’s definition, would require. Rather than advocating specific political solutions, liberation theologians have focused on the notion of “structural sin,” the idea that world economic systems perpetrate the systematic violation of human rights. This focus on locating the roots of widespread suffering in oppressive social arrangements is reminiscent of public theology’s critical style—moralistic and from the outside of extant hegemonic structures.11


James Cone, whose formulation of black theology is often categorized as a liberation theology, has also argued for black theology as a public theology. See James H. Cone “Black Theology as Public Theology in America,” in Rouner, ed. *Civil Religion and Political Theology*, 187–206.
Gutiérrez, borrowing from theologian Johannes B. Metz, defined political theology as, first, the “de-privatization” of Christianity, recovering the social aspects of the faith that were buried as secondary following the Enlightenment attempt to separate religion and politics. Liberation theology, in the words of historian John Ernest, “asserts that institutionally sanctioned religious thought is never politically neutral but rather always functions within a certain sociopolitical theatre, and accordingly must always function in a dynamic and contingent relation to the dominant economic and political forces that shape the lives of the people.” The realization that Christianity contains a vital social component should translate into the Church taking up the role of active social critic. Gutiérrez insists that more than the Church as an institution, the individual believer should take up the model Jesus provided by confronting unjust power where it existed in his life. Jesus, Gutiérrez maintains, was not a solely spiritual entity; rather, he challenged Sadducees who treated religion as merely a privileged office, and he died at the behest of the state. Likewise, Liberationist Christianity carries with it a mandate to step out into the world, to aid the poor by identifying oppression and sinful structures. Recognizing structural inequality as a long-term problem at best, liberation theology seeks to alleviate the pain of poverty through action in the lives of the poor.12

Following Gutiérrez’s influential work, oppressed peoples around the globe took up the banner of liberation. James Cone developed black liberation theology, and, within the

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United States alone, theologians employ the liberation perspective to understand the theological existence of Latino/as, Native Americans, Asian-Americans, women, and the LGBT community. Any rough definition of liberation theology would include a commitment to working out justice in history, treating the politically and economically oppressed as the true children of God. In this quest, practice is equally important to orthodox belief. Such theologians confront socioeconomic wrongdoing in public channels, defending the necessity of a political component to the gospel. Defining salvation as “not something other-worldly,” liberation theology treats the alleviation of poverty and the eradication of oppression as preconditions for a complete human existence. As such, ministers espousing this position commonly speak out against the power structure that supports inequality and lead efforts to bring power and pecuniary relief to the downtrodden. Accordingly, more emphasis is placed on right practice (orthopraxy) than on doctrinal belief (orthodoxy). Theirs is a message geared toward uplifting those who suffer under the burden of grief.\(^{13}\)

Although the liberation perspective is commonly associated with groups deserving of sympathy, this theology can also characterize the approach of a faith community with a different, less agreeable definition of justice, especially in racial matters. Despite the fact that they went to battle defending the right to own other human beings, southerners in the aftermath of the Civil War viewed themselves as an impoverished, unjustly oppressed

population. The remainder of this essay will demonstrate the ways in which the liberation theology briefly sketched above may be applied to the plight of the defeated South. Theologians in the region developed a public theology based on a sense of structural wrongdoing on the part of northern political, military, and religious leaders. They interpreted northerners’ and black southerners’ actions, during both the war and Reconstruction, as evidence of an oppressive status quo. The poverty and degradation of the defeated Confederacy led religious leaders to identify God’s favor on the side of the poor South. Southern clergy confronted the injustice of the era and placed a new emphasis on action and solutions over the antebellum obsession with orthodoxy.

**Spirituality**

Many historians have ignored the public aspects of postwar southern theology due to those ministers’ own, unending proclamations that their sermons, public speeches, and writings had no political content. Southern clergy persistently maintained that their churches were “spiritual” or “nonsecular” and abstained completely from politics. The church’s business was in saving souls, not in setting the state’s agenda. Presbyterians originated and codified the notion, referring to it as the doctrine of the “spirituality of the church,” but Methodists and Baptists joined the refrain. Yet through definitional sleight of hand, these ministers used the southern churches’ supposed non-secularity to set themselves apart from and above the northern churches. Northern critics rightly saw in the claims of spirituality a way to table the discussion of the church’s role in defending slavery. But southerners were adamant that they were taking the moral high ground by limiting their activity to saving souls, providing them with an advantageous position from
which to claim that sectional divisions led to the abuse of the South. To understand how the southern evangelical denominations managed to critique the South’s socioeconomic status while berating the notion of political involvement, we must explore the notion of the spirituality of the church in more detail.  

Although southern Presbyterians claimed to have always been non-political, they placed particular emphasis on the work of James Henley Thornwell in defining the mission of the southern church. Speaking before the first General Assembly of the new Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America in December, 1861, Thornwell gave an address that was adopted as the church’s official position on the proper division between Church and State. He proclaimed that the two were “perfectly distinct.” The church, as “a supernatural institute,” was limited to questions of redemption and morality, while the state existed “to realize the idea of justice.” The South Carolinian divine warned of dire consequences should one side overstep the boundaries of its province. “They are as planets moving in different orbits,” Thornwell continued, “and unless each is confined to its own track, the consequences may be as disastrous in the moral world as the collision of different spheres in the world of matter.”


Southerners had only sketched the limits of the doctrine at this point, despite their claims that they had “assumed no new attitude.” The faithful adamantly declared that they held to a non-political gospel “from Abraham to Moses, from Moses to Christ, from Christ to the Reformers, and from the Reformers to ourselves,” and they used the authority of timelessness to sanction discussion of current events as moral (and, hence, non-political) questions. Though only living until 1862, Thornwell included slavery as a topic within the church’s remit both before the war and during the conflict’s early stages. He admitted, “the subject of Slavery lies at the root of all the difficulties which have resulted in the dismemberment of the Federal Union” and refused to discuss “policy of its existence or non-existence” as a purely political question. Despite affecting political matters, slavery remained, at its root, a moral question in Thornwell’s estimate. Determining slavery’s status as good or evil, sin or biblically sanctioned, was an activity uniquely fitted to the church. With both the sacred and secular worlds riven by the debate over slavery’s legality and morality, no statements on slavery’s legitimacy could be confined to one realm or the other, as Thornwell surely recognized. While southern politicians declared slavery to be a “positive good,” Thornwell “utterly refused to make slaveholding a sin.” Like many other southerners, he brought Scripture into the argument, as the decisive piece in the proslavery case. Many northerners countered that the spirit of the New Testament gospel, as contained in the golden rule, called for equitable treatment of all people. Thornwell replied that all social inequality, including slavery, was consistent with “the law of love.” In the speech that codified the concept of spirituality, Thornwell established that even outlines of the proper social structure fell into the category of “sacred” topics. Thornwell’s discussion of slavery reveals that the line between moral and political questions was thinly drawn.
Following this respected precedent, southern clergy seeking to defend the contemplation of timely secular matters used claims of non-secularity to mask social commentary\textsuperscript{16}

The contours of this doctrine clearly changed as the war progressed and after emancipation. Heated conflicts over slavery in border states brought the acceptability of slavery as a sacred topic into question. Kentucky’s leading Presbyterian minister, Stuart Robinson, adopted Thornwell’s declaration and claimed it as the church’s true standard. Writing in 1862, he proclaimed, “It will be very generally agreed that politics ought to have no place in the pulpit.” Robinson and other similarly minded evangelicals in Kentucky, still members of northern denominations, found relations with their denominational colleagues increasingly strained as the war went on. As historian Luke Harlow explains, “those white evangelicals in Kentucky who retained an affinity for southern forms of belief, expressed their hostility toward Unionism through the language of the ‘spirituality of the church.’” Northern declarations of support for the Union cause blatantly violated the strictures of the spirituality doctrine. But continued debate over the morality of slavery proved even more noxious to Kentuckians with southern sympathies. They continued to defend slavery as biblically sanctioned, while charging all who argued otherwise with mixing religion and politics.\textsuperscript{17}

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Spirituality’s critics accused the doctrine’s architects of deliberate obfuscation, which hampered the church’s mission. Unionist Jacob Cooper charged that “spirituality” reduced the Gospel to abstraction, allowing no application of Scripture to real world problems, when those issues might prove offensive. “The State legislates on theft, lying, fraud and licentiousness,” Cooper asked, “must the Church, through fear of defiling her garments by meddling in politics, be silent when people commit these crimes?” It seemed to him that leading southern Presbyterians meant that “the Christian man must not express his opinion nor take any action” on the subject of slavery, while the church must “never lift her voice against the prevalence of ... sin.”

However, Robinson’s principles did not bind him from taking action. His conception of the spirituality of the church was malleable. The news of emancipation prompted him to write on the subject of slavery, despite the spirituality camp’s condemnation of northern churchmen who addressed the topic. Robinson’s *Slavery, As Recognized in the Mosaic Civil Law, Recognized ... and Allowed, in the ... Christian Church* (1865) repeated the well-rehearsed biblical arguments for the support of slavery but included a long footnote condemning Lincoln’s antislavery interpretation espoused in the Second Inaugural address. His defense for this action was twofold. On the one hand, he used Thornwell’s tried technique of claiming the church’s duty to comment on the “mental and moral epidemic” afflicting society. Second, he attempted to separate his functions as preacher and as proslavery polemicist. In the pulpit, the minister is limited to outlining the principles of ...
scripture without making “an application of the [biblical] argument to the great secular issues now pending between the slave-holding and non-slave-holding States.” However, “as a writer communicating his thoughts to the public,” Robinson felt free to suggest a practical course of action in defense of slavery’s morality. In other words, the church’s strict separation from secular matters was limited to the pulpit. Once the minister set foot (or pen) outside the church, he took up the role of private citizen, entitled to any number of opinions about the relationship between the state and the divine. This emphasis on the division between pulpit and other activities became a standard trope in southern religious circles for the remainder of the century. For example, an 1884 article in the Southern Presbyterian Review resolutely proclaimed, “May we not pray to be kept from uttering in our pulpits one word which is not his word.” Quoting Harlow once more, Robinson “might not have intended to be disingenuous in his argumentation but, if not, he was certainly naïve about the extent to which nineteenth-century American religion was politicized.” Whether conniving or naiveté informed this logic, the effect was the same: the vagaries of defining spirituality provided southern religious leaders with room to offer guidance on pressing social issues.19

Religious southerners defined politics so narrowly that many failed to see the political ramifications of anything outside of the formal apparatuses of elections and

legislatures. Moses Drury Hoge, pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, earned fame within his denomination and throughout the South as an ardent defender of the Confederacy. Though his colleague Robert Lewis Dabney counseled him at the outset of war that “we ministers, when acting magisterially, publicly, or any way representatively of God’s people as such, should seem to have no politics,” by the summer Hoge had made up his mind. If he initially had temporized and pursued peace like many Virginians, he wrote to his sister in June, “With my whole mind and heart I go into the secession movement.” He thought, wrote, and spoke in defense of the Confederacy. In 1863, Hoge risked his life running the Union blockade of the Confederacy in an effort to bring Bibles and other devotional material to distribute to the southern troops. This dedicated service provided Hoge with the stature required to earn a place on the dais at the dedication of Stonewall Jackson’s statue on Monument Avenue in 1875. Hoge delivered his most famous oration, one of the most eloquent defenses of the Lost Cause ever produced. Comparing the heroes of the Confederacy to the pantheon of ancient Greece, the Presbyterian minister regaled the crowd with tales of military valor. He warned, “If history teaches any lesson, it is this, that a nation cannot long survive when the fundamental principles which gave it life originally are subverted.”

Setting up the Confederate leaders as moral examples to be emulated, Hoge nevertheless failed to see the political significance of such statements. News of the oration’s success reached England, where Hoge had made friends and contacts during his

20 Robert Lewis Dabney to Hoge, Jan. 4, 1861, in Peyton Harrison Hoge, Moses Drury Hodge: Life and Letters (Richmond, Va.: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1899), 139; Hoge to Mrs. Marquess, June 3, 1861 in ibid., 145; Oration at the Unveiling of the Statue of Stonewall Jackson, Richmond, Va., October 26, 1876, in ibid., 445.
journey to obtain Bibles for the Confederacy. Both the London Times and the New York Tribune reported on the speech. The Tribune was charitable in its coverage, reporting that “There was no pretense of recantation of old opinions, nor any offensive assertion of them.” The editor continued, reporting that the London paper had “misapprehended the purpose and meaning of this demonstration,” interpreting the English donation of the Jackson statue and related celebration as “calculated to excite bitterness between the North and South” as well as between England and America. Hoge appreciated the fair treatment from New York, and he quickly penned a letter to his friend, English politician Alexander Beresford-Hope, to clear his name.

The celebration here had no political significance whatever. It has not had the slightest political effect. It was not intended to excite animosities between the North and the South, nor to stir up rancor between Great Britain and America. So far from it, I announced it to be the purpose of the Southern people to maintain the government as it was now constituted, though we should profess no love for a Union in which the Southern States are denied privileges accorded to the Northern.

Hoge was not alone among southerners during Reconstruction in believing that the celebration and defense of the South ostensibly had no political meaning, making room for pro-southern apologetics under the church’s rubric of spirituality. The massive gathering in Richmond merely “gave an occasion to the Southern people for showing their passionate love for the memory of Jackson.” The place of a minister at the head of the procession apparently merited no defense. But Hoge’s words to Beresford-Hope also betray the conditional nature of southern quiescence. Although they recognized formal Union control
of the political apparatus, former Confederates could never “love” Yankee control. If they
could not change the government, they would defend the South by whatever means they
had, using parades and pageantry to win moral victories when guns had failed.21

By the war’s end, southerners of all denominations had joined the Presbyterians in
understanding their churches as completely non-political. On November 19, 1865,
Methodist Bishop George Foster Pierce addressed the first meeting of the Georgia
Conference after the end of the war. As the editor of the published edition of the oration
noted, “All were acquainted with poverty and hardship, and the outlook was bleak.”
Southerners everywhere were subdued and despondent in the months immediately
following the war, and Pierce recognized that a South with a deflated and insecure ministry
was truly a lost cause. He strove to snap his colleagues out of the haze of defeat. However,
positive thinking was not the answer. Rather, Pierce foretold “the on-coming of a
degenerate age” featuring “great corruption in the Church, alienation from the truth, love of
novelty, disgust with faithful preaching,” and other offenses. Neither the causes nor
solutions to the crisis were material. Southern poverty paled in importance to the possible
moral lapse that “the demoralization of war” could cause. Luckily, the South possessed one
advantage that would help it weather the coming storm: Dixie’s ministers knew the value of
a nonpolitical church. The answer to the troubles of defeat and the perceived decline in
Methodism were to be found through prayer, Pierce maintained. He counseled ministers,
“Preach the word—the word, not philosophy, nor politics, nor science, nor human

21 London Times, October 28, 1875; New York Tribune, November 17, 1865; Hoge to A. J. B.
Beresford-Hope, November 15, 1875, in Hoge, Life and Letters, 271.
speculations. Do not read essays, nor deliver orations, nor substitute critical lectures for evangelical sermons.” “Thank God,” Pierce exclaimed, “I need not expand on this point before the Georgia Conference!” Only through “unflagging zeal, and the most unselfish devotion” on the part of ministers could the most detrimental effects of defeat be neutralized.\(^2^2\)

Defeat provided southerners with a new opportunity, to reconstruct religion and purify it of the blight of politicization. The *Southern Christian Advocate*, a Methodist paper, announced a “new mission” for the postwar church. The editor wrote, “Every surrounding calls for a reconstruction of Methodism, North and South.” However, northern Methodists were not willing to make the required changes. Southern Methodists alone could take the initiative that stood to change the character of the nation’s religion. The result would be a church, “purified from the political madness that seized upon one section of it some thirty years ago, dismembered the church, drove the nation into war, and is now pushing forward radical measures, with all the influence of a powerful organization.” Politicization had threatened to destroy the nation, not only the church. The only way forward was to excise political content from the church entirely.\(^2^3\)

Any connection between religious officials and political involvement was likely to be rebuked. Denominational bodies chastised small town ministers doubling as officials in the

\(^{2^2}\) Pierce, “Make Full Proof of Thy Ministry,” in Atticus G. Haygood, ed. *Bishop Pierce’s Sermons and Addresses, with a Few Special Discourses by Dr. Pierce* (xxx) 158, 159, 160, 166, 178.

local government. For instance, in 1869, the Tennessee Conference upbraided one Brother W. H. Pearne who had been elected the Chief of Police in Memphis, Tennessee. The body resolved that "so soon as can be, without material injury to himself, Brother Pearne be requested to resign said office." The reaffirmation of the church's spirituality became a staple of yearly meetings in the southern Methodist Church. As late as 1885, the Georgia Conference still felt it necessary to issue a statement saying,

Inasmuch as some misapprehension has existed and still extists in reference to our position as a church in the South, the Methodist Episcopal Church, while mainly supporting the great Government of the United States, is in no sense allied to any political party, nor will allow its policy to be dictated by the views and interests of political parties or leaders; that our work in the South is simply to preach the law of God and the Gospel of Christ ... leaving our members and friends to determine upon the political relations and course of action which they ought to choose and hold.24

Baptists were every bit as dedicated as Presbyterians and Methodists to defining southern religiosity as uniquely non-political. The antipathy toward politics was sometimes expressed with extreme vituperation. The editor of Georgia’s premier Baptist newspaper, the Christian Index, claimed in 1867, “The alliance of religion with politics ranks among the most successful devices of Satan.” When the church preaches political content, “prayers become, political harangues” and lose their religious value. Even some southerners were

guilty of interpreting prophecy “as referring to current politics,” implying that scripture was too lofty to refer to the corrupt realm of politics. In 1869, the editor maintained that “Baptists have always held that connecting merely political designs with any of their religious meetings, or attempting to do that which belongs to the Civil Power of the land is spiritual whoredom.” In one bitingly sarcastic 1867 editorial, the same paper declared that it was entering a “rather strange sphere” in order to endorse a candidate for the presidency. The endorsement hinged on the requirement that “our candidate must have filled the office of Church Sexton, and have proved himself competent to discharge of its functions.” The insinuation here was that southern churches would find the very idea of a government led by a person skilled in maintaining a church laughable in the extreme.  

Even an activity as honorable as serving in the Confederate army put some ministers on the defensive. Virginia Presbyterian Robert Lewis Dabney served as Stonewall Jackson’s chief of staff during the war. In an 1862 letter to the Board of Directors of Union Theological Seminary, where he was employed, Dabney explained that only circumstances rivaling biblical (although apocryphal) conflicts could justify his decision to assume a secular office. “The exigencies of the country are so unprecedented and tremendous,” Dabney wrote, “everything that makes our heritage as a people precious, our altars, our homes, our sanctuaries and our Seminaries are so obviously at stake in this crisis, that it appeared to me all other duties shrink into insignificance, beside the duty of rendering aid to our bleeding country, resting upon those who have power to do so.” The

minister reasoned that in such dire straits ministers were excused to take extraordinary actions in defense of the survival of their religion, as the "Maccabees (sic), although priests, judged it their religious duty to take up the sword" in revolt against the Romans. Dabney contended that he had been "providentially offered a post that would allow him to defend his nation and church more effectively than if contained to the pulpit or seminary lectern."\(^{26}\)

Just as Dabney found justifiable reasons to violate the doctrine of spirituality, so many southern ministers in the years after the war interpreted the strictures of nonsecularity with varying degrees of rigidity. Southerners never fully agreed on the proper dividing line between Christian sentiment and support of the nation and its government. In a sermon delivered in a South Carolina Baptist church on July 4, 1869, Rev. B. W. Whilden defended the Christian's right to express patriotism. Hearkening back to eighteenth-century state of nature arguments, the editor argued that a brief look at Indian culture would show patriotic belief to be natural. Even uncivilized peoples "cry when they see forests cleared that their forefathers once roamed in joy," according to this author. "Even savages know what it is to love where they are born." However, patriotism for this author was more than affinity for home. True love of country required the believer to care for the religious condition of the nation, above political life. "Let us remember, that in the Bible, it is not said—blessed are the people that have such and such a government, but 'blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord.' To feel this truth and to trust in the power of Jehovah are perfectly consistent with love for one's country." For this minister, the church's

\(^{26}\) Robert Lewis Dabney to Board of Directors of Union Theological Seminary, April 21, 1862, Dabney Papers, Union Theological Seminary.
abstention from politics did not limit its representatives from declaring the United States a Christian nation. According to James H. Carlisle, a South Carolina Methodist, attempting to delimit politics from the surrounding world was a fool’s errand. “Politics,” he wrote from Spartanburg in 1872, “may color the greater portion of [the average man's] daily thoughts.” Ministers and laymen alike could not hope to divorce everyday occurrences in the secular world from worship on Sunday. “The field of politics is continually before us, and around us. Its unhappy features are not coldly read on the page of history. We see them, we feel them.”

It was not unusual for southern Christians to preach the spirituality of the church while also calling for the sacralization of the nation and government. The Confederate government famously took a step toward the integration of Church and State by including the name of God in the new nation's constitution. In a letter to his son dated March 3, 1862, Rev. Charles Colcock Jones celebrated Jefferson Davis’s religiosity, saying that “under the old Constitution of the United States we never had a Christian President – never a man who in the Presidential chair openly professed the orthodox faith of the gospel and connected with that profession an open communion with the Lord at His table, and a decidedly Christian walk and conversation.” Later, when the Confederacy looked set to lose the war, some southerners contended that they had not done enough to make the nation holy. The constitution should

be amended again, they claimed, to include an affirmation of Christ, not merely the first
person of the Trinity.\textsuperscript{28}

These concerns spilled over into Reconstruction, as southern commentators
debated whether a more official affirmation of Christianity was still needed. There was an
extended exchange in the pages of Richmond’s Presbyterian \textit{Central Presbyterian} over the
limits of spirituality, in which the participants debated the distinction between “church”
and “religion.” The initial salvo, penned by “South Carolina,” claimed that the spirit of
Thornwell’s argument was misunderstood. The more common view of strict separation
“not only divorces the State from the Church, but also from religion. It makes the State,
godless. She is not to know God, although he ordained the State, and she is his creature.”
The Constitution “of the so-called United States” was a conspicuous victim of this fallacy, as
“it carefully avoids the remotest reference to the Almighty, even when it administers the
inaugurating oath to a President.” According to “South Carolina,” to pretend that religion
had no role at all in government or public officials was “to ungod the universe” and remove
the sole guarantee for social cohesion, responsibility before God.\textsuperscript{29}

That religion should inform the lives and decisions of all people, even political
leaders, no one doubted. However, the assertion that the state’s authority was grounded

\textsuperscript{28} Robert Manson Myers, ed., \textit{The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil
War}, (New Haven and London; Yale University Press, 1972), 855-56; Drew Gilpin Faust,
\textit{The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South} (Baton
Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 31–33; Rable, \textit{God’s Almost Chosen Peoples},
62–63.

\textsuperscript{29} “Dr. Thornwell on the State’s Duty to Recognize Christ,” \textit{Central Presbyterian}, May 6,
1868.
“on the mediatorial authority of Jesus” alone proved contentious. “Virginia” replied in the pages of the Central Presbyterian, arguing that scripture did not require political powers to acknowledge the religious basis of their authority. This commentator asked, “this State recognition of Jesus as King, would either be an empty form, or it would not. If it be the former, where is its value? If it is to be the latter, must it not, just to the extent it is made practical, amount to an establishment of Christianity as the State religion?” For this Presbyterian, there was more to lose than to gain from explicit political affirmations of religion. He saw in such declarations “an artifice to enlist the fearful powers of religion and superstition in support of a tyrannical and relentless political faction.” If a society is truly Christian, it will be readily apparent, as each person “is guided by his Christian conscience, such is a free Christian commonwealth.”

Both parties agreed that religion was an integral part of the governance of all successful nations, but “South Carolina” stood firm in his support of explicit state support of Christianity. Replying to his critics, he argued that the state is a “moral person and the magistrate under a necessity to know the true God and serve him in his official capacity, seeking His glory as well as the public good, for his object in every act.” According to this author, the doctrine of spirituality was a novelty, and those who adopt it “depart from our time-honored standards.” Rather, the state had an obligation to act in support of religious ends, a duty which the church must also support. He gave as an example the Indian practice of “Suttee” (that is, sati), in which Indian widows voluntarily self-immolated atop the deceased husband’s funeral pyre. Christian sensibilities required that the British

30 “Dr. Thornwell’s Memorial,” Central Presbyterian, May 15, 1868.
authorities intervene, thereby showing “preference to religion.” “South Carolina” argued that with eternal life on the line, there was little difference between the Indian case and the current South. Souls were always at stake, and scruples about non-intervention in politics must not get in the way.31

The preceding exchange shows southern believers continued to be divided about the application of the principle of spirituality in the postwar period. This debate also demonstrates that both parties found ways to speak out about secular issues. While few went so far as to endorse political candidates or even name politicians when describing current affairs, most southern clergymen found ways to articulate a public theology. The most important and frequently used way to justify advocacy regarding extra-ecclesial events was through appeal to the church’s role as guardian of morality within society. Indeed, ethical stewardship represented a commitment second only to evangelism for the South’s clergy. In the words of one Baptist, “The legitimate functions of the church and the ministry are defined as inclusive of moral reforms, even when these reforms are prosecuted by legislation, or by war.” In short, ethical concerns provided a legitimate gateway into the secular world for ministers looking to shape their section’s destiny. The war left them with plenty of work to do on this front. As Presbyterian layman Daniel Harvey Hill asked in his periodical, Land We Love, “Who can doubt that the war, which has so desolated the land and corrupted the morals of the people, was excited by the political preachers? Not upon the politicians, but upon these prophets of Belial rests the

accountability for this ocean of blood.” The image of the southern clergy had suffered as a result of the war. Reconstruction presented them with an opportunity to restore their image and lead the South, not through “political preaching” but through moral activism.32

Historians have primarily focused on the evangelical South’s crusade against drinking, dancing, smoking, gambling, and other associated social evils when thinking about the role of moral issues in postwar southern religious thought. To be sure, many ministers legitimately worried that such activities deserved significant attention, fretting that “public sentiment has become so much demoralized that many things are now thought right, or at least admissible, which formerly all men agreed in pronouncing wrong.” However, historian Gregory A. Wills has noted a sharp decrease in concern about fashionable amusements in the years after the Civil War. In the antebellum years, these types of offenses regularly appeared before Southern Baptist disciplinary bodies, with many church members excluded for their transgression. Between 1861 and 1880, Georgia Baptist churches recorded nearly double the amount of dancing offenses than before the war. At the same time, severe penalties were meted out at about half the prewar rate. Ministers railed against these amusements, but churches’ attitudes grew more lax, as clergy feared scaring off young members (the majority of moral offenders). Some ministers doubted the scriptural basis for proscriptions against worldly activities, and some churches removed prohibitions from their books. This spirit of increasing toleration among Baptists

was a product of southern churches’ more congenial relationship with society in the challenging postwar climate.  

According to Wills, “the society became more religious as the churches became less hostile to the society.” He attributes this change to the pervasive southern “civil religion” without further question, but a change of this magnitude requires more explanation. Urbanization and increasing wealth within the churches were surely factors. However, the most apparent explanation is a theological one. Southern religious leaders saw a greater problem looming on the near horizon, bigger than drinking and dancing. They became convinced that the defeat of the South marked the beginnings of the fall of Christendom. The Confederacy had represented the greatest hope in history for the establishment of a truly Christian polity, and it had failed. With the South now subjugated to an infidel Yankee power, they worried that morality would cease to concern modern society. Reconstruction proved a crisis in morality, requiring the union of southern Christians if there were to be any hope for true religion.  

The signs of decay were clear to see. Northerners were in control of political machinery and, in some cases, claimed southern churches to be their own. White


34 Wills, Democratic Religion, 123.
southerners, trained in “the habits of luxury and slothfulness” proved “unfit ... [for] the stern battle of life” they faced in the fields. Most worrisome was the decline in church attendance, which all denominations suffered. The causes were equally clear. Methodist George F. Pierce summed up the problem succinctly, preaching “The moral causes out of which this state of things has grown have been augmented by the convulsions of the country and the demoralization of war.” William Leftwich, the Missouri Methodist quoted at the beginning of this essay, identified a wartime ethic that spread like a virus, primarily among northerners. These “new standards of virtue... grew out of party fanaticism and war expediences” and led to “new fangled notions, dissimulations, prevarication and moral travestie” that faithful Methodists “could not [do] away with.” The lack of specificity in these accusations reflects a generalized fear of “Yankee values” holding sway over the South. In the words of one Baptist commentator, “times of war and social revolution tend to loosen the bands of Christian morality.” Both general historical patterns and observable present realities told southern Christians to be on guard.\(^{35}\)

The crisis of morality demanded a response at least equivalent to Confederate organization after the assault on Fort Sumter. A year after the war’s end, one Baptist counseled,

Do not suppose that the conflict is any less \textit{real} because you hear no shot and see no flashing sabre. The bloody fields of Gettysburg, and Manassas, and Fredericksburg,

and Chancellorsville, and Spotsylvania, and Richmond, and Shiloh, and Vicksburg, and Murfreesboro, and Chickamauga, and Missionary Ridge, were no more stern realities than is the battle to which you are called. Moral war is not because it is moral, therefore merely constructive or imaginary war, it is actual; there is nothing in all time or in all eternity that is more in the nature of substantial fact. ... It requires effort, such as no corps of desperate Confederates ever made, when charging over thousands of dead, through blood, up to breast-works manned by ten times their numbers.36

Veterans were reluctant to tell stories about the brutality of battle in the years immediately following the war. To combat survivors, the images of “charging over thousands of dead” in an “actual” war would have been jarring and unmistakable, even controversial. 37

This “moral war,” although waged in terms of sin and salvation, bore direct political significance. Southern ministers imagined an ethical populace as the cornerstone for the edifice of society. A failure in a nation’s religious foundation would thus have political ramifications, as an immoral people would surely choose a despotic government. Similarly, a pious and righteous population suffering under an immoral regime could legitimately protest that political arrangement as a clear form of oppression. Government itself, according to Bishop Pierce, stems from the “passions of mankind.” The ideal polity according to this theory needed little government, as harmful passions would be in check.

36 “Another Victory,” Christian Index, March 22, 1866.

However, Pierce recognized that both history and the Bible attested to the need for government “as a divine ordinance and as essential to internal peace and public order, and to national amity and relations.” Yet Pierce and other southerners maintained that “the best government is that which by any direct force governs least.” 38

The key to a successful, limited political structure was the Christianization of the people. The idea of the “best government,” according to Pierce, “presupposes such an enlightenment of the people, such an infusion of the religious element – at least so far as proper moral judgments are concerned—as shall enable the masses to know their duty and interest.” Belief in Christ resulted in “common morals which dignify the reputable citizen.” Conversion stimulated a change within the human character, resulting in a linear progression from faith to participation in orderly public life. For the true citizen, “convictions have radicated (sic) into habits, and save when interfered with by some powerful counter-impulse, act with the force and regularity of instinct.” Through a mysterious process, conversion mingled the attributes of the human and divine character, creating a more responsible and trustworthy citizen. In Pierce’s words, “the highest style of human character ... is the result of opinions and principles derived ... from God ... yet, acting through the medium of intellect, knowledge, and conscience, in conformity with the constitutional laws of mind and heart, which if obeyed ... elevates man far above the unreasoning savage or the vagabond of civilization.”39


39 Ibid., 204.
Other ministers agreed with the Methodist bishop that a nation’s fate depended on individual virtue. Prebyterian William S. Plumer contended that “the way that nations rise in worth, or sink in ruin” depended on morality, whether the “individuals who compose them, [walk] humbly with God, or [renounce] their portion in Jacob.” “Aggregated masses,” Plumer wrote, “are the sum of the good or ill woven into the character of their component parts.” Randolph McKim, a Confederate veteran and later Episcopal priest, preached a sermon at Robert E. Lee’s funeral, in which he argued that Lee was an exemplar of the moral Christian citizen. Kim argued that more southerners needed to model themselves consciously after the late Virginian, saying “Good men are a nation’s strength. They constitute the most effectual shield and safeguard to a state.” The moral nation was “a nation great, prosperous and happy.”

Under this philosophy, religion (including morality) and politics were inextricably bound, to the extent that the mention of one in the context of public life necessarily invoked the other. Virginia minister William Archer Cocke provided the most clearly developed explication of this relationship in an 1871 essay in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. For Cocke, religion was the integral part of the system, “like a thread of gold, ... worked into the web of life, and bind[ing] together the entire moral, social, and civic fabric.” Religion represented “what blood is to the human system,” sustaining “the health of the body politic.” There was no question for this author about how the South could rise out of the postwar doldrums. “Religion should permeate the social organization; and as we sustain

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civil and political relations which are unavoidable in the affairs of the world, such religion as ought to exist in the citizen, should also appear in the political and civil affairs of the country.” While the institutions of “Church and State” should be completely separate, there should be no gulf between religion and state, for it was this religious connection that vouchsafed the commonweal. Politicians like every other private citizen ought to be religious, and hence virtuous. Like Pierce, Cocke saw a direct connection between individual devotional practices and the formation of a “vital national principle” capable of weathering “every public trial.” The problem, however, was that “the religious principle has not existed ... in the United States with that purity which makes it the life of the nation.” Without revival, the nation was headed for ruin.41

History contained many cautionary tales, warning southerners of the peril that could lie in their future if they did not right their moral ship. No event was as convincing and frightening as the example of Revolutionary France. Cocke attributed the crimes of the Revolution to “the absence of something higher than political principles to control their action.” The French “Church was corrupt; the religious tone of the nation was vitiated; those sweet and sacred bonds which unite the civil and the domestic societies was severed.” No moral foundation existed upon which to build a new society. A writer in the Methodist Southern Christian Advocate argued that “civilization” always “carries the seeds of decay in its own bosom.” Only an infusion of “gospel principles” would stave off the entropy of material progress. “Witness France, witness Paris, the very fountain of all

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artistic, artificial life, and of all worldly grace and courtliness,” this author entreated. “How easily were the waters of that fount turned into blood!” Moral failure lay at the root of history’s great instances of decline.42

Southern religious leaders read signs of similar turmoil in their own culture. The writer for the Southern Christian Advocate above leapt directly from the example of Revolutionary France to “our own Northern cities,” ruled by mobs and corruption. Throughout the South, religious leaders and laypeople alike interpreted northern cultural and political dominance as forms of oppression that stood to undermine the integrity of the populace and collapse the newly rejoined nation. When northerners attempted to apply the benefits of religion to public life, they made crucial errors resulting in the establishment of unjust structures that discriminated against the powerless. According to Cocke, northerners “never quite understood the theory of our government, and the application of the religious principle to the civil order.” They chose “political harangues” and forced the integration of Church and State. Northerners “prostrated what should have been the principle of religion at the footstool of party, and made party questions a religious test, until the distinctive bearings of religion were merged into political questions; and what there was of religion, lost sight in the race for office and the contest for political success.” In short, northerners’ priorities were the inverse of what they should have been. They subverted religion to politics, and the results were catastrophic. The Civil War, “practical infidelity,” “breaking down the Bible,” and military despotism in conquered states could be directly attributed to the northern perversion of church-state relations. As such, Cocke

42 Ibid., 355, 357; “Civilization,” Southern Christian Advocate, December 20, 1871.
found northern religious officials guilty of using church influence “to overthrow the constitution of the United states and the existing order of society.”

White southern religious leaders like Cocke identified as the oppressed, proclaiming that the South was suffering under the immoral and ungodly Yankee military, political, religious, and racial order. The past generation of Reconstruction research has made invaluable contributions toward the understanding of African American life during the transition from slavery to freedom, if a proscribed version of liberty. However, that scholarship has tended to limit southern whites to the role of the oppressor, tormenting African Americans while wearing Ku Klux Klan garb, attempting to reinstitute slavery through black codes, or unfairly entrapping freedpeople in the exploitive economic relations of sharecropping. We must not let the crimes of white southerners obscure our historical understanding of their Reconstruction experience. The planters’ return to cultural and economic dominance took a complicated path, through years of poverty and powerlessness relative to their prewar state. As they struggled to attain a sense of security, white southerners externalized their own frustrations by lashing out at the freedpeople, but their race-based cruelties stemmed in large part from a deeply felt sense of powerlessness in the face of civilization’s likely downfall at Yankee hands. The conduct of the North, through military, government, and church, clearly demonstrated a turning point toward the undermining of society’s ethical basis in southern minds. The restriction of southern input in these significant times represented for the South’s religious leaders an

intolerably oppressive power divide. Having been defeated militarily, they were left with a theological protest of misused power as their only weapon.

The southern self-identification as an oppressed people began during the war, in response to military actions seen as egregious breaches of both wartime decorum and general human morality. Rev. J. L. Burrows stood before a crowd at Richmond’s First Baptist Church in the days following Abraham Lincoln’s assassination. He counseled the crowd to adopt a spirit of forgiveness, to put aside the passions of war in light of the tragedy the congregation gathered to commemorate. Yet before speaking about the deceased, Burrows reminded his listeners that there were eternal standards of right and wrong, and the Union military had recently violated those strictures. The list of outrages ran long:

Robbery and arson and massacre and rape; cruelty to prisoners and faithlessness to solemn oaths; the spoiling of unarmed citizens and defenceless (sic) women; the wanton destruction of household goods and agricultural implements ... the whole black catalogue of outrages perpetrated by maddened armies, which authority and discipline are often too weak to restrain, and which are condemned alike by the law of nations and the law of God

Burrows kept silent about current politics, but he did not need to remind Virginians that those same soldiers who proved incapable of restraint were now in full control. Even worse, the minister reported that “the blackest crimes of the horrible war through which we have just passed, have found and yet find justification from some who claim to be personally upright and even pious.” If the perpetration of injustices were not bad enough,
Burrows charged northerners of defending their extreme actions as exigencies of war. As the preacher’s language made clear, southerners interpreted those events differently. Calling Sherman’s March a wartime necessity smacked of insincerity at best, cruelty at worst. While ignoring their own trespasses, Confederates viewed the actions of the Federal forces as unjust and oppressive. Both during and after the war, white southerners insisted on casting sectional relations in terms of morality and power.44

Within the first year of war, southerners voiced their objections to the northern way of waging war. A catalogue of such southern grievances could fill its own book, so there is only room here for a few wartime examples. The Episcopal Bishop Stephen Elliott provided a shortlist in an 1864 fast day sermon. Preaching to his Savannah, Georgia, congregation, Elliott called for continued resistance, requiring “such fury as Grant’s, such cruelty as Butler’s, such fanaticism as Sherman’s.” The example of their conduct was sufficient to prove that southerners “have nothing to look forward to but degradation and outlawry…. a condition of servitude” analogous “to the paupers of Europe,” should the Yankee forces prevail. Historians continue to debate the extent of wartime cruelty, asking whether the Civil War constituted a “total war” or “hard war.” This scholarship reveals that Union soldiers exhibited relative restraint when it came to slaughtering innocents and destroying property, but the historical actors had no access to such comparative data. These distinctions never entered the minds of those who experienced the occupation of an

44 J. Lansing Burrows, Palliative and Prejudiced Judgments Condemned: A Discourse Delivered at the First Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., June 1, 1865 (Richmond, Va., 1865), 3.
enemy army or the predations of a desperate group of men told to “forage” for their own sustenance.⁴⁵

As Elliott’s sermon demonstrated, the impact of Benjamin Butler’s occupation of New Orleans reverberated throughout the Confederacy. Capturing the city in May, 1862, Butler cracked down on the rebel population with policies that struck denizens as oppressive, including censorship of the local press. Although in control of the city’s judicial system, the general worked to forestall the public’s access. Historian Chester G. Hear writes that most petitioners lost hope or were cowed into submission “after fifteen seconds,” then fleeing “through the nearest exit to the street.” Butler also intervened in religious matters, encouraging ministers to take an oath of allegiance. Those who abstained were not forced, but any sign of Confederate sympathy was punished. The general closed one Episcopal church that omitted the prayer for the president in favor of a moment of silence allowing congregants to pray for personal concerns. He expelled several more ministers, replacing them with army chaplains. Most infamous was his General Order 28, which declared that any woman who opposed the occupying forces would be regarded as a “woman of the town plying her avocation,” a prostitute. This order inflamed southern

⁴⁵ Stephen Elliott, “Vain is the Help of Man”: A Sermon Preached in Christ Church, Savannah, on Thursday, September 15, 1864, Being the Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer Appointed by the Governor of the State of Georgia (Macon, Ga.: Burke, Boykin and Company, 1864), 13.

passions and led Confederates to condemn this new, immoral form of war. Louisiana’s Governor Thomas Overton Moore declared from exile in Opelousas, “The annals of warfare between civilized nations afford no similar instance of infamy than this order.” The order represented nothing more than an excuse for the Union’s “brutal solidarity” to indulge “their lust,” that is, a license to rape the city’s women. Moore challenged Louisianans to punish the “foul conduct of your oppressors” by avenging New Orleans’s suffering women, even if it cost the supreme personal sacrifice.46

General William T. Sherman’s march to the sea lived long in southern memories as the embodiment of the Yankee military ethos. The infamous sixty-mile-wide path Sherman’s troops cut from Carolina to the coast provided a ready-made example for southerners seeking to demonstrate the excessive cruelty of northern power. The general famously stated the necessity of making “old and young, rich and poor, feel the hard hand of war, as well as their organized armies.” However, those on the home front escaped with their lives intact. According to historian Joseph Glatthaar, “In general, Sherman’s army treated Southern civilians well.” Nevertheless, South Carolina received an especially brutal treatment from soldiers who blamed the state for causing the war. While southerners “were prone ... to exaggerate” Yankee transgressions, according to historian Jacqueline

Glass Campbell, there were also legitimately excessive practices. At the very least, hatred of the Palmetto State drove Union soldiers to forage for more than sustenance. They stole items as various as rice, latching, sheet music, jewelry, and books. Yet Sherman’s tactics targeted civilians in non-physical ways, by preying on their psyche. The Federal campaign’s actual damage was exaggerated by the tactic of spreading rumors about the nature and timing of the mission. One of Sherman’s goals, according to Campbell, was “creating confusion and uncertainty in the minds of his enemies.” South Carolinians were terrified by the detailed knowledge Sherman’s men had of the countryside. Union forces allowed the strategic spread of news, leading to the creation of a frightened populace. Civilians feared the “violent and unscrupulous acts of the soldierly” and loathed putting their fate in the hands of “the whim or caprice of Gen. Sherman.”

This strategy succeeded better than Sherman ever could have imagined, as the legends of the general’s brutality became staples of southern lore. Historian Mark Grimsley explains that there is more myth than fact involved in the tales of Sherman’s cruelty, but that myth quickly became a powerful narrative force in post-Confederate culture. Extrapolating from the tales of Sherman’s march, southerners continued believing that


oppressive brutality was an integral facet of Yankee culture. Edward Pollard, in his 1866 attempt to narrate a southern rendition of the war, identified a change in northern ideas about the limits of warfare, stemming from an incident in which “a Northern officer justified his putting to death some children belonging to a hostile Indian tribe.” The North had designed a new type of war, objectionable and even savage to historic standards but now expected. “Modern War,” Pollard wrote, “is not based on logic,” but neither did he think it mandated unrestrained slaughter. War had become a calculus of carnage, where belligerents balanced potential gains and assured destruction of lives and property. While Pollard accepted that this tactical shift could not be turned back, the change served as another reminder that northern culture was changing for the worse.\footnote{Grimsley, \textit{Hard Hand of War}, 219–22; Edward A. Pollard, \textit{The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates} (New York, E.B. Treat, 1866), 597, 598.}

For the South’s religious leaders, the persecution of ministers and seizure of churches during the war were the clearest signs that they were dealing with an immoral power in the North. The North’s motivations to confiscate southern places of worship were equal and opposite. Northern denominational bodies viewed the South as the immoral party in need of missions and ethical indoctrination. One northern author looked for a way to “save the South from utter barbarism and ruin.” The war also became the Divine’s way of rejoining the split denominations in this author’s mind. “We believe God is providentially opening the way for the reoccupation by the Church of the territory in the South wrested from her by fraud and violence.” Northerners believed that the southern churches had wrongly confiscated property from the true denominational bodies (i.e., the northern ones)
during the antebellum schisms. Thus, occupying southern churches proved the quickest solution to the problems of looming moral chaos and the redress of theft.49

Southerners received even more cause for alarm when these statements of intent were put into action. The Methodist church led the charge, and only later and to a lesser extent did Baptists and Presbyterians join in. Federal military officials knew that churches in conquered areas were likely to serve as bastions of pro-Confederate sentiment. The common solution was that of Benjamin Butler: to shut the churches down and leave them dormant. Discontented with this course of affairs, northern Methodists, led by Bishop Edward R. Ames, approached the Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton, about placing the captured churches under the church’s disposal. The Secretary willingly complied and issued an order to all the generals in the western theatre of war. The November 30, 1862, communiqué instructed that “all houses of worship belonging to the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, in which a loyal minister ... does not officiate” be given over to the control of Bishop Ames. Later orders accomplished similar ends in other southern states, and the Baptists were included in 1864. These orders represented a turning point in the role of religion in the war, as missionaries streamed into the South and the passions of occupied southerners kindled.50

49 “Reoccupation of Southern Territory by the Church,” Ladies’ Repository, 22 (June 1862), 383–84.

50 William Warren Sweet, The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern Press, 1912), 96–110, Stanton’s Order qtd. in 98–99; Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 330–34.
Union troops and northern ministers worked together to seize churches from Little Rock to Charleston, St. Augustine to Baton Rouge. The extent of military control in these cases can be seen in a military order instructing a course of action for churches in Virginia. General Order No. 3 informed military officials that “all places of public worship in Norfolk and Portsmouth are hereby placed under the Provost Marshal of Norfolk and Portsmouth respectively, who shall see the pulpits properly filled by displaced, when necessary the present incumbents, and substituting men of known loyalty and the same sectarian denomination, either military or civil.” The military’s activity was not limited to choosing ministers. They also received instructions to “see that the Churches are open freely to all officers and soldiers, white or colored ... and that they shall see that no insult or indignity be offered to them, either by word, look or jesture (sic), on the part of the congregation.”

With Union oversight of such minutia as “look or jesture,” military involvement in religion became infamous throughout the Confederacy. Christians feared that northern religious authorities designed to absorb the southern denominations, thus creating a tyranny of faith over the South. Even churchmen in the border states were incensed. Kentucky’s Old School Presbyterians pled with the General Assembly of their denomination to absent themselves from the War Department’s policy, so that they might avoid affiliation with “the sin, the reproach, and ruin which this thing is calculated to bring upon” the church. They also appealed above the military pecking order, targeting their plea for mercy

51 Qtd. in *ibid.*, 101–102.
to Abraham Lincoln, whom they suspected had qualms with the merger of military power and religious interests.52

No place experienced a greater degree of conflict in this regard than Missouri. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Missourians with Confederate sympathies described the events in their state in terms of martyrdom, persecution, and oppression. Even before Stanton’s order, conditions in Missouri were more chaotic than in other states. The state never officially joined the Confederacy, but large pockets of southern sympathizers filled the state. These Confederates defended their interests the only way they knew how when facing a much more organized, occupying army: they turned to guerilla warfare. Federal officers adopted similar tactics, attacking without warning or clear reason. “Rural Missourians,” writes historian Michael Fellman, “were the objects of hatred and destruction.... Their personalities as well as their bodies and their homes and farms were attacked. They struggled just to live, to make daytime sense of cultural nightmares.” Chaos and terror became war objectives, “both a method and a goal.” Rev. William Leftwich argued that religion compounded the problem, as it had been a divisive force in Missouri culture in the decades before the war. Religion exerted a powerful presence, but the state’s revival culture resulted in contention and strife rather than unity. Churches going through cycles of revival wound up dividing like cells into ever smaller, autonomous entities. According to Leftwich, divisiveness prevented institutional growth and social unity: “the little community becomes divided into little sectarian factions, each to

drag out a half-conscious, miserable, contentious existence, instead of uniting in one large, healthy, self-sustaining congregation, with all the benefits and advantages of a first-class minister well supported, a good church and Sabbath school, with all the regular ministrations of the gospel." Religion, morality, and the public good suffered as a result.\textsuperscript{53}

The potential destructiveness introduced by Stanton's order took to this environment as a spark to kindling. Leftwich records examples of ministers taking up arms themselves to enter the fray of guerilla combat. He also notes northern combatants and sympathizers regularly robbed clergymen and ran them out of town. Perhaps the most offensive facet of the period, in Leftwich's view, was the collusion between military and clergy. Claiming spirituality of the church as one of the foundations of "free Republican government," Leftwich was left aghast by what followed. He claimed that "consultations were had and schemes devised by which the military authorities could be used to oppress and persecute ministers whose loyalty was questioned by these politico-ecclesiastics," i.e. northern sympathizers. Even worse, matters of loyalty and religion often masked greed and avarice as the motivation behind ministerial persecution. Many targeted clergy stood out because "they possessed property and stood high in the confidence" of the local religious community.\textsuperscript{54}

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\textsuperscript{53} Michael Fellman, \textit{Inside War: The Guerilla Conflict in Missouri during the American Civil War} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), xvii, 23; Leftwich, \textit{Martyrdom in Missouri}, 55.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{Ibid.}, 122, 154–55, 173.
One of the most controversial cases to arise out of the Missouri conflict was that of Virginia-born Presbyterian pastor, Samuel B. McPheeters. On December 19, 1862, Major General Samuel Ryan Curtis ordered the St. Louis minister to vacate his church and the city within ten days. McPheeters’s crimes were relatively minor, including refusing to declare loyalty to the Union, encouraging Confederate sympathy, corrupting the young, and having a pro-southern wife. This case stands out because the minister in question did not accept the military verdict and appealed to the U.S. Attorney General, eventually meeting with President Lincoln. In several 1863 communications with military staff and Missourians, Lincoln voiced his concern that the government avoid taking care of churches. But Lincoln’s words to McPheeters’s friends rang hollow in light of Stanton’s policy, which remained in operation.55

The president’s open opposition to the military’s policy regarding the churches failed to comfort southerners. While local events informed decisions to occupy certain churches, Confederates perceived a conspiracy spanning the North. With churches being seized throughout the South, any explanation based on communal feuding or case-by-case military exigency failed to convince. Southerners were convinced that the threads of corruption wound through the entire national organization of the northern denominations. Leftwich blamed the press. Northern Methodist papers “not only formed, but expressed” the plan “to destroy the M. E. Church, South.” Those same publications “were then earnestly engaged in the effort to convince those in authority, and to fasten it upon the public mind, that but for the Southern Methodists treason and rebellion could not exist in Missouri.”

55 Sweet, The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War, 104–6.
Southerners like Leftwich perceived a full-scale assault, as the entire northern denominational machine mobilized to cover up the truth of the white South's religious oppression.  

In this environment, both laypeople and clergy worried about the South's future. The prospects of Yankee rule terrified Emma Leconte, a South Carolina Presbyterian. She watched in horror, feeling helpless as “the South lies prostrate” in April of 1865. Northerners were in full control, “their foot is on us—there is no help.” Others were content with aphorisms and wishful thinking, but Leconte could not rest on the assurance that “they say right always triumphs,” given that the Confederacy had failed. “What cause could have been more just than ours?” she questioned. Reflecting on possible futures, Leconte determined that forced cooperation with a Yankee-controlled government would be the worst form of oppression possible. “I would rather we were held as a conquered province,” she wrote in her diary. “Let them oppress and tyrannize, but let us take no favors of them,” Leconte strategized. She sought strength in religion, and Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a stalwart of the South’s Old School Presbyterians, counseled his audience to avoid despair, insisting in his sermon that the South was “not conquered” and that “the next generation would see the South free and independent. In the immediate aftermath of Appomattox, southerners faced two potential futures. Palmer’s future loomed on the horizon, but represented the hopes of a conquered people. The second future was the one Leconte feared, a horrific vision of Yankee domination and continued enmity. Southerners watched for signs that would tell them about the character of the coming era, and more

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56 Leftwich, *Martyrdom in Missouri*, 155.
often than not, they found evidence that northerners remained as bent on total control as
during wartime occupation.57

Others hoped that the northern denominations would experience a change of heart
after the war. Reconciliation and reunion remained a real possibility during
Reconstruction’s beginning for Braxton Craven, Methodist layman and president of Trinity
College (now Duke University). In July 1865, he wrote a long letter to Bishop Ames, in
which he defended both the South and the possibility for a quick bridging of the sectional
gap, within both Methodism and the nation as a whole. Though not a minister himself,
Braxton held a powerful position within southern Methodism and hoped that his opinion
might sway the person most responsible for northern church policy regarding the South.
He assured Ames that Reconstruction could be a relatively pain-free experience, writing
“The South is neither hostile to the Government nor to the Northern States.” Perhaps
stretching the truth for rhetorical appeal, Craven continued, “the Reunion feeling has not
been as strong in twenty years as it now is. The great heart of the people was never in the
war at all; they neither murmur, repine nor fret at the issue.” Whether or not Craven
actually believed that southerners were ready to accept northerners as colleagues of any
sort, he did hope that the right decisions early in the rebuilding process would ease the
transition into peace. He even went so far as to entrust to the northern bishop that the
South gave up “slavery willingly and many of them gladly.” Rather, Craven insisted that

57 Leconte, Emma. Diary of Emma Leconte, 1864–1865. Transcript of manuscript #420.
Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Documenting the American South. University Library, The University of North Carolina at
23, 1865.
former masters were “strongly attached” to African Americans and knew their interests better than outside advisers sent from the North, a familiar refrain in the postwar years. Above all, the North Carolinian wanted to send a clear message to northern churchmen: “the State of Society is not what the North thinks it is.” The South needed no handholding or oversight, as there was “nothing in the South to hinder good, honest, hearty fellowship with North, East and West.” In church and state, the foundations were already in place for the South to resume its status as a full partner in the nation, “legally upon the Constitution, socially upon good morals and manners, and ecclesiastically upon fervent piety toward God and universal good will to man.” But it was up to the victors to choose clemency, while the defeated waited their decisions.\(^5\)

Despite Craven’s best hopes, the policies pioneered during wartime continued into Reconstruction. Interactions between the northern and southern denominations were characterized by more venom and rancor than collegiality and reconciliation. Questions over seized church property and denominational authority remained contentious throughout Reconstruction. Once again, disputes within the Methodist churches provoked the most ire. Dr. Daniel Curry, writing in the *New York Christian Advocate*, stated the matter plainly, “I fear the war is ending *too soon* and *too abruptly* for the good of the South or the peace of the Country.” Curry and other northerners feared that a quick return of power to the South would negate the progress made during the war. A longer period of control was mandatory to seeing the sins of rebellion erased. Southern Methodists paid

\(^5\) Braxton Craven to Bishop Ames, July 24, 1865, Braxton Craven Records and Papers, University Archives, Duke University.
attention to northern papers, and found in their pages the demonstration of a frightening sense of purpose and mission. In 1866, an editor for the New York Methodist wrote of a common northern Methodist “consciousness of having taken a sublime part in crushing rebellion and destroying slavery” which produced a feeling of ownership over the southern church. Accordingly, northern Methodists found it “quite evident ... that our Church must spread its institution all over the Southern States.” Repeated denunciations of southern Methodists as unrepentant traitors unfit of self-government drew only more antipathy from the South’s religious leaders, who realized early that true southern improvement would have to come from within the region.59

Provocative actions matched the confident words from the North. Events in Missouri once again stood out, as conditions in the state failed to improve after the war. Internecine violence marred postwar elections and continued to interrupt daily life. However, the new state constitution, passed in July 1865, drew national attention with its requirement for ministers to swear a “test oath” in order to preach legally. Clergy of all denominations challenged the ruling as a breach of church spirituality and a clear proscription of religious freedom, and, thus, clearly unconstitutional. Governor Thomas Clement Fletcher defended the oath, saying that the Supreme Court would tell “these outraged gentlemen” that “there is not ... a word in the Constitution of the United States which gives them the right to preach at all.” Clergy dealt with the controversy by refusing

to take the oath as a matter of principle. Tapping into existing tensions, Republicans in the
state rallied men with northern sympathies to enforce the spread of Unionism. With
estimates rising to 1,000 clergymen potentially preaching without having taken the oath,
men harried clergymen to swear their loyalty through threats or force. 60

The case of a Catholic priest, Father John A. Cummings, and his refusal to swear
allegiance gained particular notoriety. Leading mass on Sunday, after the subscription
deadline of Saturday, September 2, 1865, Cummings pressed his luck with local authorities,
who reacted by filing charges leading to his arrest three days later. The priest stood his
own defense, pled guilty, and used the opportunity to impugn the oath requirement as a
piece of anti-Catholic legislation. His sentence consisted of a five hundred dollar fine, which
Cummings refused to pay in order that he might remain in jail attracting attention to the
matter. His tactic eventually succeeded, as his case progressed through appeals to the
Supreme Court, drawing the support of well-known lawyers and coverage in major
newspapers along the way. A narrow, one-vote majority overturned the Missouri ruling in
a January 14, 1867, decision. The Supreme Court described the test oath as “without any
precedent that we can discover for its severity.” Though the judicial system defended
southern religious rights eventually, the South’s clerics gained no sense of relief from the
proceedings. It took years for justice to be done, and the intentions of northern religious
authorities remained abundantly clear. They desired nothing less than the complete

60 Fellman, Inside War, 231–47; Missouri Democrat, September 1, 1865; William E. Parrish,
Missouri under Radical Rule: 1865–1870 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1965),
61–70; Thomas L. Barclay, “The Test Oath for the Clergy in Missouri,” Missouri Historical
Review, 28 (April 1924), 59–108.
merger of religion and politics, even if that goal required the use of the machinery of law and order to force this false religion on the South.\(^{61}\)

Southerners interpreted nearly every action of the northern denominations as evidence of a conspiracy to amass political as well as religious power. Northern attempts to hold onto church property or enforce allegiance to a certain religious or political creed were lambasted as egregious breaches of church decorum. The North’s religious and political power were interpreted jointly, as twin heads of an intolerable Leviathan. Southerners traced this northern religious imperialism throughout the nation, finding that even the North was not exempt from political tests. Reports circulated about a Presbyterian church in Ohio that suspended a few men “upon the ground of their having voted for Hon. C. L. Valandingham for Governor of Ohio instead of Gov. Brough.” The case was appealed and made it to the Presbytery, where some members of the church court abstained from voting, fearing that the expression of a dissenting opinion would lead certain church members “to withhold their part of the salary of the preacher.” With northern churchmen working to force the marriage of religion and politics even on their own, southerners feared for the destruction of true, nonpolitical religion throughout the nation.\(^{62}\)

Another sign of future turmoil was the controversy over church property, which roiled on for several decades after the close of war. The Methodist Episcopal Church, North, often held on to properties confiscated by the military, claiming that the property


never rightfully belonged to the southern branch after the 1844 schism. The MEC, South, countered that the Supreme Court had sanctioned that original transfer of property, proving the question moot, but the northern churchmen either ignored the verdict or continued to assert that the war had somehow overturned that decision. Often, northern denominations claimed that the transfer of property during the war redressed southern theft of the property during the antebellum denominational schisms. As these claims were sorted out, Methodist bishops issued a joint statement to counsel patience to those parishioners who complained of northern abuse. At the same time, they condemned northern actions as designed to effect "our deprivation and exclusion," occupying churches and parsonages “by what shadow of right, legal or moral, we are at a loss to conceive.” To southern Methodists, the oppressive goal of the northern church could not have been more apparent, “viz: that they will endeavor to possess themselves of all the property of the Southern Methodist Church, which was owned prior to 1844, and declared ours, by the decision of the Supreme Court.” The method by which this cheating would take place was also clear. Through their union with the Republican party, northern Methodists stood to “succeed once more in carrying the election, and in placing the Radicals in power.” Favors would then be traded, and the South would find itself even more firmly under the boot of Yankee domination. There was no end in sight to the list of abuses and crimes, which put church, family, and economics on unsure footing. “A war of ... extermination” was being set up, between the defeated South on one side and northern churchmen, “the Government and nation” on the other. The list of subsequent abuses ran long:

“They take our churches by force, and install their ministerial agents by files of soldiers. They imperiously order our families from their homes, and bring
strangers to occupy them. They extrude congregations, and force them to
comfortless rooms, and to the woods and fields. Money got from well meaning piety
by fervid rhetoric and well administered taxation, ostensibly to send the Gospel to
our people, is used to drive them away from the Gospel, and to gain only a barren
conquest of buildings, at the expense of a demoralized ministry and an ignominious
name. only, of all ministers in the South, we find ourselves without sympathy from
our ecclesiastical kindred.” 63

The impact of this Methodist dispute rippled outward, affecting the opinions of
other denominations and extending throughout the period of Reconstruction. Noting the
conflicts particularly in Missouri but also throughout the South, Richmond’s Central
Presbyterian paid close attention to religious and secular persecution of southern
Methodists. Baptists paid attention to these developments as well. N. M. Crawford noted
that northern Methodist behavior hinted at the possibility of the reestablishment of an
established, national church. He was amazed at the “monstrous scheme,” exclaiming “That
such a thing should be even talked of!” But discussion continued for years, as northern and
southern denominations battled over the correct boundaries of control In 1871, for
instance, one northern Methodist declared that the MEC, South, “is tenant by sufferance
only.” The writer continued to view the northern church’s right to the property in question

63 “Union of the Churches,” Southern Christian Advocate, March 2, 1866; “Further Proof of
Evil Designs,” Southern Christian Advocate, April 3, 1868; “Pastoral Address of the
Baltimore Conference,” Southern Christian Advocate, March 9, 1866; Ralph E. Morrow,
Northern Methodism and Reconstruction (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press,
1956), 71–76.
as “indisputable,” and he maintained that “no competent, honest judge ever did or could render any other decision.” 64

Religious leaders included a wide variety of events in their descriptions of oppressive northern control. South Carolina Baptist minister James C. Furman witnessed the actions of “fanatical disturbers, who are the real cause of the miseries inflicted on our land.” Those “disturbers” ranged from northern missionaries to federal troops. The minister and educator complained to the general overseeing his region that “the military authorities at this place have recently taken from my farm a mule which I purchased in January last from a Confederate soldier.” Another soldier raided his farm, taking a horse right off the plow and fleeing the area. Furman requested compensation for the stolen animals, but his complaint was never redressed. This inefficient military rule struck clerics throughout the former Confederacy as the characteristic of a “conquered province,” in the words of Catholic priest Patrick Lynch, the Bishop of Charleston. In 1873, Lynch commented that South Carolina still resembled the “condition of Alsace and Lorraine,” regions more recently laid to waste in the Franco-Prussian war. Older people in particular found it difficult to emerge from the war, which broke them “in fortune and ... in heart.” Lynch saw no way out of these straits given the continued leadership of “crafty and unscrupulous adventurers, mostly from Northern States, who have come to make their fortunes, out of the wreck of the South.” Historians have since struck down the figure of the scheming carpetbagger as mostly a piece of southern fiction, but to southerners like Lynch

64 “Persecution in Missouri,” Central Presbyterian, October 5, 1865; N.M. Crawford, “A Glance at Passing Events,” Christian Index, October 1, 1868; Central Christian Advocate, July 1, 1871.
that character possessed striking mythical power, as a representation of a system of abuse and oppression that held the South in subjugation for years after the end of the war. 65

The North Carolina Baptist *Biblical Recorder* compared the state of affairs to the Old Testament figure of Nebuchadnezzar. Perhaps the Babylonian ruler had been right to punish the “sinful Israelites,” but, according to the biblical account in Daniel 4:33, he exceeded his bounds and was cursed, so that his hair grew to resemble feathers. “Perhaps he resembled the American eagle,” this editor suggested, which is “now universally admitted to be a bird of prey.” As in the scriptural example, the righteous cause would overcome adversity. Northern occupiers were clearly in the wrong. “A northern general” does not have “any moral right to override our laws, to abolish our government and to oppress our people.” The way to throw off the shackles of the North was not through complete submission and “confessing our treason,” according to the Carolinian editor. Rather, by naming injustices and holding firm in convictions, the South’s Christians could expect that God would come to the South’s aid in due time.66

This unjust system exhibited a racial component as well, as southerners identified the political rights of freed African Americans as yet another sign of the abuse of the white South. And freedpeople’s activity was consistently linked with northern designs,


extending the web of conspiracy against the South ever outward. Most worrisome to Lynch was not that “the civil government is in the hands of the emancipated negroes,” since he viewed them as mostly “well intentioned.” The problem that he and many others identified was that they were also “ignorant and incapable,” paving the way for easy manipulation by northern interests, particularly the missionaries sent from denominational rivals. Furman echoed these sentiments, blaming “temporary distrust of their former owners” on the manipulation of “the black garrisons and their worthy associates.” However, the Baptist preacher took comfort in his observation that many “negroes have partially recovered from the poisonous influence enacted upon them, and now profess to believe that their old masters are their best friends.” Furman trusted that without northern interference true peace could be returned to the South.67

Some feared a fate worse than political tampering, imagining Yankee operatives planning to incite a race war. Events seemed to be heading in that direction. One Methodist editor observed, “Negroes have left the cotton fields ... and are gathering in armed bands at political meetings. Arson, murder, and worse outrages perpetrated by them, though not general, are far too frequent for good order.” This author sketched out a theory that the North aimed to “[array] two classes in the community against each other” as a basis of the new Reconstruction governments, in order to ensure perpetual chaos and the limitation of white southern political involvement. Such was the effect on Richmond’s Moses Hoge, who declared in 1868 that “nothing would induce me to enter our Capitol.” He reported that “others have gone in from curiosity, but I wish to escape the spectacle of beastly baboons

67 Lynch, ibid; Furman to Radford, January 30, 1866.
sitting where sages and patriots once sat.” In place of legitimate government, he perceived only “depraved men” and many “convicted of scandalous crimes,” producing a “state of things ... too absurd to continue forever.” Yet he feared that without quick action “everything distinctive and dear in our Southern life will have vanished.”

Basil Manly, Jr., son of the revered Basil Manly and a Baptist leader in his own right, worked on a plan for such action throughout Reconstruction. At first, Manly supported co-opting the northern strategy. “Let the negroes vote,” he wrote to his father, “since so it must be. We can control the votes, as they will be more concerned for bread and meat ... than to sustain the abstractions of the Radical party.” This confidence was short-lived, though, and soon Manly wondered if South Carolina offered a prosperous future for his family. He worried even more about the fate of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which he saw as a child of sorts. Along with James P. Boyce, Manly had organized the first seminary for the denomination. The novelty of the idea of professional ministerial education among Southern Baptists and the disruption of the Civil War left the new institution, founded in 1856, on shaky ground. Both funding and students were scarce during Reconstruction. Faculty had to buy on credit, borrow from friends and neighbors, and serve country churches to make ends meet. Political and racial problems combined with poverty to create an intolerable environment. He wrote to his brother that the seminary could survive only “if the country is to be compar[atively] quiet, and SC any tolerable government.” However, it seemed to him more likely that “revolution is to come

68 “Satan, as an Angel of Light,” Southern Christian Advocate, October 2, 1868; Hoge, Moses Drury Hodge, 239–40.
in fact with violence and flame” or that “the state is to be thoroughly negroized.” Without “a considerable revival in prosperity and confidence among our people,” then “it may be necessary to close the Seminary or to remove it hence.” Manly’s fears came to fruition. Poverty persisted, African Americans voted, and the denomination failed to come to the institution’s rescue. Boyce and Manly moved the seminary to Louisville, Kentucky, in 1877 to escape Greenville's harsh conditions.\(^{69}\)

The key to the perception of an unlivable South was the presence of northern missionaries in the South. Southern Christians, according to historian Daniel Stowell, “were quick to link northern missionaries with any political persecution of former Confederates.” These unwelcome visitors represented the attempts to control church property, efforts to organize African Americans politically, and the general state of subjugation to the North, politically as well as religiously. Sent southward to teach poor whites as well as freedpeople, these missionaries entered the region as early as 1861. Many did begin with imperialistic motivations, but, as Edward J. Blum argues, the contact with freedpeople produced many changes of heart concerning the ability of African Americans to make their own political decisions. Northern racial acceptance could only serve to strengthen white southern fears of biracial collusion toward the continued dominance of defeated

Confederates. A vision of the South’s future thanks to missionary involvement could be seen in Jamaica. The Caribbean island was a veritable paradise, requiring no clothing nor fire to keep warm, no farming to fill a society’s bellies. Yet, somehow life remained chaotic after emancipation. A writer for the Christian Index charged that the laxity of missionaries who styled themselves as the friends of the freedpeople was responsible. Under missionary guidance, black Jamaicans “administered their own laws.” For this writer, the widespread “criminal participation” under this regime was evidence enough that missionary guidance led only to anarchy\textsuperscript{70}

The top spot in an 1868 list of reasons the different sections of the Baptist church could not reunite was “It is known to a good many of us, that the first missionaries who came out to labor among the colored people, did feel it their duty to teach them politics, and succeeded in alienating them from whites.” Next on the list was the attitude of those visitors, who “did not seek our acquaintance, friendship, or cooperation” and “either boarded in family groups of Northern persons, or among the colored people, thus throwing themselves beyond the pale of our society.” The New Orleans Christian Advocate issued a similar complaint, charging that the missionaries “are sent not to neglected places, but where our congregations abound.” Their purpose in the South seemed to be “misleading ignorant and unstable persons” to their theology of “political partisanship,” further abusing the power of the “Church ... for the furtherance of their political purposes.” The goal of the northern missionaries was nothing less than to erode the foundations of the

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southern church, thereby establishing their corrupt brand of politically tainted theology in the last bastion of spiritual Christianity.71

This perceived web of oppression, combining military, political, religious, and racial components, gave Southern ministers a temporal cause necessitating a response. The work of northern denominations was easily rebuffed, since it fell within the province of the church. Other realms of northern activity in the South were framed as threats posed to the foundations of southern religion and morality. Thus, religious leaders had a ready-made justification for their theological response to the clearly secular matters of race and political control. Indeed, southern clergy recognized the era as a historically significant moment in church and world history. Fervently believing that “no people were ever more honest and conscientious than the people of the South during the late war,” ministers charted a course for the South leading out from northern control. The church possessed a “divine power,” uniquely tooled for countering injustice. A writer for the Central Presbyterian charged that “the Church seems at the present day to be unconscious of the power with which her exalted Head has endowed her.” The activity of persuasive preachers could change the status quo, turning domination into cooperation in the name of Christ. Even northern missionaries could be brought into the southern fold, through a combination of the right words and a welcoming attitude. As a result, “Confidence in each other having taken the place of distrust, wise measures could then be matured and adopted; and the

great work of Home Missions be entered upon with renewed zeal, greatly increased interest, and with results that would astonish the churches and fill heaven with joy.”  

Southern religious leaders entered Reconstruction with an acute sense of mission. Anticipating the convening of the 1867 Southern Baptist Convention, the editor of the Christian Index left no doubt as to the importance of the times: “Such a time is, with emphasis, a crisis. It separates from the past; it decides for the future. Instants are moments; the Now moves!” “At such a time, no error is little,” the paper warned. “Those which we most contempt as unworthy of regard in the calculation of the forces that affect society, may prove ‘like the grain of mustard seed, which, when sown, is less than all the seeds in the earth, but when it groweth up, is the greatest among herbs and becometh a tree.’” This writer viewed the crisis as a providential development. God had provided southern ministers with the opportunity to prove their importance by coming to the South’s aid, reestablishing the foundations of Christianity in the section, and, thus, saving the soul of the nation. “Christians do not live at such a time by mere accident ... They are raised up by the Lord, to see that Zion takes no harm amid the convulsions that shake the world. They are his chosen priesthood.” This was a theology of praxis, stressing the urgency of action to effect the spiritual liberation that only could save the South.  


73 “Southern Baptist Convention,” Christian Index, April 4, 1867.
Colonel William S. Hawkins, a former prisoner of war, echoed this call for a liberating church. Comparing the defeated South to early Christian martyrs at the hands of Rome, he argued that just as faith had saved the ancient church’s heroes, so it would continue to do.

So let the Church in these dark days, stand bravely at her post,

Though cruel wars and strife abound and Satan leads his host,

They gnash their lion fangs at her, but ah! they gnash in vain,

For God will send his armies down to save and to sustain.

And in some gracious coming time, her banner white shall be,

The truest badge of might sublime that waves the land or sea,

And war’s red-letter’d creed die out, beneath her flowers of spring;

And where our martyrs fight and bleed, their babes shall sing and sing.

Historians typically dismiss words of this sort as Lost Cause cant, but considered in the present context they bear sincere meaning. Coming from a powerless, defeated people, these words represent the power of religion to express the hopes of those to whom life had seemingly given no reason to hope.  

Christianity buoyed spirits and provided a direction when all seemed lost. Rather than strictly a regressive vision, the liberation theology articulated by southern clergy

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envisioned spiritual and temporal progress. Soon after the war, South Carolina’s Methodist Bishop William May Wightman, preached a sermon entitled “Progress is Man’s Glorious, Dread Destiny.” The current “social situation,” must not limit Christian anticipation for a better future. If any people could handle adversity, it was the South:

We maintained for four years a life and death struggle, with all odds against us. We failed in the result, and have lost all but the honor of our section. What then remains but that forgetting the things which are behind, expending no vain regrets, weeping no weak tears over what is irrevocable and beyond remedy, we should turn our focus to the future. If suffering awaits us, where is the people who have not time and again been called to suffer?

Human minds could not comprehend the significance of current events. Perhaps “this fundamental change in our domestic institutions” (i.e. emancipation) would turn out “better for the white race.” With a progressive mindset and “leaving to the great controller of human events all results,” Southerners could overcome present trials. Wightman rallied his congregation, preaching, “Let us stand unbending as the giant stem of the oak to misfortune” while also bending “as its rustling leaves,” sensitive to the needs of those made poor by “the fortunes of war.” Through action and trust in God, things would get better. It was a matter of destiny.75

Ministers worked tirelessly to achieve that destiny during Reconstruction. By defining the nature of the era’s various struggles as moral, southern pastors vastly

75 William May Wightman, “Progress is Man's Glorious, Dread Destiny,” June 1865 in Papers of William May Wightman, Wofford College.
expanded the scope of the church’s activity. In this formulation, preventing northern political control became a matter of preserving Christian morality, rather than a clearly secular question. This strategy allowed religious leaders to craft a liberation theology, premised upon northern oppression and corresponding southern theological praxis. The South’s churches called for action, rather than complacency in defeat. The remaining chapters of this dissertation will demonstrate how the South’s evangelical churches banded together with a common message of liberation, overcoming denominational divides. However, as churchmen confronted pressing issues such as education and poverty, questions over the means to effect that liberation from northern cultural and economic power tended to divide as much as it united. Still, religious leaders remained at the center of the movements for the realization of justice for the white South and the preservation of true (read: southern) Christianity.
Chapter Two

Providence Revised: Defeat, Doubt, and Providential Theology in the Postwar South

Writing in the months following Appomattox, Ella Gertrude Clanton Thomas of Savannah, Georgia, confessed that the events of the Civil War had led her to doubt God. Until that point, Thomas had likely followed the cyclical logic shared throughout the Confederacy and the Union. Military advances signaled divine favor; loss represented divine chastisement. However, abolition was no ordinary wartime event. Thomas confessed upon hearing the news of Lincoln’s proclamation, “I did not know until then how intimately my faith in revelations and my faith in the institution of slavery had been woven together.” She, like other southerners, believed that the Bible offered unequivocal proof that God supported slavery, even if that institution were “evil.” Slavery done away with, Thomas found her “faith in God’s Holy Book … terribly shaken.” Normally a source of solace, religion provided yet another reminder of defeat: “When I opened the Bible the numerous allusions to slavery mocked me. Our cause was lost.”1

Emancipation, defeat, and widespread destruction presented an unprecedented challenge to the faith of white southerners in a sustaining Providence. Was God truly in control of earthly events, if 620,000 (or more), were allowed to perish and an entire landscape—houses, churches, roads, bridges—razed?2 Or, worse, did God oppose the Confederate cause? Confederates had largely restrained themselves from thinking the worst, identifying their cause as that of God until

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2 A recent study by J. David Hacker has deemed the standard number of 620,000 deaths to be significantly short of the actual number, which Hacker claims to have been at least 750,000. "A Census-Based Count of the Civil War Dead," Civil War History 57 (December, 2011), 306–47.
the very end. But defeat changed the intellectual possibilities. War tore apart many of the personal and institutional connections that had bound people together in antebellum America. Sectionalism and war engendered feelings that split most of the national denominations into sectional organizations. Especially in the South, physical edifices crumbled along with the spiritual. Churches were damaged or destroyed, and destitute parishioners struggled to raise funds to repair or rebuild. Civilians and soldiers alike turned to their faith for security in chaotic times, but the scale of destruction and the ubiquity of death posed difficult theological questions. As Thomas cried out in her diary, “Earnest prayers had ascended from honest hearts — Was so much faith to be lost? I was bewildered—I Felt all this and could not see God’s hand.”

For decades, the scholarly output concerning the cultural changes wrought in the 1860s was quite slim in comparison to the amount written about political and military events. This situation has begun to change in recent years, and many historians now find that the experience of unbridled carnage, for both those on the front lines and on the home front, represented, in Louis Menand’s words, “a failure of culture, a failure of ideas.” The characterization of the era as one of cultural destruction recurs in the literature on the religious impact of the war, which is still relatively slim. Historians frequently speak of religion in the mid-nineteenth century as being in “crisis.” Mark Noll labels the war itself as a “theological crisis,” and Drew Gilpin Faust argues that widespread suffering induced a “crisis of belief” that “propelled many Americans to redefine or even reject their faith in a benevolent and responsive deity.” The selection of this word, crisis, is appropriate in its ability to communicate the seriousness of Americans’ sudden inability to use religion as a common language and their doubts about a loving God’s

providential design. But at the same time it also suggests that the result of these challenges was a kind of intellectual gridlock in which creative solutions were unlikely to be found within tradition. The title of Drew Faust’s chapter on the religious impact of Civil War death, “Believing and Doubting,” sums up the way in which the subject is now understood. Put simply, some kept believing without modification after the war, and others doubted.⁴

This division into two camps—believers and doubters—is useful insofar as it acknowledges the shaking of cultural foundations that occurred in the Civil War era, but the either/or dichotomy obscures more subtle transformations that occurred somewhere between faith and disbelief. Ella Thomas, writing in October 1865, was a doubter. But slightly more than two months later, she expressed confusion about the role of God in the end of slavery.

“Sometimes I am inclined to look upon our defeat as a Providential thing and then I grow skeptical and almost doubt whether Providence had anything to do with the matter.” Historians have demonstrated an over-reliance on the writings of northerners who never had a conventional faith in the first place, skewing the historical interpretations too far in the direction of doubt. Ambrose Bierce, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, and Herman Melville were certainly astute critics and observers of wartime culture, but their exceptional capacities for creative, individual thought and their willingness to depart from tradition necessarily set them apart from the majority of Americans. A full accounting of the impact of the Civil War on belief requires

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On death and the Civil War, see Faust, *This Republic of Suffering*; Mark S. Schantz, *Awaiting the Heavenly Country: The Civil War and America’s Culture of Death* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2008); and Kent A. McConnell, “‘There must be tears in the houses;’ A Search for Religious Meaning from the Carnage of the American Civil War,” (Ph.D. Diss., Univ. of Virginia, 2007).
historians to alter their approach to the problem and investigate the thoughts of more representative Christians professing traditional beliefs. By expanding the time frame through both the Civil War and Reconstruction, I suggest that we will find a category of believers who averted “crisis” by modifying—not fully rejecting—traditional concepts to maintain their faith during changing times. The southern Presbyterian Old School was one such group.

One reason for this expansion of chronological focus is regional setting. Aside from the excellent work on the Lost Cause, the cultural developments of the postwar South have hardly been studied. But with three times as many Confederate soldiers falling in battle as Union troops—adjusted proportionately—and the devastation of the southern landscape, the South must be considered in the measurement of grief caused by the Civil War. And southerners’ pain did not end at Appomattox. Current historiography takes for granted that the war itself was the defining event of the mid to late nineteenth century, but for white southerners the humiliation and suffering provided by defeat extended at least until the end of Reconstruction, a trial almost on par with the loss of the war itself. Adding to the political and military upheaval, the late 1860s and 1870s also presented the faithful with serious new intellectual challenges from science

5 Burr, ed. The Secret Eye, 278; Faust, This Republic of Suffering, XXXX.

The individuals studied in this chapter also present problems in terms of representativeness. Most examples in the following come from Presbyterians, who occupied a slim minority of the southern population in comparison to Baptists and Methodists. Dabney and Palmer, the prime subjects of this study, were far more intelligent than the average believer and likely more wealthy, although the Reconstruction economy reduced both men to paupers along with the majority of southerners. However, their intellectuality offers a glimpse into the thought processes involved in understanding defeat that is simply not accessible for the average Baptist or Methodist southerner.

and philosophy, as Darwinism and logical positivism threatened the intellectual defensibility of orthodox Christian belief. Some well-known thinkers such as J. S. Mill and Herbert Spencer directly challenged the doctrine of Providence in the “modern” world. It would be difficult to isolate the impact of any of these factors on southern belief; rather, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and new ideas were experienced in tandem by believers working to make sense of a radically new world.  

If any group could have weathered the turmoil of the era and emerged intellectually unscathed, it would have been the southern Old School Presbyterians. These Presbyterians placed a heavy emphasis on tradition and orthodoxy. They valued intellectual development and logical argumentation over the passion and zeal of the evangelical revivalists, although the southern branch of the Old School was certainly not as anti-revivalist as the northern division could be. As such, despite the destitute conditions of the 1870s, publications like the *Southern Presbyterian Review* remained in print. But even this stalwart institution did not survive the Civil War era unscathed. The intellectual careers of Robert Lewis Dabney and Benjamin Morgan Palmer reveal that the most conservative Calvinist estimations of the way God works in the world changed during this time. Both Dabney and Palmer fundamentally altered their theologies of providence, but the changes in their belief systems by no means weakened their faith. Rather, with the utmost sincerity, they attempted to breathe new life into old forms while remaining true to their theological heritage. Beginning with an exploration of the problem of

doubt and Providence in the postwar South, this chapter focuses on Dabney and Palmer as case studies demonstrating the complications involved in incorporating defeat and Reconstruction into a theology of Providence.  

Nearly everyone had some sort of theology of Providence during the Civil War, not just the professional theologians. As George C. Rable argues, American Protestants, Catholics, and Jews “shared a providential outlook on life” despite their vastly differing theologies. During every stage of the war, they saw God’s involvement in all events. Quoting Rable again, “Everything—storms, harvests, illnesses, deaths—unfolded according to God’s will.” The language of God’s providential control suffused American parlance, even permeating the vocabulary of noted non-traditional believers like Abraham Lincoln. Southerners detected Providence even in tragic events, most notably the death of Stonewall Jackson. But while providential phrasing could appear in any context for the general population, nineteenth-century American theologians had specific definitions in mind when speaking about the matter. They wrote about “general” and “special” providences. The former category referred to the general plan God had devised to govern the world, such as God’s sustained maintenance of nature through consistent laws. God’s interventions in history, momentarily breaking the normal order, were known as special providences. Southern theologians separated their formal discourses on providence apart from other technical topics such as grace or predestination, but the questions

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raised by God’s allowing an irreligious North to overthrow a godly Confederacy produced a series of questions beginning in the realm of special providences and spiraling outward.⁹

Clergy of all denominations in the postwar South worried that the war had dealt a fatal blow to religion. Not only were many churches destroyed; membership was declining at those still standing. Postwar issues added to a problem many noted during the war. Methodist minister John T. James recalled in his 1894 memoir of the war and Reconstruction that “the novelty and excitement of war in a company made up almost wholly(sic) of youths, soon reduced the number of consistent professors of religion.” At first James himself was swept up in the irreligious environment of the camp, but before long the chaos of war subdued even the most reckless young soldier. “[A]s it settled down to a regular human slaughter, it became a most serious time; we were chastened and beaten down in spirit by Him who rode above the war clouds, into the seriousness of looking death and eternity into the face every day.”¹⁰

While the experience of living near death kept some from disbelief, the problem of creeping doubt was a frequent complaint among ministers after the war. Many denominational newspapers complained that doubt infected their territory. The Southern Christian Advocate noted, “Methodism in the country has lost (to use a French military term) its esprit du corps” and “the war left many of our members somewhat demoralized.” The 1868 Eufaula (Alabama) 

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¹⁰ On the challenges to southern religious life see Stowell, Rebuilding Zion, chapter 1; ibid., 25; John T. James, Four Years of Methodist Ministry, 1865–1869 (Staunton, Va.: Stoneburner & Prufer, 1884), 19-20.
Baptist Association reported its venue to be “cold and indifferent.” Where most religious outlets were content with a brief diagnosis of the doubt pandemic, Richmond’s *Episcopal Methodist* provided a more sustained prognosis. An article entitled “The Confederacy and Faith” looked for the root cause of “the tendency to a wide-spread unbelief” that grew out of “the shock which the fall of the Confederacy has given to the belief of many persons in the doctrine of Divine Providence.” The problem came down to an over-estimation of human capability. To those who thought Confederate defeat overthrew “natural ideas of right and wrong,” the author countered, “We are not authorized to identify the truth of God with any particular form of temporal prosperity, whether personal or national.” In other words, the wartime obsession with Providence controlling political and military events had gone too far. God worked “through instrumentalities,” indirectly, and “he will not work a miracle to indemnify their defects.” Blame yourselves, not God, the paper effectively argued. Others, such as the Episcopal Bishop Stephen Elliott, maintained that this postwar doubt was nothing special. Unbelief is “always the same in essence” even if it “assumes a thousand shapes to suit the times in which it may be circulating.” In 1868 the Ebenezer Baptist Association worried that gloom following defeat was leading to more serious moral problems than doubt alone: “The war and its results have largely demoralized many of our church members, and as such, there is too much intemperance, profanity, neglect of church duties, heresies, dissensions, and general unchristian conduct, tolerated by the followers of Jesus.”

The solutions ministers offered for those in doubt repeated a constant theme: keep believing. They argued that admissions of doubt were not helpful techniques for assuaging either one’s own spiritual turmoil or that of questioning congregations. The Charleston Episcopalian intellectual James Warley Miles confessed to his friend that he was “often impatient,” but he constantly reminded himself of the difference between “worldly matters” and God’s work in the world. Miles wrote that he was “sometimes almost in despair as to worldly matters,” but he maintained that “Providence has never yet deserted me and sometimes light and help have come when all was black.” Nearby, the Presbyterian minister John Girardeau counseled his congregation to rely on the transformative and healing properties of prayer in moments of despair. Girardeau was realistic to the difficulties his congregation faced when asked to believe in difficult times. The advice simply to pray can easily seem insincere or even insulting in the face of the grimmest problems. Prayer, Girardeau recognized, was not easy in such times, “when confidence in its efficacy has been weakened if not impaired by the occurrence of afflictive and disastrous events against which its aid had been invoked.” Worse, believers also had to contend with “the sneer of the skeptic” who added to their trauma the constant inquiry “Where is now thy God who professes to be the hearer of prayer”? To provide his audience with confidence to continue their own belief and ammunition against doubting accusers, the pastor delivered a series of typically Old School, well-reasoned disquisitions on the nature and power of prayer.  


12 Miles to Mrs. Thomas John Young, October 14, 1865, James Warley Miles Papers, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University; John L. Girardeau, Sermons (Columbia, S. C.: The State Company, 1901), 249.
One leading Southern Presbyterian, William Swann Plumer, saw the Providence problem as the most urgent intellectual and religious dilemma in the aftermath of the Civil War. In 1866 he published a long defense of Providence’s continuing relevance, Jehovah-Jireh (God will provide). The book’s hopeful message began in the title and continued throughout the book. Plumer consulted the words of eminent minds in Christian history, compiling testimony both scriptural and theological to affirm the uninterrupted faith in divine control of earthly events shared by believers throughout all of history. Judging from this book alone, this Presbyterian minister belonged firmly in the camp of those who kept believing after the war. Plumer repeated the refrain throughout his work: “God’s providence is over all creatures. … He governs by a plan.” The mysteriousness of that plan and the inadequacy of human faculties in comparison with the divine recur on nearly every page of the book. For those perplexed by the seeming absence of God’s hand in current events, Plumer reminded, “The Almighty does not settle his accounts with his creatures every thirty days.” Even minds as great as that of the renowned English theologian John Owen admitted that “visible confusion” in earthly events such as “the oppression of tyrants” and “wasting of nations” shook the foundations of providential faith. The solutions were as old as the problems themselves, according to Plumer. Nearly every age has doubted God’s direct and indirect involvement in everyday affairs; this problem was not special to former Confederates. And like Christians of the past, southerners should continue to trust in God and remain steadfast in the support of the church, the only institution God uniformly blessed. Although Plumer never addressed the war directly in the book, Jehovah-Jireh’s historicizing of providential doubts and reassurance that moral order remained intact was likely
written and interpreted as an assurance to keep calm, admit human failings, and continue believing as if a devastating defeat had not occurred. 13

Despite the steady posture of Plumer and most of the religious press, a more subtle process was going on, which can be seen in the postwar thought of Robert Lewis Dabney and Benjamin Morgan Palmer. The uncertainty generated in the chastened South motivated Dabney and Palmer to reassess their understanding of the divine character as well as the very ability of humans to possess religious knowledge. Dabney and Palmer’s approach to the theological problems of the era was informed by a rich tradition of theological reflection on God’s role in the world. Dating back to the late colonial period, southern religious thinkers approached theological questions from a perspective that historian E. Brooks Hollifield has termed “rational orthodoxy.” Rationality, Hollifield observes, was “the most noticeable feature of American religious thought in the early nineteenth century.” Although the emotional style of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century revivalism is most often seen as the defining characteristic of southern religion, conservative theologians such as Dabney and Palmer sought the experience of the divine primarily through reason. They believed the solution to any theological or philosophical problem could be deduced through argumentation drawing on Scripture, logic, and sensory perception. The world itself had a rational structure that the human mind, by God’s design, was able to understand. And, for the Old School, that structure necessarily comported with the doctrines of Reformed theology. If God’s power and goodness could not be seen in a particular instance, the believer could trust that with further reflection any supposed irrationality would be revealed as a failing of the theologian’s initial thinking and not a reason to doubt the existence of

the traditional theistic God. Relying on this tradition, Dabney and Palmer’s theological reformulations during the Civil War and Reconstruction never led them away from faith; rather, both men created a version of orthodoxy both steeped in tradition and applicable to the concerns of the times.  

On June 13, 1861, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, the popular minister of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, rose before his congregation to deliver a topical sermon entitled “National Responsibility Before God.” From the lectern, Palmer looked over the packed pews of the South’s third largest congregation, which often attracted visitors who had expressly traveled to hear the pastor’s famed orations. The parishioners of this Old School Presbyterian stronghold were likely more restive than they would have been on a typical Sunday in a previous year; it had been only two months since the skirmish in South Carolina at Fort Sumter initiated what these southerners saw as a new war for independence. Palmer sought to galvanize those feelings, emphasizing the seriousness of the moment’s political reality. “We must renounce the shallow nominalism which would make such a word as ‘nation’ a dead abstraction, signifying only the aggregation of individuals,” Palmer exhorted. Instead, a nation should be understood as “an incorporated society,” possessing “a unity of life resembling the individuality of a single being.”


By adopting such an understanding of nationhood, southerners would be able not only to emerge victorious from the war but, more importantly, to stand righteous before the judgment of God. Palmer reasoned that nations, like individuals, have moral responsibilities, and when those obligations are not met, the wrath of God is incurred. In Palmer’s words, “each [nation] has its own precisely defined character, fulfils its appointed mission, is developed through a providential training, and is held to a strict providential reckoning.” In other words, God acts in history, supporting nations in temporal affairs and, in return, expecting allegiance. When humans transgress this arrangement, God then punishes disobedience in this world, not waiting for final judgment. Sometimes, punishment is delayed for several generations, but it is “unavoidable” nonetheless.\textsuperscript{16}

The Civil War represented for Palmer the dénouement of tensions between the United States and the Divine that had been building since the nation’s birth. The absence of God’s name in the Constitution served as one example among many of the nation’s failure to give proper reverence to God in all of its affairs. However, the Confederacy’s constitutional recognition of its obligations to God was merely a first step toward righting those wrongs. This decisive turn against past misbehavior, Palmer asserted, meant that the Confederacy would “feel the support of God’s immovable Providence.” The message was simple: the pious and righteous

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\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 203, 206.
South should be “prepared to recognize that gracious Providence which will work our
deliverance.” 17

Less than a year later, though, New Orleans fell into Union hands, and Palmer fled to
Columbia, South Carolina, where he served as Professor of Theology at the Presbyterian
seminary. His dedication to the Confederate cause, however, never flagged. During the war
southern clergymen generally backed the Confederacy through victory and defeat, interpreting
results on the battlefield as indications of Providence’s mood. In the words of Harry S. Stout,
“the clergy were virtually cheerleaders all.” Palmer was more energetic than most in his
support, and he spent much of the war away from Columbia, speaking and preaching in various
venues throughout the South. According to historian James W. Silver, Palmer “ranged up and
down the country during the whole of the war, assuming the appearance of a prophet of the
Lord. A general in Mississippi declared Palmer to be worth a thousand soldiers to the cause.” 18

Given his firm conviction that Providence would secure Confederate victory, Palmer was
understandably devastated by defeat. During the years of war, Palmer lost a beloved daughter
to illness, his intellectual inspiration James Henley Thornwell also succumbed to disease, and
his South Carolina house and library were burned by the Union army. When Palmer made his
way back to New Orleans, an editorial in the New Orleans Times from July 17, 1865, noted that

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17 Ibid., 219.

18 The literature on religion in the American Civil War is extensive. On the clergy, Providence,
and nationalism, see especially, James W. Silver, Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda
(Tuscaloosa, Ala.: Confederate Pub. Co., 1957); Mark A. Noll, The Civil War as a Theological
Crisis (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Harry S. Stout, Upon the Altar of
xviii. Silver, Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda, 78.
he “had lost none of those powers which gave such a charm to his pulpit oratory. He seemed, however, to be more chastened and subdued than he was before.”

Reconstruction heaped more misery onto Palmer’s life. He had no hope in a nation led by “a man who was a renegade and traitor to his own people,” Andrew Johnson. Indeed, Palmer’s “only hope” was in the “expectation of seeing the United States go to pieces.” The end of the country was near, but not near enough. He feared that “in the meantime, [we] have to go through a terrible ordeal.” Although that day did not come, there was no end to Palmer’s invective against the North and despair over the South. In an 1872 tirade, Palmer bemoaned the poor South, “breathless and panting in its exhaustion at the close of a long and cruel war with three-fifths of its property practically confiscated by a single stroke of the pen, with its system of labor unhinged and its industry paralysed [sic], overwhelmed with a degree of taxation rendering the poor the envy of the rich, with a band of harpies fattening on the public revenue.”

In a long letter written February 25, 1867, Palmer commiserated with his colleague Robert Lewis Dabney about the state of the South, plotting with his denominational confrere an escape to a more southerly latitude where a replica of the Confederacy might be erected. Mexico, Cuba, and the West Indies did not suit him, and Canada was out of the question, as it was “too cold.” Brazil had attracted much attention, but Palmer surmised that “the reptiles and insects would render life intolerable to a Virginian.” Brazilian society also lacked the “prejudice


of race” and tolerated racial mixing. The answer, Palmer argued, was on the other side of the globe, in New Zealand. Its population was mostly English Protestant, and the natives would be dead in a few years. But Palmer’s distrust for the times led him to doubt even this idyllic location. He did not trust potential southern immigrants, as they “do not want to work but wish to get into positions where they can receive salaries.”

Ultimately, Palmer chose to stay put in the South, but that decision introduced him to even more grief. Death seemed to follow Palmer wherever he went. Parishioners constantly asked him for solace and meaning in the death of loved ones. Yellow fever was a particularly heinous menace in New Orleans, taking young infants and healthy adults alike. The 1867 outbreak left him with scarcely a moment’s rest from the presence of death and suffering. The pestilence produced particularly distressing deaths, which worked against nineteenth-century notions of the “good death” by forcing a quick burial instead of a prolonged viewing of the deceased. An editorial in the New Orleans Daily Picayune described “something so repulsive in the nature of the pestilence itself that even affection does not wish to detain the body from an immediate burial.” Scholarly discussion of these disrupted funerary traditions is generally centered during the war itself, but the yellow fever epidemic serves as another example of the continued presence of abnormal death in the South. The personal tragedies that befell Palmer’s own family laid the minister low. The death of a daughter in 1875 left only one of his six children alive after Reconstruction. Reacting to her death, Palmer wrote, “For the first time in all my life, I find my public work to be oppressive. I do not understand it. …What a pity that faith is

not always steady and bright! But one swings so, from faith to sense again and all is dark as before.”

As tragedy multiplied, Palmer felt no reprieve. “Each bereavement cuts its way down to the quick,” followed by “a return of the old grief, as it rises up to meet the new.” In response to the ever-presence of tragedy, Palmer formulated a theology of suffering. He counseled parishioners that “God has not made it a sin to mourn.” While grieving freely, the bereaved should consult the biblical story of Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, Isaac, which now seemed to Palmer a “form of sacrifice … not so peculiar as it seems.” The death of a child presented an opportunity for a renewal of Christian “submission and faith.” In a memorial sermon, Palmer maintained, “Our blessed Redeemer has sanctified everything which he hath touched, even death.” Such a thought was startling, even unbelievable, but Palmer was adamant. Although “[c]old reason may stagger at the metaphysics of the doctrine,” death presented a hidden blessing in forever imprinting the love of the deceased in the memory. Later that year, Palmer wrote about “a depth in the utterances of grief that no philosophy can fathom.” Suffering and loss thus forced the believer beyond the rational in order to understand the relationship between human and divine.

The Civil War and Reconstruction failed to destroy the Presbyterian divine’s belief in God’s active presence in the world. But Palmer’s experiences did lead him to revise his

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understanding of special providence in a way that removed rational certainty. In an 1872 essay entitled “The Tribunal of History,” Palmer sought to work out a theory of how God worked through human history. God, not “wholly unmindful of the affairs of earth,” nonetheless worked somewhat indirectly, through human agents. Palmer began by reinterpreting the meaning of the creation of humanity in God’s own image, a concept with a long trajectory in the history of theology. The image of God here becomes the capacity for understanding divine justice, i.e., an innate ability to understand how things ought to work in this world. The fall of Adam, however, clouded the human understanding, but it did not destroy the human ability to tap into the knowledge of the true divine order. “This rugged sense of justice,” Palmer asserted, “remains, shattered and defaced it may be, warped by passion, obscured by prejudice, blundering through ignorance and mistake into a thousand errors.” This sense of justice served as “the corner stone of religion and of law” and held “the very fabric of society together.” As such, Palmer reasoned that this sense was the means by which God acted on earth, through human agents endowed with the capability of meting out divine judgment—albeit imperfectly.  

The upshot of all this was that Christians could be certain that the divine acted in the world, but unpredictably so. In the short term, Providence worked through humans, whose corrupted faculties and free will lead them not always to act in accordance with divine standards. It was the long term, however, that truly mattered. And only the divine mind could comprehend the true course of events, which extended beyond time into eternity. In Palmer’s words, “not until the vast tapestry is unrolled before us in the pavilion of eternity itself, and the constituent figures are seen to be wrought with an exquisite unity of design, shall we be able to frame a judgment of the wisdom of the whole.” This world was merely a probationary period, during

which both good and evil enjoyed periods of success and neither won entirely. Palmer backed down somewhat from this line of reasoning in the pulpit, but the main point remained the same. He encouraged his parishioners to avoid trying to comprehend the workings of Providence in the world: “[N]o man is able to tell how the thread of his personal history is woven into the web of God’s universal Providence. Neither you nor I, can tell why God should, in fatherly discipline, afflict us as He does.” Even if someone were to calculate the reasons for personal suffering, Palmer averred, “We do not know how our afflictions are made to profit others—nor the extent to which we are bound up with thousands around us, in the delicate complications of life. We must wait until we sit upon the mount of God, and there read the [secrets] of His providence, as interpreted in their fulfilment (sic), … before we can comprehend either the wisdom or the love of God’s dealings with His Saints upon the earth.” No longer confident to predict the ways in which Providence operated, Palmer was nonetheless still convinced that God continued to work in the world, and this fact, if little else in the changing world of the South during Reconstruction, could provide vital solace for the southern Christian.25

The change in Palmer’s understanding of Providence since the outset of the Civil War was not merely a visceral reaction to the disappointments of the war and Reconstruction. It was one part of Palmer’s reworking of his religious epistemology—i.e., how humans are able to come to knowledge of the divine—in the postwar period. The Reconstruction era was not only a turbulent period in the realm of politics; it was also a period of major transition in the life of the mind. By the 1870s, the Darwinian theory of evolution had gained enough clout that ministers were beginning to wrestle with its implications for faith. Meanwhile, the rise of logical

positivism in philosophical circles threatened to undermine the combination of Scottish Common
Sense philosophy and inductive method that had allowed for the harmonization of religion and
science in the antebellum period. Positivists admitted no a priori knowledge and held to a dogged
empiricism, which demanded that the senses reign supreme. No amount of careful, inductive
argumentation could make up for the absence of a phenomenon to the senses, e.g. God.26

Along with most other southern theologians in the first half of the nineteenth century,
Palmer saw no conflict between the goals of science and religion. Most conservative Christians
of the South agreed that through the use of the inductive method—carefully building conclusions
from the slow and patient collection of particular and dependable observations—trustworthy
facts could be discerned from the natural order. Theologians believed that observation of the
natural world, properly constrained by the bounds of induction, provided firm evidence of God’s
design and ongoing care of the earth, and for many American scientists the end of their fields
was to offer empirical proof for the existence of the biblical God.27

Palmer, like his antebellum contemporaries, was a true empiricist, believing that the mind
was “destitute, at birth, of all knowledge, without power to create within itself a single material

26 On Darwinism in America, see Jon H. Roberts, Darwinism and the Divine in America: Protestant
Intellectuals and Organic Evolution, 1859–1900 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988)
and Ronald L. Numbers and Lester D. Stephens, “Darwinism in the American South: From the Early
1860s to the Late 1920s” in Numbers, Darwinism Comes to America (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard
University Press, 1998), 58–75. On the impact of positivism on American religious thought, see Charles
D. Cashdollar, The Transformation of Theology, 1830–1890: Positivism and Protestant Thought in
Comte and the American Reformed Theologians,” Journal of the History of Ideas 39 (Jan.–Mar.,
1978), 61–79.

27 On this arrangement, see Theodore Dwight Bozeman, Protestants in an Age of Science: The
Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought (Chapel Hill: University of North
of thought, and depending upon experience for all…. It is furnished with the senses, the open avenues by which it enters the domain of nature.” By compiling the information discovered in nature, the mind could gradually ascend to knowledge of “the most general axioms.” True science transcended taxonomy by aiming toward the heavens. Science, philosophy, and theology were all aimed toward the knowledge of God. Scripture, Palmer asserted in 1852, must be included in the investigations of any of these three disciplines. As he put it, “The philosophy … which will ignore the Bible … has apostatized from” proper methodology. Moreover, Protestantism, in Palmer’s mind, was the wellspring of all the major scientific breakthroughs of the age of the Enlightenment. Palmer, again like many other southern theologians, focused on Francis Bacon. “There never could have been a Bacon without the Bible,” Palmer wrote. “Francis Bacon was the offspring of the Reformation.” All human pursuits of knowledge—science, philosophy, and religion alike—were part of the same intellectual project, which was to be conducted using the same empirical method.28

By the 1870s Palmer’s theory of knowledge had undergone fundamental changes. The intelligibility of Providence in human events, as we have seen, was put at a distance, potentially placing the ability to know God in peril. As the questions arising from contemporary geology, Darwinian evolution, and pragmatism revealed seemingly irreconcilable differences with the Bible and Christianity, conservative theologians were forced to take stock of science anew and evaluate whether its conclusions could be trusted to provide information about the Divine. For Palmer, nothing could be more misleading in the quest for religious knowledge than science

conducted improperly: “It is the shame of bastardy, which Science brands upon her own forehead, and the great scandal which tarnishes her proud name, that she is not, in every stage of her own progress, the interpreter of that God whom she finds in nature, and the witness of His being.”

The problem, as Palmer framed it, was that “when we look out upon nature, there is the agency of God, it is true; but that agency, to a large extent, is obscured and hidden from us.” Palmer’s solution to this dilemma was to devise an epistemological system in which sensory data, and thus scientific investigation, constituted true knowledge, but knowledge that was of an essentially different type than that by which humans cognize God. He spoke about this distinction between scientific and religious knowledge using the concept of separate spheres:

“Knowledge is acquired by us in one or other of two ways: either by the discoveries of reason, in the sphere of the natural; or by the revelation which is made to faith, in the sphere of the supernatural. The two are entirely distinct; for they relate to different spheres, and are addressed to two distinct faculties of the soul.” For Palmer religious truth existed on “a plane which is higher.” It would be impossible to leap to this lofty sphere from the earthly position to which the human mind is bound when confined to the data provided by sensory perception alone. As Palmer put it, “The more successful we are in explaining any natural and secondary causes, all the facts which our senses observe, the further do we put from us the intervention of God.”


True religious knowledge then could not begin with empirical investigation. Palmer held that it goes “directly to the heart,” from the revelation of God. Thus, even though the world appeared to be governed by chance, the believer could trust that “in the religious sphere ... God shall be in closer personal communication with us.” This “closer personal communication” occurred in a faculty each person possesses that was attuned to the reception of religious truth, what Palmer called the “testimony of consciousness.” His point was simple: the knowledge stemming from divine revelation was real knowledge and even more trustworthy than that provided by the senses.31

This argument marked a significant development. Relying on the thought of Scottish Common Sense philosophers, Old School Presbyterian theologians commonly saw the senses as direct conduits between the objective world and a passive imagination, while frowning on any deductions that moved beyond demonstrable “fact.” By collecting many basic units of demonstrable truth, larger truths could slowly be proven. Palmer, like the Scottish Realists, defended the necessity of a priori mental structures in this assent to truth, arguing that “in every case of deductive reasoning we are pushed back to certain elementary and fundamental principles, so simple we are unable to press behind them.” The mind was necessarily active in

the process, and Palmer agreed that turning perception into knowledge did not occur automatically.\textsuperscript{32}

From here Palmer’s argument broke with tradition. Whereas the Realists used arguments in favor of a priori cognition to contend against the weakness attributed to reason (and hence to religious belief) in Hume, Palmer used these very arguments to supplant the power of reason in favor of revelation. By demonstrating that the mind was active even when receiving data from nature, Palmer secured the ground from which to argue that there was a component of knowledge—scientific and religious alike—that did not appeal to experience. In the case of religious knowledge, this element was the conscience, which had the capacity to receive revelation directly from God. What was communicated in this way was not understood rationally, but by virtue of the authority of this sense alone it offered “proofs conclusive to the most sluggish understanding.” In short, while scientific knowledge was created by both the senses and the mind, religious knowledge was formed by God’s activity on the mind alone. Revelation, by relying solely on divine input and not the corrupt data of the world, became the guiding principle behind Palmer’s religious epistemology. Palmer had thus constructed an intellectual system that allowed him both to take science seriously and to preserve the demands of faith against the intellectual currents of the times.\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{32} Bozeman, \textit{Protestants in an Age of Science}, Chs. 1 and 2; Palmer, “Testimony of Consciousness,” in \textit{A Weekly Publication Containing Sermons, February 11, 1877} (New Orleans: Clark & Hofeline), 223.

In 1860, when war was looking increasingly possible, Robert Lewis Dabney was not nearly as exuberant about the southern cause as was his denominational colleague Palmer. Love for one’s nation, Dabney declared to his audience at Hampden Sydney College, was an admirable and proper sentiment. However, unlike many of his contemporaries, Dabney held that the Christian’s duty was to smooth over conflict, to preserve peace, and eschew the divisions that politics often engenders. Prayer, confession of sin, and regular religious duties would serve the Christian’s nation the best. For each sin attributable to others within the nation, each sincere Christian could find one to match in his or her own heart. War could do nothing but disturb the two things that matter most in human life: the preservation of the family and the religious work of the Church. As a mistake, civil war would be “second only to that of the apostate church which betrayed the Savior of the world.” The effects on the church would be calamitous: “[war’s] judgment will be rendered in calamities second only to those which avenged the divine blood invoked by Jerusalem on herself and her children.” Until war officially broke out, Dabney devoted much of his considerable energies to moderating the passions that were flaring throughout the South.34

Dabney, however, was a child of the South, and when the events at Fort Sumter forced his hand, he joined the southern cause with full vigor. More specifically, Dabney was a son of Virginia, born in Louisa County in the eastern Piedmont and educated at Hampden-Sydney, the University of Virginia, and Union Seminary at Hampden-Sydney. While his mind traversed

through the gamut of the Western world’s ideas, his body stayed firmly planted in the Commonwealth. After seminary, he spent a few years in a rural parish but then found his true calling training the young minds of Virginia’s Old School as professor of Theology at his alma mater Union Seminary from 1853 to 1883. Even job offers from Princeton Seminary, the bastion of the Old School’s brightest minds, and New York’s Prestigious Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church, could not pry this Virginian from his home. Only alienation from his peers caused by his forever irascible personality drove him away to Texas in old age to serve at the new state university in Austin.\(^35\)

So, when war came, Dabney took a stand for Old Virginia in the way he thought he could best serve the cause: by following the troops into battle as a military chaplain. During his four months with the 18\(^{th}\) Virginia Volunteers, he witnessed firsthand both the Confederate victory and horrifying violence at the First Battle of Manassas. Despite his presence at the battle, Dabney assured his sister, “I am a non-combatant, and intend to remain so. I have persisted in refusing to get any uniform or side arms.” Thus it comes as a surprise that in April 1862 General Stonewall Jackson offered Dabney a position as his chief-of-staff. Dabney quickly accepted the opportunity to serve Virginia, much to the consternation of the professional soldiers he supplanted in rising to such an office. Jackson was pleased with Dabney’s performance, but, as

historian Wallace Hettle notes, it was likely because Dabney “never functioned as a general’s chief-of-staff; he more closely resembled the personal secretary of a friend.” The one time Dabney was given responsibility for conducting military affairs (at the Battles of Seven Days), he passed the duty down the chain of command. Only five months after accepting Gen. Jackson’s offer, the unlikely officer who showed up to camp decked out in a knee-length formal coat and a fancy beaver hat, returned home for the duration of the war.36

The Civil War was a defining event in Dabney’s life. According to his most recent biographer, “The war was the dividing line of his mental history and the most significant event of his life. … While before the war he had been Virginian first American second, after the War Dabney was Virginian first, Southerner second, and American maybe.” His antipathy toward the North and its supposedly dishonorable inhabitants had no end. One former student recollected that he “became so embittered by the ruthless methods of Federal officers like Sheridan and Sherman, and the efforts of Congress to impose Negro rule on the South that he almost went off his mental balance.” Moreover, Dabney was forced to suffer the indignity of manual labor in the years immediately following the war. In an 1865 letter, he lamented, “I must work or starve. I would greatly prefer to labor in the gospel rather than in the corn-field, if God … will let me. My private income, small before, is now at an end.” For the holder of a prestigious professorship

and erstwhile Confederate officer, the struggles of Reconstruction life were almost too much to bear.  

His postwar writings reveal the spirit of a man possessed, driven by a consuming passion to return to the way things were in the Old South. He became, in the words of historian Charles Reagan Wilson, “a prophet of the past.” But as Dabney weathered the storm of Reconstruction, he augmented his logical understanding of tradition with a new appreciation for the role of emotion in both the human psyche and the character of the divine. The role of Providence in the travails of Virginia—which Dabney never doubted—required a new set of tools to explain in a way that also stayed true to orthodoxy.

Given Dabney’s admiration of the past, it was fitting that his initial postbellum book was the first biography of his friend Stonewall Jackson, *Life and Campaigns of Lt. General T. J. (Stonewall) Jackson* (1866). This hagiographic treatment of Jackson’s life and military career treated the subject as a Christian martyr for a noble, even holy, cause, thus laying a cornerstone for the Lost Cause myth that obsessed the southern mind until well into the twentieth century. A year later, Dabney printed an apologia for his home state entitled, *A Defence of Virginia*. First, Dabney argued that northerners milked the southern economy in order to live plush lives of luxury, while southerners endured parsimonious, hard-working lives. The second argument was yet another return to the past, rehearsing a long tradition of using the Bible to justify slavery. These two early publications set the tone for Dabney’s subsequent discussions of social and

political matters. He spoke out against the reunification of the Presbyterian Church, which had split during the sectional crisis before the Civil War. Public education represented in Dabney’s mind the death knell for the traditional, hierarchical family. The only promise capitalism and industrialization held for the South was the fragmentation of southern society and the destruction of republican values. Dabney looked out from his enclave at Union Seminary, and what he saw was not good. Before the war, slavery had assured a stable society built on rank, merit, and Protestant faith. The developments of Reconstruction convinced Dabney that the South was headed for anarchy, racial mixing, and atheism.38

The horrors that unfolded before Dabney’s eyes during Reconstruction were reminiscent to him of the French Revolution. Southern slaveholders had long been influenced by the memory of the events in France and the waves they made across the Atlantic into Haiti, especially after Nat Turner’s revolt and other insurrection scares in the 1830s. For most slaveholders, these fears remained latent possibilities and ended with the war, but thoughts that the Terror had actually resurfaced in history permeated Dabney’s postwar writings on social issues. In the introduction to his Defence of Virginia, Dabney made the connection explicit, writing, “It will in the end become apparent to the world … that the conviction of the wickedness of slaveholding … is a legitimate corollary from that fantastic, atheistic, and radical theory of human rights which made the Reign of Terror in France which has threatened that country and which now threatens the United States, with the horrors of Red-Republicanism.” In response to charity efforts toward freedpeople in the South, Dabney responded by arguing that the “reign of

terror” was the product of would-be philanthropists who desired human equality, and “from that
day to this,” the products of the Jacobin party were the same—social upheaval and chaos.
Similarly, Dabney observed northern common school advocates “rapidly preparing … another
sans culotte revolution,” as they sketched the designs for a public school system that did not
include religious education. A near obsession with the parallels between the postwar South and
revolutionary France filled Dabney’s imagination for the rest of his life. In a lecture delivered at
the fledgling University of Texas in 1885, Dabney recalled America in 1865, where “we see the
second harvest of death” from the Jacobin philosophy. He cautioned his audience to take up the
study of philosophy so that they would not be deceived by the utopian dreams of egalitarian
thought. A United States devoid of the social hierarchy and stability he believed had been
furnished by slavery filled Dabney with terror.39

C. Vann Woodward summed up nicely the conflict Dabney waged on social and political
grounds, writing “Never, of course, was there the remotest chance of Dabney’s goose quill
prevailing against the clattering presses” of the New South’s proponents. But when it came to
religious matters, being stuck in the past was no detriment. Dabney was a disciple of tradition in
a denomination that reflected on the history of doctrine. By the time he received his seminary
degree in 1846, the role of the conservative Calvinist theologian in America was well-defined.
At early nineteenth-century Princeton, the ideal of the full-time professor-theologian was forged.
Instead of ministering themselves, the ablest theological minds cordoned themselves off in the

39 Defence of Virginia, 21–22; “The Crimes of Philanthropy,” The Land We Love, December,
1866, in Discussions Vol. 4–5, 53–70, 56–57; “Free Schools,” Southern Planter and Farmer,
January, 1879, in Discussions Vol. 4–5, 260–80, 261–62; “Commendation of the Study of
seminary, training new generations of conservative ministers and writing endlessly to preserve tradition. The protection of orthodoxy served as the primary end of this system. As Charles Hodge, who set the theological course at Princeton for almost forty years, famously proclaimed, “I am not afraid to say that a new idea never was originated in this seminary.” This defensively conservative posture developed in Princeton informed the southern Old School Presbyterians. In the antebellum South, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge (1800–1871) and James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862) took up the assault on heterodoxy, despite their distance from northern centers of liberal theology and New School Calvinism. Although doctrinal quibbles occasionally arose between the Princetonians and southerners—and even between southerners—the Old School intellectual establishment represented a unified front for the defense of the faith, even as other national denominational ties crumbled during the Civil War.40

Dabney’s theological writing fits the category of “rational orthodoxy” well, as he applied a thorough rationality to the defense of tradition. Although he was widely published before the war, his main theological and philosophical works appeared after the war. His *Lectures in Systematic Theology* (1878) drew on courses he had been teaching for decades by the time of its publication, but the work evidences no sign that the events and intellectual innovations of the 1860s and 1870s had disturbed his trust in the rationality of Christian belief. *The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered* (1875) also displays an unwavering

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confidence in antebellum theological rationality in the face of the criticisms levied by innovative philosophers such as the Positivists August Comte and John Stuart Mill.

While Dabney and other southern conservative theologians affirmed the value of revelation and Scripture, they also held reason to occupy a powerful role in the operation of these traditional sources of religious authority. It was reason by which the human mind could recognize the truth contained in the Bible. In an exposition of the role of reason in theology, Dabney encouraged students to “discard all the false and mischievous ideas generated by the slang of the ‘contest between reason and faith.’” For Dabney, “There is no such contest. The highest reason is to believe implicitly what God’s word says, as soon as it is clearly ascertained to be God’s word. The dictate of reason herself is to believe; because she sees the evidences to be reasonable.” Thus, revelation must be filtered through cognition before it becomes valuable. As such, Scripture, by design, is fitted to the capabilities of the human mind: “The claim which the Scriptures address to us … is addressed to our reason.”

This of course implies that human reason had the power to apply the data from revelation to its proper ends. While Dabney saw reason as necessarily limited in its reliance on revelation to locate truth, his philosophy of mind displayed an optimistic confidence in the natural ability of the mind, operating properly, to understand truth. “I fearlessly assert,” he wrote, “that no erroneous belief on any important question can arise in a sane mind.” This ability made it the duty of the responsible Christian to develop a rational belief in the Bible, which could only be done through the logical assembly of evidence. In Dabney’s words: “Man is required … to

41 On reason’s operation in southern Biblical interpretation, see ibid., 72–109; Dabney, Lectures, 143–44, 141.
believe and love the Bible. … He who says he believes, when he sees no proof, is but pretending, or talking without meaning.  

Dabney’s view should not be confused with the destructive capacity latent in Enlightenment rationalism, which granted reason the authority to chart its own path regardless of what stood in the way. His was a rationalism wedded to tradition, as would be expected of an orthodox theologian. On the one hand, reason operated in conjunction with Scripture as a corrective to scientific and philosophical flights of fancy. On the other hand, as “the laws of thought which necessarily rule in the human soul were established by the same God who gave the Bible,” the mind was given the role of first deciphering the categories of proper revelation and then, by those categories, judging the meaning of the revelation contained in Scripture. Thus, rational explanation demonstrated through logical evidence assumed a central place in Dabney’s understanding of how humans form religious knowledge.

This approach is evident in Dabney’s stance on Providence. That God both designed the world and continually guided its events in time struck Dabney as a matter of “common sense,” if God were to be considered perfect. God, as perfectly good and wise, designed a world that required constant intervention in order to maintain a personal relationship with creation. Dabney reached this conclusion first through logical argumentation and only after this demonstration did he show that his conclusions comported with the Bible. Dabney’s refutation of the challenges that Deists and Pantheists presented to the orthodox doctrine of Providence shows the primacy of arguments from reason, rather than Scripture, in his polemical arsenal. His opponents both responded to the problem of theodicy (that is, if God is supremely All-Wise, All-Powerful, and

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42 Ibid., 136–37, 141.
43 Ibid., 141.
Just, why does suffering exist?) by distancing Providence from day-to-day affairs. Deists—as Dabney understood them—argued that God acted in the world only at the Creation, and then left the world to run through mechanisms of natural law. Pantheists included God in the development of the world, making God mutable and, thus, imperfect. Dabney, of course, found such positions to be tantamount to atheism. Whereas Dabney’s opponents asserted that Providence could only be seen from a broad, general perspective, Dabney, ever the good Baconian, argued that without knowledge of the particular there could be no knowledge of the general. “It is a mere illusion,” he argued, “to talk of a certain direction of the general, which does not embrace the particular; for a general class is nothing, when separated from particulars which compose it, but an abstraction of the mind.” If the means by which God operated in the world on a quotidian basis were “contingent and fallible,” then “the providence must be such also.” Satisfied by the logical consistency of his argument, Dabney displayed an exuberant confidence in the divine plan directing natural and human history: “A multitude of elements and bodies are here seen connected by most multifarious influences, and yet the complex machine moves on, and never goes wrong. There is a guiding hand!”

However, Dabney’s confidence in the ability of logical argumentation to prove the intricacies of dogma, as displayed in the Lectures in Systematic Theology, must be put in the context of his other writings from the 1870s. Such contextualization reveals a thinker having doubts about the sufficiency of strict logic to explain the full complexity of human experience and divine action. In the postwar period, Dabney wrangled with how to understand the role of emotion in the human mind, a problem that had not been developed in southern conservative

44 Ibid., 52, 280, 284. For Dabney’s full doctrine of Providence, see ibid., 276–91.
theology until that point. That this problem arose during the trial of Reconstruction should not be surprising.

Emotion is presented as an alternate way to communicate religious truth aside from rigid argumentation in Dabney’s *Sacred Rhetoric, A Course of Lectures on Preaching* (1870). In his guidance for future pastors, Dabney asserted that the cultivation of emotion, properly curtailed of its excesses, has its place in religious knowledge. While Jonathan Edwards and other outstanding preachers were able to tap into the resources of emotion through logic, another tactic existed for the average pastor. Dabney called this strategy “descriptive painting,” which endowed the orator with the ability to communicate “affecting images of the truth” by involving the “faculty of imagination.” It seems that Dabney thought of imagination as the fullest possible use of the human mind, calling it “the imperial faculty of the soul.” His definition of imagination reveals the free-ranging power he assigned to this faculty: “The imagination is rather the recreative faculty: it is the power of combining the elements of conception furnished by the memory into organic forms which, as wholes, are new. It is that faculty by which the soul constructs complex images out of separate parts, with truth and distinctness.” The mind, Dabney suggested, is capable of creating intricate formulations that logical argumentation strains to put into language. These mental processes are the only cognitions possessing the powers necessary to tap into the faculty of emotion. In other words, only through the representational powers of the imagination, can one experience emotions corresponding to experiences that have not been experienced first-hand. So, just as Paul was able to forecast the emotional needs of future Christian congregations, the average believer can approach unseen “sacred truth” and learn about “the rational attributes and providence of God, or the glories and terrors of the judgment day,”—subjects beyond the ken of logic alone—but without falling prey to the fanaticism of evangelical
revivalists. “The efficacious … movement of the feelings,” he wrote in 1887, “is just as essential a part of a true religious experience as the illumination of the intellect by divine truth.”

Thus, it was paramount for Dabney that the imagination be put to the service of the gospel, but with logic failing to convey the message fully, he advised that ministers utilize “description” as an alternate mode of exposition. Because the product of the imagination, as a divinely designed mental faculty, is necessarily trustworthy, the orator must only clearly set forth the image held within the mind. Dabney’s understanding of this process placed little, if any, stricture on the minister’s license to appeal to the Christian’s affections in this way. To be successful in this technique, Dabney instructed that a return to Scripture was necessary. While in his systematics lectures Dabney organized Scripture into religious knowledge by filtering it first through reason, here the theologian pointed to Scripture as a starting point for training in the art of description. Nowhere else in the entire Western canon were such brief, unadorned, and yet emotionally affecting narratives to be found. Following this example, eschewing literary flourish for concision, and employing biblical examples whenever possible, the greatest emotional impact could be achieved. Furthermore, by using scripture as a model for emotive narration, Dabney saw a way to avoid heterodox scriptural hermeneutic methods, notably allegory. As such, Dabney’s method offered a way for the defense of doctrinal tradition, while taking emotions

seriously as a way of coming to religious knowledge, a position that would have been unthinkable for the antebellum Old School. ⁴⁶

As Dabney struggled to articulate the precise role of emotion in genuine religious knowledge, he also began to think about emotion as a way to understand divine action. The problem arose in an 1878 essay, in which Dabney took on the question of how the Christian God could willingly ordain some and not others for salvation—a perennial problem within the Calvinist tradition. This question presented a vexing dilemma: “How can [God’s] power and wisdom be cleared, save at the expense of his sincerity? Or his sincerity at the expense of his wisdom and power?” Historically, conservatives had tended toward the first pitfall, emphasizing God’s power over divine love. At the other end of the theological spectrum, liberals placed great stock in love as God’s essential aspect, maintaining that God loved creation enough to grant them free choice in matters of salvation. The issue boiled down to love: either God did not love universally and allowed the unloved to endure eternal torment, or God loved absolutely and wished for all people to be saved through the exercise of their own free will. ⁴⁷

However, Dabney found parts of both positions objectionable. The answer, he held, was to be found in proper understanding of God’s own emotional composition. For Dabney, the only rational way to make sense of the doctrinal quandary between conservatives and liberals was to modify the rigidly logical approach theologians had taken to understand the aspects of God’s

character. God had too commonly been depicted in Reformed theology as absolutely simple. That is, in God thought and action were simultaneously one, so that all of God’s attributes blended into a logically consistent whole. If God did good, God was good, for instance. However, the Bible, Dabney argued, showed a much more complicated God, one endowed with distinct capacities for “wrath, love, pity, [and] wisdom” producing ends that did not always cohere in human reason. This did not give the human power to elicit an emotional response in God capable of changing God’s will. Dabney merely maintained that God possessed “active principles” that, while “not passions in the sense of fluctuations or agitations … none the less are they affections of his will, actively distinguished from cognitions in his intelligence.” Dabney had no problem with the scriptural depiction of a God who was displeased at times, joyous at others. “Why not let the Scriptures mean what they so plainly strive to declare?” Truly orthodox scriptural belief must work to apprehend “that God eternally has active principles directed towards some objective, which combine all the activity of rational affections with the passionless stability of his rational judgments, and which while not emotions, in the sense of change, or ebb or flow, are yet related to his volitions.”

Despite Dabney’s characteristic rhetorical confidence, a sense of confusion is evident regarding how exactly the divine could experience something like emotion, if not true emotion. As the composition of the divine persona was beyond human comprehension in Dabney’s estimate, the logic of the theologians had to be given up in favor of an explanatory strategy conforming more closely to human cognitive powers. The answer Dabney found was to look to the Bible as a stylistic guide. The authors of that sacred text had not shied away from using

anthropomorphic analogies, leading Dabney to conclude that a bit of anthropomorphism would serve to make scriptural interpretation more accurate and would be easier to understand. The human mind could only process that with which it was familiar. “If we are forbidden to think after human norms,” Dabney argued, “we cannot think at all.” As such, by examining “the most rational and righteous human will,” one could, by analogy, “illustrate God’s will in its actions touching disputed cases.”

To solve the problem at hand, Dabney developed an analogy comparing God’s action to that of the most virtuous human he could imagine: George Washington. As arguably the most cherished son of Virginia, Washington was an obvious choice for Dabney. The theologian presented an exegesis of Washington’s emotional response when faced with the treasonous acts of John André during the American Revolution. Like God, “Washington had plenary power to kill or to save alive. His compassion for the criminal was real and profound. Yet he signed his death-warrant with spontaneous decision.” Washington’s compassion was real, but it had to be weighed against duty to country and law. Despite the difficulty of the situation, Washington made the free choice to condemn the criminal to death, all the while feeling remorseful for doing so. If Washington was capable of such a complex arrangement of emotion and duty, could not a perfect God operate similarly? Dabney contended that there was no reason to answer this question in the negative, and a positive response offered the benefit of preserving God’s goodness, power, and wisdom in understanding the workings of predestination.

Dabney’s theology shows that in the Reconstruction South a rational theology that did not adequately account for the reality of emotion was not reasonable at all. The wild swings of

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49 Ibid., 297, 298.
50 Ibid., 285.
popular mood accompanying the performance of the Confederate army in the field during the Civil War—and the depressing lows privileged white clergy like Dabney felt as their traditional way of life was torn asunder during Reconstruction—created an environment in which even the most logical mind could not avoid the reality of emotion in the human composition. And, as the era’s science and philosophy pounded at the gates of orthodox theology, Dabney stood firm in unwavering support of Providence’s guidance of earthly affairs. That guidance, however, had to be understood as conducted by a deity whose actions were analogous to the best of humanity’s. By working a complex understanding of emotion into his theology, Dabney constructed an orthodox vision that became authoritative among southern conservatives until the early twentieth century.

The lives and intellectual journeys of Palmer and Dabney, while following entirely different courses, both demonstrate that even the most determined believers had difficulty preserving the antebellum formulations unchanged through the trials of the Civil War and Reconstruction. Belief was tested, but it was not defeated. The intellectual journeys of both men show that drawing a strict dichotomy between believing and doubting obscures the nuances that demonstrate how much of antebellum religious thought—like antebellum racial and political thought—survived war and defeat. Perhaps Palmer and Dabney were not even fully cognizant themselves of the changes that had gone on in their theology. After all, major points of doctrine, most notably belief in intervening Providence, appeared fundamentally unchanged. But the ways in which they approached those questions and how they decided what counted as genuine religious knowledge began to look different after the war. If belief itself was not defeated, yet at the least a blow was dealt to the cult of inductive reason practiced among southern Presbyterians before and during the Civil War. The best-laid plans produced by the human mind failed
miserably, and Reconstruction-era cultural and economic poverty provided a constant reminder of that failure for decades after the war had ended. Dabney asserted to the end a rational orthodoxy, but he tempered the demands placed upon reason by allowing emotion a place in belief. Palmer similarly maintained a formal attachment to reason, but he granted the divine greater agency in formulating religious knowledge, having seen the failures of human attempts to decipher the will of God and the fragility of human life. Ironically doubts about human ability only strengthened trust in tradition—both of the church and of southern culture. Dabney and Palmer became warriors for the past because, following Confederate defeat, the past was all they knew to be true.
Chapter Three

The Boundaries of Zion: Southern Denominationalism in the Civil War and Reconstruction

The wounds caused by the war had begun to heal by 1870, but Robert Lewis Dabney’s work as steward of orthodoxy continued. The latest threat came from widespread efforts to erase denominational boundaries, with some ministers wanting to bring all Christian branches into a formal union. Christ is not divided, so the thinking went; therefore, Christians should not be. The dour Presbyterian theologian dismissed the idea as a fad, a “Utopian dream of the manifestation of the unity of spirit of the whole body of believers in a universal church.” Even if the idea’s influence proved temporary, it stood to do great damage in a culture given to “whims” and “epidemic distempers.” Dabney wrote with a tone of unsurprised admonition, chastising southerners for being “morbidly excited with the claim that Protestantism must manifest its Christian unity as popery does.” There existed, in Dabney’s mind, a slippery slope between declarations of Christian common purpose and the global dominance of Catholicism.¹

Denominationalism posed a tricky problem for religious leaders in the postwar South. Correctly done, the message of Christian unity could provide the cohesion needed to turn religious leaders’ visions of religious and cultural liberation into reality. Wartime cooperation and revivalism convinced many southerners that their region possessed a unique religious element, a spiritual quality that defined the very essence of what distinguished Dixie. But the southern concern for orthodoxy mixed poorly with ecumenism.

Platitudes about shared heritage caused no controversy, but Dabney and other conservatives worried about the preservation of particular traditions in the face of zealous proponents of Christian union. If the fold were increased to include Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, as well as Episcopalians and others, who would set the standards? Would the faith mean anything, so diluted?

Dabney distinguished between a “spiritual” church organized by God that bound all of Christendom and a “physical” church made by humanity. Like its human creators, the church as present in the world was imperfect, fragmented by organization and theology. Yet the multiple manifestations were called “not sects, nor schism, but denominations of Christians,” signaling that the difference between the groups was only nominal. As such, the Presbyterian minister saw no reason to challenge existing boundaries. Christian difference should be accepted as natural, and discussion should move forward to more pressing problems. Yet other religious leaders argued that there was no reason to persist in naming meaningless boundaries, as all Christian theologies could be boiled down to a few key tenets. Additionally, the celebration of the Lost Cause convinced white southerners that a unified South existed culturally, even if it were politically powerless. Wartime precedents of denominational cooperation, paeans to a Christian core of belief, and the Confederate experience itself provided what many thought to be a multifaceted regional accord. But the agreement proved ephemeral, as doctrine and tradition proved more intractable than optimistic Christian unionists had hoped. The career of denominational thought in the nineteenth-century South demonstrates the persistence of distinctive theological concerns
in defining southern identity, even when the this-worldly advantages of ecumenism were obvious.²

For much of the twentieth century, the question of American religious identity largely centered on the denomination. Noticing the fractures in the contemporary religious landscape, scholars created a narrative of splintering organizations to characterize the career of American faith. The plural origins of religion in this nation initiated an endless series of divisions, especially after the Great Awakening and the rise of evangelicalism. A religious culture characterized by divisiveness concerned many scholars, particularly those writing from seminaries and motivated by their own hopeful beliefs that there could be a way to find unity amid ongoing organizational separation. The subsequent search for the nature of denominationalism produced roughly two camps, those who favored theological explanations and those who looked to the socio-cultural environment. As with most problems in the humanities approached with an either/or set of solutions, the answer lies somewhere in between the two alternatives. Recently, religious scholars have shown a more acute awareness that belief must be taken at face value and appreciated as a sincere expression rather than a mask for some underlying social or political cause. At one level, all


Several decades after his pioneering work, Gustavo Gutiérrez lamented the fractured state of liberation theology. He admitted that it was possible to have many legitimate theological positions, but worried that the lack of a common purpose handicapped the liberation struggle. He wrote, “You are Black, you have your point of view; you are Hispanic, you have your point of view; you are Asian, you have your point of view; you are a woman, you have your point of view; you are Whate, nice White people, you have your point of view. But enough is enough! With this tool, it is impossible to struggle for liberation.” Gutiérrez qtd. in Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 242.
denominations exist for the preservation and propagation of a distinct vision of the truth. Alternatively, H. Richard Niebuhr’s pioneering *Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1929) still contains useful insight, namely that secular phenomena such as politics, region and class inform denominational identity.³

Such a compromise solution provides the best explanation of denominational identity in the Civil War era. For a brief period beginning in the sectional crisis and ending shortly after Reconstruction, the contest between North and South assumed top priority in southern culture. The schisms of the major Protestant churches before the Civil War serve as incontrovertible evidence that sectionalism changed denominational identity. The strong ties between regional and denominational identity forged in this period resulted in a moment of flux in America’s traditional movement toward division. Animosity between evangelical denominations within the two regions gave way to questions of union, leading religious leaders throughout the South to question the meaning of denomination and the parameters of the true Christian body. Their solution was both regional and creedal. Wartime events had proven northern Christianity corrupt, tainted by political involvement and various types of immorality. This contempt for the northern denominations fed into celebrations of southern culture, leading many clerics to believe that only the South was home to true Christianity. Religious leaders found cause to unite with southerners of other denominations. Often wartime destruction necessitated this cooperation, but the result was a genuine sense of trust and shared mission among the denominations. However, the trials

of Reconstruction enforced limits on this ecumenism. The matter of formal union between denominations popped up in discussions throughout the region but was never adopted. Fears of external, invading powers represented by the northern denominations and Roman Catholics highlighted denominational difference once again. By the end of Reconstruction, evangelical thoughts on denominationalism ranged between the poles of creedal particularity and a sense of southern Christian unity. The resulting confusion detracted from white ministers’ message of southern advancement, as the various denominations expended more energy determining the precise nature of their relationship than using common ground as a basis for action.

After the passions of the Great Revival died down, Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians pondered their futures. Each group chose to settle down and institutionalize in the early nineteenth century, in hopes that the best elements of revivalism could be preserved. Until fairly recently, historians depicted these transitions as peaceful, with harmonious relations existing between the New Light denominations. Historian Winthrop Hudson has argued that the evangelical groups identified one another as equal parts of the Christian body. Like the Reformers themselves and subsequent groups, American evangelicals affirmed, "The true church ... is not an institution, although in the life of the world it must assume institutional form. But the church must not and cannot be identified in any exclusive sense with any particular institution." The theological distinctions between Baptists and Methodists, for instance, were thus insignificant ones, and debates regarding method of baptism were friendly dialogues rather than rancorous arguments. In the words
of historian C. C. Goen, "Baptists promoted Baptism, Methodists spread Methodism, and Presbyterians Presbyterianism; but all recognized a unity of the church universal that transcended the apparent disunity of denominations by agreeing on the essential fundamentals of the Christian faith, especially those of evangelical Protestantism."

Denominations served as nominal boundaries, mere names rather than meaningful distinctions according to these scholars.4

More recent work suggests that a common heritage and mission did not keep southern evangelicals from bitter rivalry in the Early Republic and antebellum periods. Intense competition between evangelical groups precluded cooperation during these foundational years. Conversion implied more than an emotional acceptance of Christ. It was not conversion to evangelical Christianity, but to a particular denomination within that larger rubric. Preachers and parishioners agreed that nothing less that the fate of true religion was at stake in the competition for converts. The antebellum minister’s job included much more than preaching. His every written or spoken action served to define the boundaries of a still-inchoate denomination and distinguish a particular group from competitors. Methodists, Baptists, and Presbyterians all borrowed tactics from one another, but that contact provoked rivalry rather than instilling a sense of common cause. Denominational enmity spilled over the church house threshold and into the public square,

where even laity joined in to disrupt their rivals’ meetings and addresses. In the words of historian Phillip N. Mulder, “competition and differentiation became the essential element of evangelical religion.”

For early antebellum evangelicals, denominational affiliation formed the core of their religious identity. A Baptist was a Baptist above all else. Church polity likely afforded Methodists and Presbyterians with a larger scope of geographical involvement. Baptist congregational governance limited their frame of view to local concerns, but they too met at yearly denominational assemblies and produced the histories and memoirs that solidified a sense of history and purpose. The sectional conflict changed the confessional landscape of the nation by imbuing region with moral and theological qualities. As slavery proliferated in the South and infiltrated the region’s culture, evangelicals lost their ambivalence about human bondage and their conviction of the races’ spiritual equality. With southern evangelicals embracing slavery, northern evangelicals moved in an opposite direction, increasingly questioning the South’s “peculiar institution.”

The resulting schisms of the evangelical denominations added a new dimension of identity. The Presbyterian Church split first, in 1837–38, along theological lines that

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E. Brooks Holifield incorporates the divisive potential of denominationalism into the framework of his comprehensive study of American theology. He writes, “To take theology seriously, and to recognize its denominational locus, is to emphasize the extent to which theological differences could separate Americans from each other, creating local tensions and disrupting religious organizations.” *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 14.
happened to coincide roughly with the Mason-Dixon line. The conservative Old School dominated the South, while most New Schoolers lived in the North. In 1861 the Old School divided once again, along sectional lines. The Methodist Church was next to rend in 1844, and slavery was the obvious, direct cause. Northern churchmen objected to the appointment of the slaveowning Bishop James Osgood Andrew at the General Conference of 1844. An almost entirely southern minority voted against Andrew’s suspension, and the following conflict could not be resolved amicably. Baptists parted ways the following year. Northern abolitionists within the church questioned the morality of slavery, and southerners judged those advances to be outside the bounds of proper church jurisdiction. Unable to resolve their objections within the denominational structure, Southern Baptists formed their own branch. Now, to be Baptist in the South was to be a Southern Baptist, equal parts region and denomination. Each of these schisms was based on a desire to preserve true religion and to keep the foundational principles of the denomination intact. Each denomination monitored the activities of its neighboring competitors. Southern evangelicals were conscious of creeping northern infidelity that was becoming increasingly active in the spread of irreligion. Though unwilling to lock shields in a southern phalanx of the faith, evangelicals began to understand that the South was the last bastion of proslavery and biblical Christianity in the nation.  

The southern evangelical understanding of slavery gradually produced an ideology of a symbiotic relationship between Christianity and the slave system. In the years before the Civil War, slavery moved from a position of defensibility within Christian ethical strictures to a required mission task in ministry to the benighted descendents of Africa. Proslavery Christianity became yet another vector of change in southern evangelical identity. Each denomination supported ministry to African Americans by the 1850s, and the mission to the slaves shared similarities across the denominations. Here, in the quest to articulate a gospel that could both save and pacify the enslaved, southern evangelicals joined in lockstep. In the words of historian Charles F. Irons,

All evangelicals believed that whites should simultaneously encourage and monitor their slaves’ religious worship, that paternal care for slaves was a piece with proselytization, that oral instruction was the safest method of religious indoctrination, that whites should supply worship places and worship times especially for blacks, and that whites should recruit white southern men and women to conduct services to compensate for the lack of slave preachers.

The gospel preached to slaves contained only the essentials to salvation. It was a theology in the simplest of terms, and it paid no heed to denominational differences, despite the varying degrees to which each denomination poured funds into the enterprise. Baptists, for instance, were already successful with black believers and faced a lesser barrier than the more-liturgical Presbyterians, but all longed to make the mission a success.7

7 Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 17–21; Eugene D. Genovese, A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White Christian South (Athens: University of
Ministers also preached this all-inclusive gospel to white audiences. Braxton Craven, president and organizer of Trinity College (now Duke University), spent much of his time in the years immediately preceding the Civil War advocating for Methodist education in North Carolina. Yet, when in the pulpit, Craven delivered an ecumenical message. In one sermon, he acknowledged that the church was naturally “divided into a number of distinct denominations,” including “the Romish, the Episcopal, the Methodist, the Baptist and the Presbyterian and the Lutheran.” Braxton accentuated commonalities rather than differences, arguing that “in the great leading points of salvation they all agree.” Doctrinal particularity was “harmless so long as it is not made a bar to salvation.” Craven warned that making too much of “an article of faith which God has not written” was done “at the peril of [one’s] soul.”

This ecumenical spirit added to the sense that southern Christians shared a distinctive set of problems, but it did not collapse evangelical particularity. Beneath the similar methodology lay the familiar competitive edge, as each group sought to out-proselytize the other. One explanation for the antebellum explosion of religiously affiliated colleges in the South was that each denomination sought to train its own cadre of educated ministers, primed to enter the mission field. Sectarian and sectional concerns merged in the common cause of devising and deploying an effective proslavery gospel. At once

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divisive and unifying, the mission to the slaves solidified the sense that southern
denominations were alone in doing God’s work.9

During the Civil War, a sense of common purpose in the Confederacy further eroded
denominational fault lines. Especially during the early years of war, the South’s Christians
rejoiced in their new nation as chosen by Providence for a grand place in world history.
From the acknowledgement of God in the Confederate constitution to the national motto,
“Deo Vindice” (“God Will Defend”), the new southern nation chose to dress itself up in
religious garb. Identifying as “the most religious people in the world,” southerners of
various stripes found common cause in a notion of shared religiosity. Soldiers and civilians
came together in observation of officially proclaimed days of thanksgiving and mourning.
The sight of an entire nation kneeling before God overpowered many would-be
denominational partisans and detractors of the Confederate experiment.10

Charles Reagan Wilson is correct to an extent in describing this phenomenon of
cultural unity as a “civil religion ... center[ed] on the religious implications of a nation.” The
Confederacy certainly provided the context for this religious realignment, as well as much
of the content. But the impact of national identity should not overshadow the importance
of decidedly religious activity. Ministers’ work in the camps also transcended temporal
concerns, and the soldiers’ conversions, both real and reported, demonstrated a higher

9 Snay, ibid., 103–4.

10 Religious Herald, January 1, 1863, qtd. in Drew G. Faust, The Creation of Confederate
Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State
University Press, 1988), 22; Faust, ibid., 22–40; Harry S. Stout, Upon the Altar of the Nation:
order of operation for Confederate observers. The Confederate experience taught southerners about more than the Lost Cause. In other words, they did read the war as demonstrating southern moral and religious superiority, but they also drew theological lessons, particularly concerning the unity of the Christian body and the simple kernel of the gospel shared by all denominations.11

The exigencies of war necessitated a more ecumenical approach to ministry than had been typical in the antebellum years. As destruction and privation worked against southern populations, churches on the home front consolidated to provide whatever religious resources they could muster. The problem of irreligion among the soldiers prompted a more drastic response. Clergy imagined the worst when it came to camp life. Gambling, drinking, cursing, irreligion—the list of sins incubated by life in a group of isolated, desperate men fresh from the killing fields ran long. The Confederate policy on chaplaincy prompted crisis. With human and capital resources in short supply, Jefferson Davis’s government opted to forgo an official chaplaincy from the organization of the army. Citing the separation of church and state, theories of small government, and the need for soldiers rather than preachers, the Confederate bureaucracy left it to the president to assign chaplains, then constantly altered the wages promised to government-sponsored

chaplains. A continual chaplaincy shortage resulted from this official unwillingness to fund the spiritual care of the troops.\textsuperscript{12}

Each denomination initially organized separately to provide for the war effort, raising funds, recruiting chaplains, setting up printing operations for the production of tracts, procuring Bibles, and hiring colporteurs to distribute the religious literature. The denomination’s existing infrastructure was the only ready-made system for organizing religious mobilization, but the centralization of religious activity in denominational bodies did not mean that their work took a sectarian tone. In fact, arguing tenets based only in one faith tradition invoked scorn. In the spring of 1863, accusations circulated that the Baptist Tract Society had printed literature advocating “the peculiar tenets of that Church on the subject of baptism.” Baptists would not tolerate such a slander, and the \textit{Religious Herald} leaped to the denomination’s defense, denying that their publication board had “published a line bearing directly or indirectly on the question of baptism.” Rumors circulated of a Methodist rebuttal to these doctrines, but the issue was quickly put to bed, with all parties agreeing that during the war disputed points of theology must be avoided. From a pragmatic standpoint, the attitude made perfect sense. Wartime was no occasion for sectarian spats. But the cooperation of all major denominations signaled an important theological transformation. Avoiding the opportunity to advocate for a particular form of evangelical faith was highly uncharacteristic. For a Baptist to keep quiet on the particulars

of baptism represented a new appreciation of the universally acknowledged truths of Christianity, “the great cardinal doctrines and duties of religion.” Baptist minister John William Jones reflected on wartime religion a few decades after the war, remembering “No one was asked or expected to compromise in the least the peculiar tenets of the denomination to which he belonged; but, instead of spending our time in fierce polemics over disputed points, we found common ground upon which we could stand shoulder to shoulder and labor for the cause of our common master.” By temporarily muting distinctive beliefs, evangelicals were able to put the related goals of Confederate unity and conversion ahead of longstanding disputes.  

The spirit of collegiality soon led to the formation of various interdenominational organizations to oversee the production and distribution of religious reading material and the quotidian religious life in the camps. Delegates from all over the South attended the new Confederate Bible Society, an offshoot of the American Bible Society formed in 1862. The new organization welcomed clergy from nearly every Protestant group in the South. The Business Committee included members of the Presbyterian, Methodist Episcopal, Protestant Episcopal, Baptist, Lutheran, Methodist Protestant, and Associate Reformed churches. The inaugural sermon, given by Methodist Bishop George Foster Pierce, reinforced the reasons for such a union. In a word, the very life of the Confederacy depended on the Bible Society’s work. From the education of the young to the quality of the

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government, all aspects of life in society required access to Scripture. Pierce set an
optimistic course, despite the ongoing war. He proclaimed, “Let us have a Christian nation
in fact as well as in name, that God may be as a wall of fire round about this young
Confederacy, and a glory in the midst of her.” An emphasis on the civil religious dimensions
of this rationale obscures the momentousness of this gathering. For Pierce and his
colleagues the cause of Christ came before the Confederacy, the latter being merely a
vehicle for the former. These religious leaders celebrated the state to an extent, but they
celebrated its potential more than its actuality. Only with hard labor would the
Confederacy become praiseworthy.¹⁴

Under the old political system, sectarian divisions had gotten in the way of fully
implementing Christ into the school curriculum, science, and politics. Secession had
provided a clean slate by severing old ties and revealing that southerners bore enough in
common to put away old disputes. Pierce asked his audience, “is it sectarian to teach a
youth to fear right, to love country ... to urge patience, benevolence, personal purity, by the

¹⁴ Kurt O. Berends, “"Wholesome Reading Purifies and Elevates the Man’: The Religious
Military Press in the Confederacy,” in Randall M. Miller, et al., eds., Religion and the
American Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 131–66; Proceedings of the
Bible Convention of the Confederate States of America, Including the Minutes of the
Organization of the Bible Society, Augusta, Ga., March 19th–21st, 1862; and Also a Sermon
Preached Before the Convention by the Rev. George F. Pierce, D. D., Bishop of the M. E. Church,
South (Augusta, Ga.: Office of the Constitutionalist, 1862), 10, 15; W. Harrison Daniel, “Bible
Publication and Procurement in the Confederacy,” Journal of Southern History 24 (May
1958), 191-201.

There were also Bible societies organized on smaller scales. Nearly every state in the
Confederacy had its own Bible society. Protestants of various denominations organized the
South Carolina Bible Society during the war’s first winter, 1861–62. See Bennett, Great
Revival, 130; Daniel, “Bible Publication,” 194.
sanctions of revealed religion[?].” The implied answer was that the essential components of a truly religious society were indisputable—“the impregnation of government, law, art, commerce, civilization, with [Christianity's] own pure, gentle, peaceable, loving sentiments.” With proper action, the Confederacy would emerge triumphant out of the “darkness” of the present millennial conflict. All that was required was to “put the Bible in every house, an evangelical teacher in every school, a man of God in every pulpit--stir up, vitalize, intensify every agency for good in the Church; multiply by faith and prayer revivals of religion; seek ... the instruction and conversion of the young.” As a result, “when this terrible war is ended and peace reigns in all our borders, we shall have a state of society so bright, beautiful and blest, that time shall have no emblem of it in the past but Eden, and eternity no type in the future but heaven.” There was no place in this triumphant vision for schismatic thought or squabbles over denominational peccadilloes. The Confederate Christian nation was not a fait accompli; Pierce called for unity and preparation for a harmonious future.15

Similarly, a group of ministers including the leading lights of the generation met in April 1863 and issued a joint statement promoting Christian unity in the face of perceived Yankee barbarism. “Surrounded by scenes that pain the souls of all good men,” these clerics inveighed against the northern way of waging war to an imagined global audience, “for our own sake, ... for the sake of humanity, for the sake of the truth, and above all for the sake of our Redeemer’s kingdom.” The document’s aim was to bring down international calumny against the North, whose putatively aggressive, destructive, and unconstitutional war

15 Ibid., 11, 13–14.
struck against the foundations of any Christian morality. Reunion, the supposed goal of the extended bloodshed, could never be achieved through violence, the ministers argued. Continuing to pile up bodies in the quest for an unattainable end, Yankees “achieved nothing but cruelty,” yet the enemy ever sought the “widening of that river of blood which divides us from them forever,” the ministers wrote. Common moral decency called for the union of Christians of all nations and denominations to overcome the unending strife threatened by the Union army.\(^\text{16}\)

In the midst of this inexcusable violence, emancipation represented for these southern clerics the height of Abraham Lincoln’s “wicked and reckless war,” a draconian reach that would unite Christendom in defense of the Confederacy. The Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation stood to become a moral calamity of unprecedented magnitude, “a suitable occasion for solemn protest on the part of the people of God throughout the world.” That the president would risk the almost-certain “bloody tragedy” of race war as a combat directive violated the strictures of just war conduct. In addition to the unconstitutional seizure of “property,” this Federal strategy was certainly “repugnant to civilization” and “worthy of universal reprobation,” or so the signers of the address hoped. The statement continued to strip away the moral trappings of emancipation, revealing the cynical ploy believed to lay underneath. The directive would free “only the slaves of those who fight against the United States,” meaning that the “effort is simply to invoke slavery as an agent against the South” and not to end the institution of human bondage. The years of

\(^{16}\) An Address to Christians throughout the World by a Convention of Ministers, Assembled at Richmond, Va., April, 1863 (Philadelphia, 1863), 3, 12, 13.
pointless death and destruction would only multiply without foreign intervention. This plea for help addressed a universal Christianity, not a particular body. These southerners believed that emancipation would incite any Christian to action. No answer other than a resounding “yes!” made sense in reply to the rhetorical question, “In the name of the great prince of Peace, has Christianity ... nothing to say to such an awful tragedy?” Surely, the clerics contended, the faith’s foundations necessitated a stand “against war, against persecution for conscience’ (sic) sake, against the ravaging of the Church of God by fanatical invasion.” The time had come for a true Christian Union to defeat Lincoln’s fanatical and bloodthirsty political Union.  

The signers of the address also appealed to a trope that spread like wildfire throughout southern apologia: the crusading Christian Confederate soldier. The story usually took a familiar form. Soldiers entered the camp, and, somehow, “amid all the demoralizing influence of army life, the good work of salvation has gone forward there.” Reports of conversions began in the early stages of the war and continued to be circulated through 1865. Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia became the epicenter of army revivalism, but religious enthusiasm also reached the western theater of war. Estimates reached upwards of 150,000 converts by the end of the war, although those figures are now widely recognized as exaggeration. Nevertheless, a religious culture was ubiquitous in the Confederate forces, and its impact reached from the front lines to the home front. Soldiers and chaplains alike noted that church meetings became part of the standard routine. Relatives anxiously inquired about the state of religion in the camps. One soldier

17 Ibid., 8 (italics in original), 12, 16.
from the 19th Virginia regiment described the services of a typical Sunday in the Fall of 1861 and noted the “encouraging” signs, including the soldiers “marching to church sometimes in double quick time, lest they should fail to get seats.” With religious life disrupted at home, Confederates looked to the army to sustain the region’s piety.  

With chaplains in short supply and religion in high demand, a remarkable ecumenism characterized church meetings in the camps. In the words of historian George Rable, questions about sprinkling, bishops, and predestination seem[ed] less important and certainly not fit subjects for camp sermons.” One reason for this collaborative mood was the bare fact that ministers worked with what they had, which was always meager at best and called for improvisation. Richmond’s Presbyterian minister Moses Drury Hoge visited some troops in the Spring of 1863 and marveled at the scene produced by wartime necessity. He described what he witnessed from the pulpit: “And so we had a Presbyterian sermon, introduced by Baptist services, under the direction of a Methodist chaplain, in an Episcopal church.” Hoge regarded this interdenominational cooperation as a blessing, “a beautiful solution of the vexed problem of Christian union.” This sort of scenario was common, as units rotated chaplains of various backgrounds on a regular basis. Without funds from the Confederate government, the hodge-podge nature of the southern religious response was unavoidable.  

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18 Ibid., 15; Bennett, Narrative of the Great Revival, 413; Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 204–7, 303–7, 310–5, 339–44; Soldier qtd. in Bennett, 103; Drew G. Faust, “Christian Soldiers: The Meaning of Revivalism in the Confederate Army,” Journal of Southern History 53 (February 1987), 63–90, 64–68.  

19 Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 135; Hoge qtd. in Jones, Christ in the Camp, 223.
A spirit of cooperation and a non-denominational presentation of the gospel made this compromise solution possible. Methodist Bishop James Osgood Andrew warned the ministers of his denomination, “You will, doubtless, in camp, be surrounded by those who will have little sympathy with your religious views and feelings, who will closely and constantly scrutinize your whole conduct.” The proper response was not to debate but to “be witnesses for Jesus” through patience and an inoffensive message. After the war, A.C. Hopkins, a Presbyterian chaplain, remembered, “One thing soon struck me; there seemed to be no affiliation among chaplains.” Each denomination circulated the message that a chaplain’s conduct should be positive and not provocative. Baptists did not completely abandon their taste for controversy, but many followed the advice of North Carolina’s *Biblical Recorder*, a Baptist paper, which counseled its readers “to do nothing in a partisan spirit.” It was perfectly attainable “to maintain the spirit of Christ and be saved from discourtesy and intolerance towards others.” Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians dealt charitably with other religious views. The Episcopal Church had a history of refraining from joining in with revivalism, doubting the propriety of an emotional religion that lost all sight of order and decorum. Yet in the camps, Episcopalians expressed few doubts about the workings of Christ through revivals. Even Catholics joined in with the ecumenical spirit in the camps. Protestants attended Catholic-led services, and vice-versa. Observing the retirement of centuries-old divisions, the cause of innumerable
wars in the past, religious leaders imagined boundless potential for religious and national
glory in this moment of awakening.\textsuperscript{20}

The creation of interdenominational organizations for the propagation of the faith
provided channels for the dissemination of this ecumenical revivalism. On the local level,
each regiment formed its own camp church to organize religious services and to foster a
sense of spiritual community. Chaplains and soldiers of many different traditions
participated in these groups, and in their meetings belief made up the standard measure of
the man, not a particular creed. Unaffiliated with the regimental churches, Christian
associations sprang up in response to demand for religious experience. During the winter
of 1862–1863, one such organization came into being “for the purpose of uniting the
members of the various Churches, as well as the new converts, in the work of saving souls.”
Methodist minister John C. Granbery spoke glowingly of his Baptist and Presbyterian
colleagues in forming Christian associations, which formed “a nucleus for lay co-operation
with the chaplains, or lay labors in the absence of chaplains.” Thus, religious leaders set up
these organizations to be self-sustaining engines of revival.\textsuperscript{21}

Public services and private prayer meetings filled the days for young seekers
gathered in a revival that allegedly produced 140 new converts for one association. The
bonds tying adherents to these organizations were looser than denominational

\textsuperscript{20} James Osgood Andrew qtd. in Bennett, \textit{Great Revival}, 97–98; A.C. Hopkins to J. William
Jones, March 22, 1867, in Jones, \textit{Christ in the Camp}, 466; “Let Us Keep our Principles in
View,” \textit{Biblical Recorder}, December 9, 1863; Rable, \textit{God’s Almost Chosen Peoples}, 134–36,

\textsuperscript{21} Bennett, \textit{Great Revival}, 54–55, 205–6, 245–7, 321–22
membership but still binding. A secretary kept records on attendance and behavior, and conduct violations such as gambling and drinking resulted in an appearance before a judicial committee. Military offenses such as desertion also incurred penalties. At the same time, the Christian associations put forth a conscious effort to avoid interfering with denominational affiliation. One group organized in the Army of Northern Virginia in October 1863 drew up a constitution declaring, “We do not propose ... in any degree intervening between a Christian and the church with which he may be united.” The purpose was to foster religious life regardless of denominational affiliation, “to throw as many strengthening influences around the weak, and reclaiming influences around the erring ... without placing ourselves in collision with any organized church.”

Christian associations also had their own creeds, formulated to avoid clashing with any denomination’s confession of faith. Enoch Marvin, a Methodist chaplain, drew up a collection of “Articles of Faith” for the Church of the Army, Trans-Mississippi, that appealed to the basic principles of the Reformation. The short list included affirmations of the Bible as “the only rule of faith,” the Trinity, justification by faith, and a future state of rewards and punishments, among a few other items. This organization existed solely for the creation of “one church” organized by regiment. By using the existing structure of military

organization, religious leaders were able to avoid divisive questions of church polity while strengthening the soldiers’ identification with their station in the military. 23

This successful culture of interdenominational revivalism tested the validity of continued denominational distinctions, but it was not strong enough to eradicate sectarian sympathies. There were limits to the wartime ecumenism, which kept Confederate Christians from devising any schemes for formal unions between existing churches. While formal rivals worked together to recruit converts, the nature of conversion did not change from the early nineteenth-century pattern. Conversion was always to a particular denomination, usually that of the chaplain supervising at the moment the soldier accepted Christ. Presbyterian minister James McDowell remembered one revival at Petersburg, Virginia, in which “more ... men joined the Baptist Church than any other denomination.” However, at the same time McDowell recalled, “I suppose I received fifteen or twenty into the Presbyterian and Methodist Churches.” It was typical to describe conversions in the following way: “Colonel Dunlap, of the 46th Georgia, who united with the Presbyterian Church.” As the common church of the southern elite, the Episcopal Church received a greater percentage of converting officers than the evangelical groups. 24

Meanwhile, denominational newspapers, many of which circulated through the camps, warned readers not to let a cooperative ethos destroy creedal particularity. The

23 Bennett, Great Revival, 357–58; Harold W. Mann, Atticus Greene Haygood: Methodist Bishop, Editor, and Educator (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1965), 45.

24 James McDowell to J. William Jones, March 27, 1867, in Jones Christ in the Camp, 501; Bennett, Great Revival, 247; Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 311.
Biblical Recorder advised Baptists to “keep our principles in view,” lest “the terrible crisis through which we are now passing” do irrevocable damage to the faith. It was all too possible that well-meaning believers would “underrat[e] the great truths which constitute our denomination a peculiar people.” This concern for distinction within the larger Christian body also fostered a sense of competition in supplying chaplains. In the same issue of the Biblical Recorder, the editor fretted over reports of greater success in recruitment from other denominations. There were reports of Presbyterian plans “to place a Presbyterian chaplain in every brigade in the entire Southern armies,” and the Richmond papers carried news “that the brethren of the Methodist church resolved in their late Conference ... to put twenty additional chaplains at work in Gen. Lee’s army” while also resolving to support those men’s families to boot. Surely, the editor argued, Baptists could match and surpass these efforts. In the midst of cooperation lurked a real, if muted, sectarianism. The perseverance of denominational sympathies even in these heady times demonstrated the limits of ecumenism in the South. However, the ways in which doctrinal preferences were concealed in mixed company led some to overestimate the extent of that collegiality in the postwar era.25

Confederate Christians remained united in defeat, as they had been in battle. A common religious interpretation of the North’s victory emerged even in the war’s final months. Confederates developed a battlefield logic that viewed setbacks as signs of the punitive hand of a loving Heavenly Father. Death and destruction represented divine hints

that the South had fallen off the holy way. Throughout, southerners remained convinced that God backed them and their cause. Some tried to identify the cause of divine chastisement, finding fault in home front irreligiosity, soldiers’ immorality, and even in the treatment of slaves. Others remained content in the knowledge that God favored the South and would lead them to victory in time. There was room for individual lamentation within this logic, but few doubted God’s existence in the midst of their grief.26

The example of the piety in the Confederate army bolstered postwar religious morale, providing a constant source of hope for the future unity of the southern states and the perseverance of religion in the region. In the decades after Appomattox, the Methodist minister William Bennett and J. William Jones, a Baptist, wrote popular narratives of the revivalism that spread like wildfire through the Confederate camps. Historians commonly describe these men as mere shills for the Lost Cause who exaggerated claims of Confederate religiosity to demonstrate the morality of their war effort. In his work on Civil War religion, Steven E. Woodworth quickly summarized the aims of these books as “to support a false claim that the South had been more devoted to God and therefore must have been right in the cause for which it fought.” To be sure, Jones in particular worked tirelessly to create and perpetuate the myth of southern purity, and the stereotype of superior southern piety over northern infidelity runs throughout both narratives. However, the beliefs Bennett and Jones described had qualities other than superiority to the North. A theology of evangelical ecumenism suffused both histories. What mattered for these men

was not just that the South believed, but that it believed together. That the revivals included members of all evangelical denominations worshipping side by side seemed as important as their prevalence, if not more so. Whether this was prescriptive rather than strictly descriptive is hard to tell, but at the very least, it can be discerned that evangelical ecumenism operated as an ideal, which many ministers strived to actualize. White southern religious leaders believed there was truth behind their assertions. These people seriously believed that there was something about the southern character that was uniquely religious. The vital principle of southernness was evangelical piety, and it was in that piety that the region’s hopes rested in the trying times of Reconstruction.27

Association with the Lost Cause fueled the notion that there was a common southern mode of piety. While it is wrong to limit our understanding of religion in this period to the blending of religion and the celebration of the Confederacy, it is equally wrong to deny that this phenomenon happened. In addition to the political aspects of the Lost Cause religion typically emphasized, southern religious leaders found theological meaning. As Charles Reagan Wilson mentions, “the religion of the Lost Cause and the Christian denominations taught similar religious-moral values,” and “the God invoked in the Lost Cause was distinctly biblical and transcendent.” Put another way, the ubiquity of similar religious values communicated to ministers that the wartime peace and commonality between denominations would only strengthen after the Confederacy’s demise. The Lost Cause went even farther than most ministers would travel in their ecumenism by including Catholics and Jews. In fact, one of the most outspoken advocates of

27 Bennett, Great Revival; Jones, Christ in the Camp; Woodworth, While God is Marching On, 290. On Jones’s activism for the Lost Cause, see Wilson, Baptized in Blood, 119–38.
the Lost Cause was a Catholic Priest, Abram Ryan, whose poems in celebration of the Confederacy were revered throughout the South.\textsuperscript{28}

Catholics styled themselves as willing colleagues in the project of crafting a southern religion, both in the traditional and Lost Cause senses. Having supported slavery as well as the Confederacy, southern Catholics battled the same difficulties as their evangelical neighbors. While formally united with the Roman Catholic church in the North and throughout the world, southern adherents maintained a regional partisanship. They suffered under the same Reconstruction-era privations and cast the Yankees as oppressors just as their evangelical neighbors did. In 1873 Bishop Patrick Lynch argued, “[T]he South is still in the condition of a conquered province.” And, like many other South Carolinians, he identified the root problem in the fact that “the civil government is in the hands of the emancipated negroes,” whom he found to be “ignorant and incapable.” Catholics also sought a central position in the religious layout of the Reconstruction South. The Civil War and Reconstruction provided common experience that many Catholics hoped would form the basis of lasting regional cooperation.\textsuperscript{29}


The schisms between the national evangelical denominations endured, simultaneously feeding from and fueling sectional identification. While the nation worked to heal political wounds, churchmen showed little inclination to patch up rifts with coreligionists on the other side. The character of debates over the sectional organization of the churches will be covered in a following chapter, but these divisions bear mentioning as a factor in Reconstruction era ideas about the strength of denominational boundaries. As Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians waged their own individual battles over the causes of the original schisms and justification of extended separation, the defense of true religion attained a regional character. Apologetics for orthodox and spiritual (that is, non-political) faith became a *southern* battle rather than strictly a denominational one. Religious pundits reshaped old debates over the causation of war and the morality of slavery, offering no new arguments but reinforcing regional identity along the way.

Each denomination contested the same points with northerners in discussions of a formal scheme for reunion. As such, evangelicals paid attention to the internal politics of others, either looking for solutions for their own denomination’s problems or offering sympathy to fellow southerners. The *Southern Christian Advocate*, a Methodist newspaper, stood beside the southern branch of the Presbyterian Church in an 1866 editorial. The Methodist editor argued that the church was equally wrong “to preach ... the doctrines of republican equality” as it was to argue for “the extirpation of slavery,” since neither fell within the universal church’s spiritual province. Southern Christians of all denominations agreed that slavery was not a religious issue; that is, “unless it can be shown that slavery is a sin.” Generations of polemics taught that this rhetorical question must be answered in the negative. Presbyterian stalwart Benjamin Morgan Palmer made a personal appearance
at the Methodists’ first General Conference after the war, held in his home city of New Orleans. Methodist newspapers circulated Palmer’s message to the assembly, in which he offered words of support and common mission. “We are co-laborers in the great cause of extending the kingdom of our beloved Master,” Palmer assured the Crescent City’s guests, who shared in the task of “building up the cause of Christ in the waste and desert places.” Interest in the affairs of the other southern organizations remained high, and each denomination routinely carried news of all southern religious affairs. Debates over church politics garnered close attention because they represented the fate of southern ideals. As the only ideological bastion removed from the Yankee government’s domineering reach, the church embodied the hopes and fears of conquered southerners who resisted the social and political changes going on in the world around them.30

While northern Christians provided a foil against which southerners could define their common cause, the exigencies of postwar privation and rebuilding continued the wartime experience of regional collaboration out of necessity. Many church edifices had been destroyed or abandoned during the war, and it was rare to find a community in which each denomination possessed a minister of its own. A Presbyterian minister described the scene in eastern North Carolina in 1866 as one of desolation. Rev. B. F. White claimed that


the area exhibited great piety before the war, but afterward religious behavior flagged.

Reporting to a fellow minister, he lamented,

In many of these churches there are no pastors. In all of them it is not customary to preach but once a month. During the Winter, the houses are so very uncomfortable that few attend on inclement days. During the Summer nearly every body goes to the meeting. About half ... stay outside. Folk of farming trade horses and settle or transact business hire hands etc. On the inside of the Church on right and left of the stand are arrayed the faithful and others who wish to hear. The other parts of the house are occupied by the gay and thoughtless, who laugh and talk during the services. The most of the ministers are not only illiterate but weak. I know of but two of any education.

He complained further that the “3/5” of the church members were African American, and many of them were abandoning their Baptist roots, “either belonging to no church, being Universalists or infidels.” Reports of poorly supplied churches turning away from the faith circulated throughout the South as panicked ministers hastily plotted strategies for bringing much-needed institutional support and revival to the section.31

As a result of the calamitous state of southern religion, there was a great degree of resource sharing in the Reconstruction South. George Gilman Smith, a former Confederate chaplain who was seriously wounded in the Antietam Campaign, recorded in his diary

31 B.F. White to Calvin H. Wiley, April 8, 1866 in the Calvin Henderson Wiley Papers, #781, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
some of the trials he faced in his postwar ministry. While assigned to the Lewisburg, West Virginia, circuit, the minister had no Methodist building in which to preach, but he gladly accepted when local Baptists offered to “let us preach in theirs when we wished it.” Presbyterians also offered worship space. Smith noted, “I had not been there long when the Presbyterians offered us their session room against the wishes of some of my brethren I gladly accepted it.” In 1871 the Methodists assigned Smith to various pastorates in his native Georgia. The collaborative mood remained the same in the Deep South. During his second Georgia appointment, in Marietta, Smith helped organize an ecumenical revival, and he remarked in his diary, “Methodists Baptists & Presbyterians all were interested.” Denominations sought out active collaboration with similarly minded members of other groups. 32

Richmond’s Central Presbyterian included an editorial on working with Baptists in various Bible societies. According to the 1873 article, “There are none who do not lament the long separation of our Baptist brethren from us in this labor of love in which, if anything, it is desirable to have the united efforts of all the followers of Christ.” Furthermore, John B. Adger, editor of the Southern Presbyterian Review sought out contributions to the high-minded periodical from leading Baptists. Writing to the influential seminary professor, theologian, and denominational leader Basil Manly Jr., Adger appealed for help in the cause of creating a literary culture for their region. He

assured the Baptist that “there are many points where our ideas harmonize and we have common enemies to fight.” Reminding Manly of their lofty yet necessary goal, the Presbyterian editor urged, “perhaps it might be pleasant for you some times to be collaborators with us in our endeavours to and in building up a Southern religious literature.” While each denomination organized its own institutional rebuilding efforts, pastors organized to provide the essentials of religion, lest the anxiety caused by defeat lead to an even more devastating spiritual loss.33

An ecumenical theology of cooperation arose out of the process of religious Reconstruction. Many religious leaders explicitly minimized concerns about denominational difference, asserting instead the faith all Christians shared. Daniel H. Hill, editor of *The Land We Love*, summarized the prevailing theology well: “There is enough of common ground in the great doctrine of redemption for all to occupy, who love the Lord Jesus in sincerity and truth.” A writer in the *South Carolina Baptist* under the pen name Simplex agreed, “I have long desired to see more union between the churches, or especially among the ministers of the different orthodox denominations; for if the ministers were united, the members would also be united.” Bringing southern Christians together in a spirit of love and honor carried the added benefit of silencing critics. Cooperation would “be better for the world at large,” as it would “rob them of their sport when they so often tauntingly say of us professing christian, ‘why they can’t agree among themselves!'”

Georgia’s Episcopal Bishop Stephen Elliott thought that division, even in the name of reform, only resulted in unnecessary strife. In 1866 he preached a sermon urging his listeners to stop “dividing and subdividing into innumerable sects, each one setting up its own altar.” Elliott found denominationalism to be unnecessary and destructive to the Christian cause. “Truth,” the bishop maintained, “is one and fixed.” Institutions pledged to the perpetuation of that knowledge should remain similarly unified.34

Presbyterian William Archer Cocke agreed, admitting, “it is a source of immense grief to reflect that denominations are so sectarian” that “in their unholy temper they would sever the body of Christ.” Writing in 1871, Cocke found it pitiable that some would define their piety “by denominational creeds” over the shared faith of the “common church.” Such believers wrongly “exhibit the excitement, the spleen, the passion, and often the venom of the politician and the avaricious extortioner” instead of the “cords of brotherly love” which ought to characterize people of faith. In that spirit, Cocke represented the majority opinion when he argued, “let the denominations adhere to their respective creeds; let the different Christian Churches open wide their doors to the entrance of sinners.” Any Christian, Cocke continued, should be able to enter any other church and be accepted as part of the “common succession” as “heirs of Christ,” “common baptism,” and “common communion.”35


Religious leaders throughout the South followed this pattern of emphasizing vague notions of “truth,” the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist, and few other indisputable doctrines as the key components of the Christian faith that ought to define what it meant to be Christian in place of more complex and arcane denominational particularities. The quality of “spirituality” often embodied this essential theology, but here the term took on a separate meaning from its polemical usage as the opposite of “political.” In this sense, “spiritual” referred to the quality of the gospel as Jesus preached it. In the words of the Central Presbyterian, “Our Lord did not address himself exclusively to the intelligence of his hearers. He did not present the truths of religion as an intellectual exercise, or as mere food for abstract meditation.” Instead of a “cold, ruminating orthodoxy,” a spiritual Christianity would appeal simultaneously to the intellect and emotions. Those who followed this theology would “submit implicitly to the Spirit and Word of God” rather than engage in detailed codification of belief. Delegates to the first Southern Baptist Convention of the war referred to this ecumenical attitude as the principle of “Soul Liberty,” modifying a term usually used to refer to the freedom of the individual Christian. Expanding the term’s referent, the Baptists affirmed the right of all Christian groups to define their own creedal particulars unmolested by government or religious authorities.36

Rev. J. A. Quarles also investigated the nature of denominationalism in depth in an 1877 article for the Southern Presbyterian Review. Using a metaphor with a long history in Christian tradition, Quarles described Christendom as a body. Providing specifics within

that framework proved problematic. A common explanation of the relationship of the various churches held that each division was akin to a limb or organ. However, Quarles points out, each church performs “all the functions of a complete Church,” not a specific function contributing to a larger whole as the previous understanding of the body metaphor required. Quarles’s alternative explanation located the essence of the body metaphor in the shared spirit or “generating power,” closer to the human soul than anything physical. Struggling for adequate words, Quarles identified something broad and vaguely mystical as the “minimum of faith.” The very act of Christian worship defined the religion’s fundamental component. “When several Christians are ... assembled,” Quarles wrote, “there is a principle that unites them, the principle of religious association.” He continued, “The common purpose of their meeting, and the common exercises in which they engage, constitute the visible tie that distinguishes their” status as an authentic branch of the church. This “tie that connects the persons who are met in one place, is the same that binds the most distant members together.” Quarles pled with readers to remember this commonality, minimal yet authoritative, when interacting with other Christians. He reminded readers that “diversity in unity seems to be the true doctrine of Christian liberty,” while insisting that the faith “is violated whenever one part of the Church refuses to recognize another.” Denominationalism per se should not be faulted, as a natural outgrowth of this inclusive definition of the faith. However, Quarles contended, “the war of sects is a perpetual invasion of the integrity of the Church. It violates the spirit of union, and tends to destroy the ties formed by divine wisdom for its perpetuity.” Yet all churches must remain vigilant, as “there is something of this error in the conduct of all sectarian bodies.” Quarles
argued a policy of ecumenical attentiveness toward other denominations as a defining characteristic of proper belief.\textsuperscript{37}

While minimizing the importance of denominational boundaries, some southern Presbyterians sought to redraw the contours of their institution during the war and Reconstruction. Necessity drove this denominational realignment in large measure, but ideology also informed the changes. The emphasis on common Christian principles in the religious culture at large cast subdivision within the Presbyterian fold in bold relief. Debates over readmitting the New School Presbyterians to the southern church began during the war. Many stalwarts of the denomination, including Benjamin Morgan Palmer and John B. Adger, opposed the merger. These detractors claimed that the New School’s heretical beliefs persisted and that any union would require that members of the United Synod (the organizational title of New Schoolers in the South) recant those tenets before being accepted. The plan of union also had well-known supporters, including Robert Lewis Dabney and Moses Drury Hoge. Dabney claimed that the theological distinctions between the two parties had expired, but he held firm that the Old School should remain the guardians of orthodoxy in the church’s councils and seminaries. The issue came to a vote, and the results varied in each presbytery. Virginia presbyteries came together with the Old School in the 1864 meeting of the Synod of Virginia and rejoiced: “Christian ministers and people long severed are re-united; differences of opinion and diversities of sentiment are

\textsuperscript{37} J.A. Quarles, “The One Visible Church and Many Denominations,” \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review} 28 (January 1877), 26–46, 28, 30, 36, 42; See also, A.G. Palmer, “The Church Identified from its Organic Unity,” \textit{Christian Index}, October 1, 1868.
forgotten ... and today we think the visible body of Christ more like the sacramental host of God’s election should be [greater] than ever before.” 38

The union of presbyteries occurred on the local level, and continued tensions complicated the process in areas with higher concentrations of Unionists, such as eastern Tennessee’s Holston Presbytery. Elsewhere in the Volunteer State, Cumberland Presbyterians entered into talks concerning union with the Southern Presbyterians. These bodies, separated in 1806, realized that they had much in common after the war, but the delegation stalled after the Cumberland representatives requested even modest concessions from the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1868. Although these denominational mergers were fraught with difficulty, their very existence in the Civil War era attests to a greater spirit of cooperation than had before been the case. Proponents of union like Dabney envisioned, in the words of historian Sean Michael Lucas, a “united Southern Presbyterian church would serve as a single Southern Zion.” Greater religious organization appeared to be the key to the advancement of the struggling South.39


The failure of all Presbyterians to unite in one body demonstrates the illusory character of postwar ecumenism. Heady optimism fueled by regional sympathies and friendly discourse concealed the true nature of denominationalism, which proved to be more deeply seated than many realized. Theological commonalities were revealed to be more surface than substance when parties engaged in serious dialogue about doctrine and polity. The glue of sectionalism dissolved when creational loyalties met a real test.

Relationships between Baptists and others provided a constant reminder that any effective union would be fraught with difficulty. “W.S.,” writing in the *Southern Christian Advocate*, bluntly summarized the opinion of many Methodists, Presbyterians, and others: “Baptists do not now recognize us as Christians.” Baptists expressed a greater reluctance to collaborate, even out of necessity. J. William Jones complained to a fellow minister, “I am the only Baptist preacher within 30 miles of here in two directions, within 60 miles in another and within 100 miles in another direction. And there is a constantly growing demand for Baptist preaching and an increasing readiness to accept Baptist views.” Asserting exclusivity regarding the sacrament of baptism, southern Baptists often refused to admit any believer from a tradition that practiced sprinkling instead of dunking or infant baptism into the Christian fold. Those who chose to participate in interdenominational efforts, such as bible societies and Sunday schools, received careful instruction to preserve the Baptist truth. The fear was that “the Baptist members of such organizations scarcely

hear” arguments about ecumenism “without treason to the truth.” The ways in which Baptists phrased their distinctive beliefs either insulted or repelled others, for example by referring to differing theologies as treasonous. Jeremiah Bell Jeter once described the benefit of dunking as creating a convert “who is preeminently an humble and devoted saint.” One Presbyterian replied to the claims of a “baptism of humility” with an expression of familiarity, claiming to find those arguments “in the mouths of more obscure, but not less zealous and boastful, advocates ... in my neighborhood.”

Baptists often responded to challenges with heightened rhetoric and accusations that exacerbated conflict. Having heard that Presbyterians were gradually discontinuing infant baptism, a writer for the Christian Index claimed that Presbyterians had merely moved the practice into secrecy. The master polemicist of the era, James Robinson Graves, worked tirelessly to promote Baptists above all other creeds. Using his newspaper, the Tennessee Baptist, Graves launched verbal assaults on Methodists, Presbyterians, Campbellites, Episcopalians, Catholics, Swedenborgians, Spiritualists, and even fellow Baptists. Graves was a figurehead in the Landmark movement, a minority position that held distinctive views regarding apostolic succession and objected to the idea of a universal church beyond the local organization. With frequent articles like “Further Proof of Methodist Corruption,” the Baptist contained an unending flow of invective. The editor ran pieces likening Presbyterian theology to Catholics and charging Methodists with

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exclusivity, with ministers sworn “to make war on other denominations.” Graves’s paper carried an article aiming to expose ecumenism as a hollow endeavor, an act of “unblushing mendacity and transparent hypocrisy.” In their declarations of essential similarity, advocates of expanded Christian union only fool themselves. As the author reminded, “We have seen cats and mice, dogs and rabbits, foxes and chickens, all nesting together in the same cage, as if bereft of those instincts which, in a state of nature, make the weak the prey of the strong and the strong the terror of the weak.” Doctrinal particularities, though dormant for a time, could never be eradicated. To hope for a cooperative union was mere fancy, “a farce.” “All these projects looking to a territorial church,” the author warned, would be revealed as “hav[ing] their origin in intensely sectarian purposes.” Otherwise, proponents would join the Roman Catholic Church. Instead, each holds a secret plot to use union to destroy denominational rivals, like spiders hoping to trap flies in its web. The article concluded with a bit of schadenfreude, wishing “that failure may teach a valuable lesson to these pragmatical visionaries.”

At the same time, many Baptists discouraged such confrontation, working instead to allow for interdenominational collaboration, albeit on a modest scale. Baptists outside the


Landmark movement saw Graves as a force to counteract and seemed to be embarrassed by his dramatic rhetoric. In 1873 William Harrison Williams worried that “J.R.G.” was “making powerful efforts to obtain a foothold in Alabama.” “The aggregate influence of the Baptist ministry of the state is not now what it was several years ago,” Williams worried, so he wrote to Basil Manly Jr. “to come to our aid” and defeat Graves’s influence. Manly’s father, Basil Manly Sr., had an enduring reputation in the state, making the prominent minister a suitable candidate to change the tone of Baptist debate in the state. Even Graves himself conflicted his usual provocative tone occasionally. In his first editorial after the war he gushed, “I plead for the union of all the followers of Christ in heart, in sympathy, and in act, the union of alienated brethren, the union of disrupted families, the union of disorganized and distracted churches.” He swore not to “fan the fell spirit of hate and revenge that rankles in the breasts and burns upon the tongues of some of our brethren.” Likewise, W.H. Jordan, a North Carolina Baptist minister, opined, “It is lamentable to think what prejudice exists against each other, among the different religious denominations.” He described Christians as “all brethren,” regardless of disagreements. The South Carolina Baptist expressed more effusive hopes for cooperation, even “union,” between churches. Objecting to a pact “in opinions” and “outward order,” this editor restricted the meaning of the term to a charitable attitude toward other Christians. “We should love as brethren, think well of, and honor one another, wish all good, all grace, all gifts, all success”—these were the elements of true denominational union, not stronger connections which could lead to strife.42

42 William Harrison Williams to Basil Manly, Jr., March 6, 1873 in the Basil Manly Papers,
If Methodist minister John T. James encountered this charitable spirit in Baptists he encountered, it certainly did not register. He contended that Baptists attempted to elevate themselves above Christianity by appropriating the ordinance of baptism and excluding others from it, thus making "it a Baptist ordinance instead of a Christian one." According to James, Baptists thus wrote themselves out of the faith by "shut[ting] the Lord out of it, for He cannot be made a party to such sect exclusiveness by any people." For James, to be Christian required allowing a degree of latitude in the interpretation of others’ beliefs. Though Baptists surely possessed this tendency to claim superiority, the activity of exuberant defenders amplified and likely exaggerated those concerns, for even exclusivist Baptists such as Graves admitted the need for Christian collegiality.43

The turning point in postwar ecumenism came when suggestions that the southern people join in one regional church received serious attention. Georgia’s revered Episcopal Bishop Stephen Elliott was likely the first major figure to propose a union between the Episcopal and Methodist churches, and “may be of all the other Protestant Churches.” Elliott optimistically believed that polity, ritual, and theology could easily be merged, with each party jettisoning troublesome components in favor of the harmony of the whole. Methodists would accept the more complex liturgy of the Episcopal church, while the latter would welcome the former’s system of ministerial itinerancy. Bishops from both churches

#486-z, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Tennessee Baptist, February 1, 1867; “Religious Prejudice,” Biblical Recorder, August 28, 1867; “Guilt of Treason,” South Carolina Baptist, April 20, 1866.

43 John T. James, Four Years of Methodist Ministry, 1865–1869. Baltimore Conference, M.E. Church, South (Staunton, Va., 1894), 13.
would receive a re-ordination, and individual churches were left “free to choose or decline liturgical worship.”

Elliott died in December 1866, before he could explore the possibility of a formally unified southern church. His successor, John W. Beckwith, a former Confederate chaplain, continued the cause of Christian accord. However, the new bishop did not possess the charm and restraint of his predecessor, and the scheme of union did not go far in his hands. At an interdenominational gathering in Columbus, Georgia, Beckwith delivered a sermon that offended many of the non-Episcopalians present. According to one attendant, “He claimed that the Pr[otestant] E[piscopal] Church furnished an organization to which no one could object, its creed being simple and catholic, and its ministers being in regular line from the apostles.” Thus, he proposed an easy union, consisting of “an unconditional surrender of doctrines, ordination ... modes of worship, every thing that now distinguishes us as various branches of the church of Christ.” Though another witness characterized his message as sincere and “in the spirit of the Gospel of Peace,” Beckwith’s proposal set off a spirited debate that endured for years. Similarly, a writer for the North Carolina Baptist outlet, the Biblical Recorder, proposed a union on Baptist grounds in late 1871. The author believed “that both Catholics and Protestants, Baptists and Paedobaptists, Quakers and Ritualists are willing to bring their differences to our standard and abide by its decisions.” The majority of southern Protestants could tolerate and even champion ideas of

44 “Church Union,” Southern Christian Advocate, May 29, 1868.
interdenominational cooperation, but when the plans for an actual union arose, agreement proved fleeting as struggles for power commenced.45

Unsurprisingly, these schemes for union under the control of one denomination failed to convince. Beckwith imagined that his church could provide the most capacious fold for southern religion, based on that tradition’s creedal laxity, but his message enticed only fellow Episcopalians. Evangelical reactions ranged from hopeful and intrigued to offended and afraid. One of the most optimistic reactions found agreement with the Bishop that controversial doctrine was becoming extinct. “Catholics,” he hoped, “are throwing off the shackles of the Papacy and protesting against the unscriptural dogmas of Rome.” Likewise, the Episcopal church showed signs of dissolution. World events seemed to be heading a course to a “spiritual kingdom” ruled by Christ, not “ruled by Pope or King, by Cardinal or Priest.” Another commentator affirmed, “I am in favor ... of obliterating the non-essential points which divide Christians of the same community into Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Episcopalians.” However, his support flagged at the mention of “organic union” requiring a merger of governance and theology. The disunity of the


Following Beckwith’s controversial sermon, other Episcopal bishops followed suit. See “High Church Claims Examined,” Southern Christian Advocate, July 3, 1868.
proposed unifier surfaced regularly, as evangelicals pointed out the fissures within Anglicanism as evidence that any such plot would inevitably fail. 46

Welcoming other Christians with kind accord did not erase the deeply seated position of denomination in evangelical piety. As this same writer reflected, “My Methodism grows with my growth, and strengthens with my strength.” Affiliation with a particular Christian tradition consisted of more than creeds and polity; denominationalism was firmly ingrained in the very structure of belief. Alabama Baptist pastor Joseph E. Carter regretted often hearing the prideful declarations of those who gloated, saying, “I am a Presbyterian!” or “Oh, I’m a Baptist.” This identity led more often to conflict rather than Christian peace. As Carter wrote, “All this, often spoken by those who seem to live, not for what Jesus says or commands, but for what they have been educated and trained to believe by mother, father, or some one else.” In other words, although there was nothing in the message of Jesus himself to suggest that denominational identity should matter, the long process of training in the faith engrained sectarian notions that were extremely difficult to overcome.47

Reactions to the church union debate did result in a degree of evangelical agreement by identifying the culprit responsible for political and religious strife in the world. Evangelical religious leaders condemned those churches that sought to place Christendom


under their rule, making convenient targets out of Roman Catholics. The accusations of Catholic lust for power had a longstanding tradition. Although Catholics participated in the wartime revival culture and were active in the postwar celebration of the Lost Cause, the battles of the Reformation lived on in southern culture. The long history of the church informed evangelical responses to the idea of Christian union. While the possibility of cooperation remained attractive, formal pacts between denominations constituted a step too far. With southern churches united against the same institution, the Catholic church, should it attempt to expand, would have only one domino to topple rather than many. One minister asked, “Are the Catholics Coming?” and reported a general climate of apprehension that “the Catholics will come and swallow up the Protestants.”

Evangelicals throughout the South imagined a slippery slope from doctrinal laxity to Catholic expansion to chaos, and racial elements suffused these dystopian visions. In particular, rumors circulated that “hundreds of colored priests are now training in Rome and that, with millions of money, they will soon swarm like locusts on our coasts.” While Irish Catholics “are generally good citizens,” this Baptist wrote in horror of the “African”

48 “Are the Catholics Coming?” Biblical Recorder, September 15, 1869.

Andrew H. M. Stern’s recent work demonstrates that Protestants and Catholics worked together more frequently than they fought in the Old South. See Southern Crucifix, Southern Cross: Catholic-Protestant Relations in the Old South (Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2012). In light of this argument, it seems that Reconstruction-era southern anti-Catholicism arose at the same time as the national discourse about Catholicism took a negative turn. Increased immigration produced nativist sentiments in which Catholicism appeared the agent of American and Protestant destruction. While southerners claimed to be under a unique threat, their protestations were part of a national phenomenon. See Tracy Fessenden, Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007).
who would not confess to anyone, “either white or black.” Such was the Catholic desire for control that even uncontrollable priests of African descent would be deployed if the result were added dominion. Presbyterian William Archer Cooke wrote of the Catholic propensity for social instability, as Catholic counties “are prey to constant revolution.” The freedpeople untethered to a denominational organization represented a more common and realistic problem than an invasion of African priests. Occasionally, efforts to Christianize and even ordain black ministers originated in the supposition that if evangelicals failed to attract African Americans, Catholics would successfully bring freedpeople into their fold. Freedpeople already exhibited “a tendency Pope-ward,” and without action the “appellation of ‘Father’ instead of ‘brother’ given to the pastor will become in time a connecting link with priestly domination and tyranny (sic).” Southern evangelicals reasoned that Reconstruction provided the perfect occasion for Catholic takeover as communities rebuilt and churches remained impoverished. The religious newspapers led readers to believe that evangelicals were going over to Catholicism in droves. A delegate from Virginia rose before the 1869 Southern Baptist Convention to rally a united front against the Pope, urging, “Oh come and stand side by side fighting in the great cause of Christianity.”


See also the long series of articles beginning “Romanism,” *Central Presbyterian*, July 10, 1878. The author offered similar arguments about the political, social, and racial degradation accompanying Catholicism.
In this climate, the provocateur J.R. Graves revealed a connected result of the Christian union debate when he wrote, “Catholicism, Roman and Episcopal, the old and the new, are coming in upon our land like a flood.” Even before Beckwith’s controversial proposal, evangelicals doubted Episcopal Christianity. Too focused on ritual and its ecclesiology too close to Rome, the Church of England and its branches balanced on the precipice of Catholicism. Having examined Anglican polity, one Methodist asked, “What is this but Romanism?” Some evangelicals doubted the sincerity of the English Reformation and wondered if the Pope maintained secretive connections to the denomination’s hierarchy. One Baptist theorized a law of “development” in which theological error only led toward worse error. Thus, the Episcopal church, having started down the road to Catholicism, would eventually reach that destination. Many commentators focused on the “smells and bells” of Episcopal worship, using “Ritualists” as a shorthand for Episcopalians. The highly liturgical style repelled many evangelicals, who found that the focus on ritual did not achieve evangelical ends. Conversion experiences did not happen with chanting and incense. Evangelicals believed that Episcopal piety rested on authority rather than on free choice, teaching approved interpretations of scripture and restricting individual readings and religious experiences—the opposite of soul liberty. Although these descriptions of Episcopal worship were never fully accurate, the stereotyped Episcopalian who followed orders rather than experienced the divine directly set off alarms among evangelicals that Catholicism was on the march. Early in Reconstruction a few voices spoke up in defense of the Episcopal Church, stating, as one 1867 Baptist commentary put it, “to compare [the Episcopal Church] with the church of Rome, is unkind and injurious.” The Christian union debate silenced those voices, and talk of Catholic plots of domination
received no rebuttal. During Reconstruction the cooperative spirit between evangelicals and others vanished as talk of conspiracy and takeover proliferated.\textsuperscript{50}

Evangelical critics based their claims of Anglican liturgical and ecclesial similarity to Catholicism on some reality, but the charges aimed at Episcopalians quickly ranged into the realm of fancy. The links with Catholicism supported arguments that the Episcopal Church also aimed to take over southern Christianity. Methodist J. E. Evans asked rhetorically, “Is it not the custom of both ministers and members of the P. E. Church to endeavor to make proselytes from other churches and congregations?” Evans accused them of stopping at nothing to gain adherents, including dangling immoral practices as the carrot enticing conversion. Episcopal tactics included using “even … a love of the ball-room, the social dance, the circus, the theatre and such like amusements, to influence such members of other churches.” Evans’s own exegesis of Bishop Beckwith’s campaign for Christian union led to the interpretation that the bishop “claims for his Church, still \textit{to be one} with the Roman Catholic Church.” Another minister wrote of “a stealthy foe … creeping about Zion—mining in the dark—whispering delusive tales to unsuspecting ears—proffering a jubilant welcome to all \textit{deserter}s.” Instead of a collaborator in the cause of Christ, the Episcopal

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Church seemed a nefarious proxy for Rome’s advances on the last bastion of orthodox Protestantism.51

Southern evangelicals also interpreted connections between the Episcopal Church and the North. Fretting over the loss of religious power in addition to the political and economic subjugation continuing from the Civil War, Dixie’s clergy remained vigilant to any plots to impinge further on their religious life. One Methodist recorded an instance in Scott County, Mississippi, in which several southern Methodists went over to the northern branch of the denomination. The author drew the conclusion that both “Northern Radical[s]” and Episcopalians used accusations of “illiberality, ’bigotry’ and ‘sectarianism’” to counter regional and denominational arguments in favor of the southern religious status quo. Thus, heretical belief was made to seem “new” and attractive, luring the southern faithful away from the fold. Both northern religion and the Episcopal Church stood as examples of “false or defective” religion, seducing converts in a quest for power rather than preaching the gospel. The editor of the Baptist Christian Index feared Northern Methodist and Episcopal collusion in a plot to establish a national church. This abomination would seamlessly merge the Republican Party with Christianity, further subjugating the defeated Confederacy politically and suppressing southern belief in the spirituality of the church. However, southerners (not only Baptists) knew better than to erase the demarcation between church and state. “Southern Methodists … their bishops and subordinate clergy,”

the editor wrote, “have too much good sense and too much piety” to agree to such a scheme. He could not say the same for the Episcopalians in his midst.52

By the 1870s, mixed messages about denominational relations filled the South. Calls for formal Christian unity had reminded southerners of all creeds that there were clear reasons for division within Christianity. At the same time, perceived threats from the North, Episcopalians, and Catholics provided justification for a common evangelical cause, especially in light of the challenges already posed by Reconstruction-era poverty. No single, clear solution surfaced, and religious leaders routinely extolled doctrinal particularity and Christian unity (if not union) in the same sermon or editorial. Many evangelicals urged a return to “doctrinal preaching” in an effort to reinforce orthodoxy. Methodist M. Woodruff of Columbus, Georgia, argued in favor of more doctrine in the pulpit, so “that our people may not be carried about by every wind of doctrine.” An anonymous writer in the Southern Presbyterian Review looked back to the glory days of theological rigor in the antebellum era of John Henley Thornwell. Hoping for a revival of “doctrinal theology” in place of pastors who “act the down ... to prevent sleep and drowsiness,” this pastor called on southerners to revisit Thornwell’s works to see the necessity of a “fundamental theology” when it came to the matters of divine truth. In the presence of competing “fundamentals,” meaningful collaboration proved rare and fleeting.53


Dabney often over-estimated the extent of conservatism in the South, but on the topic of denominationalism, he had his finger on the region’s pulse. Though southerners might extol the virtues of Christian union, theological difference remained an impediment to ecumenism. The Presbyterian divine compared the organization of a formal union to the building of the Pacific railroad, nothing more than “a mighty aggregation of money and numbers.” In an area sensitive to issues of powerlessness, denominational union stood as one more arena in which southerners stood to lose control to more powerful parties. Northerners could take political power and property, but belief remained the indisputable prerogative of the individual. Compiling all Christians into the same church erased the significance of religious choices while also diluting theology to the point of meaningless abstraction. Dabney and other southern evangelicals, in short, agreed to disagree. They realized that Christians shared certain essentials, including basic sacraments, evangelism, and the work of saving souls. However, the move to unite or even join in collective action between denominations proved unsuccessful in most cases, as debate about proper boundaries crippled action. Separation was rarely the goal; Dabney encouraged Christians to “study moderate and charitable feelings towards others” and to “seek to grow in the knowledge of revealed truth.” Perhaps, after years of study all groups would “approach nearer that infallible standard” and thus “approach nearer to each other.” Far from the

optimistic visions of wartime evangelicals, the union of southern Christians remained only a distant possibility.\textsuperscript{54}

The fragmentation caused by talk of church union undermined the effectiveness of religious leaders’ message of liberation. Southern Christians wanted to join together, whether in the church or in the celebration of the Lost Cause, but cultural differences continually pulled them apart from one another. Race, theology, and denomination comprised ever-present fissures in the shared culture southerners longed to achieve. The collaborative, ecumenical spirit of the Civil War promised an easier road to recovery in the postwar period. Optimistic ministers believed that Christianity could weld together a defeated region’s people in common cause, resulting in shared definitions of problems, pooled resources, and ultimately the creation of a southern Zion. Yet, as the Civil War faded into memory, Christian commonality failed as a uniting message. The problems of poverty and perceived spiritual decline were serious but not sufficiently pressing to marshal the region’s religious forces as war had done. Enough hopeful clerics persisted in their visions of southern Christian unity to keep dreams of a religious liberation alive, but sectarian concerns consistently undermined the realization of those plans. The failure of postwar ecumenism affected the whole of southern public theology after the war. Ministers recognized key problems, such as education and poverty, but worries about denominational competition, among other factors, fragmented the response, despite the obvious need for agreed solutions.

\textsuperscript{54} Dabney, “What is Christian Union?,” 442, 446.
Chapter Four

“Can We Maintain Our Zion?”: Education, Morality, and the Religious Liberation of the Reconstruction South

William Henry Ruffner, a fellow Virginian and ordained Presbyterian minister, tired of arguing with Robert Lewis Dabney over the direction of postwar society. After prolonged debate, Ruffner declared in 1876, “you do not represent Virginia, either present or past: not even Colonial Virginia: still less the Virginia of Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe: ... nor the Virginia of to-day: and I shall prove it.” Dabney’s cultural war operated on many fronts, but this battle took place in the arena of public education. Ruffner had given up the pulpit for a bureaucrat’s chair, serving as Virginia’s first Secretary of Education. After examining various theories of education and the history of the topic in Virginia, Ruffner challenged Dabney, “Either you are un-Virginian in your education doctrine, or you are ... [a] Yankee! You may take your choice.” Similar rhetoric was commonplace in nineteenth-century academic repartee, but anyone who knew Dabney would have realized that these barbs would cut the deepest. By dissociating Dabney from the state he cherished dearly and linking him to the hated North, Ruffner introduced what might have been fighting words in another context. Why were two ordained ministers—supposed shepherds of peace—at one another’s throats over the subject of education?1

Understanding the rancorous debate in the South over public education in the late 1870s and 1880s requires viewing the topic from the vantage point of the Civil War and the

fallout from Confederate defeat. Memories of the war, over a decade past, still fueled Dabney’s rejection of free public education. Virginians, he maintained, did not choose to tax themselves in order to instruct society’s lower sorts, both black and white. Rather, the arrangement was “virtually thrust down our throats by the bayonet.” Public education added yet another dimension to the Yankee oppression of the South in his mind. Dabney asked rhetorically, “It is hard enough to have a triumphant faction rule us in a mode which outrages our sense of equity and patriotism—shall they also abuse their power to poison the minds of our own children?” Although Virginia experienced a comparatively early end to official Reconstruction in 1870, issues of power—political as well as cultural—continued to draw the attention of southern ministers even as politicians declared Reconstruction complete. The South still suffered under what they saw as a repressive regime. White Christians pined for redemption, a solution that would see to victory over Yankee authority.²

In addition to his regional sympathies, Dabney felt compelled to speak out on the topic of education as a minister. The idea of education without a religious element baffled, and evangelists spoke of the spread of Christianity as an educative process. For many southern ministers, education provided the key to evening the regional balance of power, politically, economically, and morally. Properly applied, instruction held the potential to reinvigorate southern morality, corrupted by war, to the standards maintained in the Old South. Better seminaries and colleges would train more qualified ministers, and public

education would bring more literate eyes to the pages of Scripture. A scientific curriculum would strengthen this evangelical message, while building a foundation for a southern economic resurgence. Ministers adumbrated multiple plans of action, but the general thesis remained the same: education held the potential to redeem and liberate the South.

White religious leaders agreed that a moral epidemic had swept through the South and that education offered the inoculation necessary to stop the spread of listlessness, infidelity, and a host of other problems keeping the South in a state of subjugation. As such, churches poured their resources into building up institutions of learning, and pastors as well as parishioners looked to education as a beacon of hope in bleak times. Southerners believed that the plan to improve education had to work because it was the only course of action left to the impoverished and politically powerless region. However, there were multiple theologies of education in circulation, preventing the formation of an easy consensus. For some, ministerial education offered the quickest and surest return on an investment, as the South needed ministers. Others sought to form a pious professional and intellectual class through a revamped system of higher education in the South, primarily in denominational colleges but also in state universities in some cases. Public education was the most contentious solution, but ministers led the South’s first ventures toward free, public schools in North Carolina and Virginia. The systems received as many religious supporters as detractors, which ensured that religious consensus would never solidify. In the midst of this diversity, a sense proliferated that all educational ventures were of a piece.
Ruffner, for instance, commonly referred to “colleges, theological seminaries, private schools ... and mission schools” in one breath.³

These divergent theories of education arose from factors outside the classroom. As discussed in the previous chapter, southerners failed to agree theologically, and the realm of education was no exception. Denominational battles spilled over into discussions of seminaries and colleges. Race proved a persistent dividing point, as ministers considered the merits and perils of educating African American preachers. The provision of basic literacy to freedpeople stimulated hearty debate among southerners (to say the least), and ministers offered their impassioned guidance. Articulations of the ideal social order in general frequently clashed, with answers ranging between the poles of egalitarianism and fixed hierarchy. Throughout all of the southern discussion of education, the theory of the spirituality of the church was both invoked and challenged. Clerics disagreed over the status of education as a secular or religious topic. Some ministers put away their reservations about the collaboration of church and state in the name of education, such was the promise of advancement it offered. The combination of unrealistically high hopes with strong social ideas and religious beliefs made the topic of education an arena for the sort of bitter debate that led Ruffner and Dabney to trade such caustic words.

Historians of religion in the postwar South have noted the importance of educational activity, particularly in the (re)building of denominational colleges and the growth of Sunday schools. Most of this work focuses on the organizational aspects of these

efforts, while mentioning the supporting ideology only in passing. The presence of Lost Cause commemoration of Confederate heroes and erstwhile southern glory overshadows the theological rationale for educational activity in those accounts that do pause to reflect on the meaning of this growth. Scholars rarely question why educational development received so much attention, as if growth were the only natural response. But impoverished southerners did not casually invest their meager resources. The decision to channel effort and funds when both were at a premium required momentous consideration. Beth Barton Schweiger rightly situates the seminary uptick in the context of the rise of American professional culture. However, the intellectual origins of this phenomenon get short shrift in comparison to the practical benefits of professionalization. Although Schweiger notes that pastors “intended to reconstruct more than religion” by “build[ing] order, harmony, and even virtue out of the postwar chaos,” she underestimates the position of education in that process. Sally G. McMillen's To Raise Up the South: Sunday Schools in Black and White Churches, 1865–1915 demonstrates the importance of the theological narratives of redemption and uplift, yet her focus on Sunday School and the surrounding culture obscures the fundamental links between all educational activities in the postwar South, as other work in the field does.⁴

The history of white southern education in this period gives scant attention to the Reconstruction years and fails to recognize the religious roots of turn-of-the-century successes. Aside from institutional histories, no major studies analyze the region’s colleges after the war. The rich body of scholarship on southern public education begins its coverage around 1880, when mandated changes began to see positive results. The two earliest and initially most successful systems, those of North Carolina and Virginia, have received the most historical attention. However, the theological motivations of the white South’s early partisans for public education evade the notice of the most important studies. Yet, Calvin H. Wiley and William H. Ruffner, the educational pioneers in those states, respectively, were deeply religious men. Both saw their work in schools as a ministry, and many agreed with them. Objectors to state education based their accusations on theology, as well as the more studied social and practical reasons. Indeed, those secular concerns were subsumed in a broader public theology geared toward southern liberation.5


By contrast, the religious motivations of African American and northern educational reformers has been fully documented. See, for instance. Matthew James Zacharias Harper, “Living in God’s Time: African-American Faith and Politics in Post-Emancipation North Carolina,” (Ph.D. diss, University of North Carolina, 2009); Edward J. Blum, Reforging the White Republic: Race, Religion, and American Nationalism, 1865–1898 (Baton Rouge:
The high hopes for the ability of education to bring about both sacred and secular change did not emerge for the first time following the Civil War. Ministers had relied on denominational colleges, in particular, to do religious work for decades by 1865. In the 1830s and 1840s religious southerners began to build institutions of higher education. The life of the mind found its home in the North until this point, for the most part, and southerners fretted that their region’s culture faced a future of subjugation—or worse, extinction—if the region’s literary infrastructure did not improve. State universities remained under-funded. Church leaders, particularly evangelicals, took on the onus of educating the South and organized denominational colleges in states throughout the South.6

The motivations for building colleges were both sectional and sectarian. Increased abolitionist activity put southerners on edge concerning slavery, and the colleges seemed the ideal base for a counter-offensive. Designing the curriculum from a southern point of view, educators defended hierarchical social arrangements and developed pro-slavery argumentation that they hoped would then echo throughout the South. Competition between evangelical groups influenced the proliferation of colleges just as much as an interest in defending the South. In 1835 South Carolina Methodists noted other denominations’ efforts “to bring education back to sound principles” and pledged, “We may not, we cannot, linger behind all others.” The understanding that religion and education


were inextricably connected fanned the embers of rivalry, and each denomination feared
the end of its orthodoxy if its members should fail to provide superior collegiate
infrastructure. The result of this boom in higher education was an uneasy balance between
theological difference and a shared understanding of “southern values,” centered in the
slave system.7

The Civil War disrupted the South’s denominational colleges, as young men and
some professors left the halls of academe for the camps and trenches of military life.
Exigency often demanded campuses to be repurposed as hospitals or barracks, or they
were left empty, their doors closed due to a combination of lack of funds and students.
These problems continued into the postbellum era. Many students, crippled financially
and/or physically or worse, did not return to school. Campuses themselves fell prey to
looters from both armies. Libraries and labs lost equipment, and buildings themselves were
defaced and damaged by vandalism and use. Most schools shifted their finances to the new
Confederate currency, particularly in government bonds that were valueless after defeat.
The few institutions that had invested wisely still found a home in a ruined region, where
land was cheap and labor unreliable.8

The fears of regional inferiority that plagued southern thoughts about college
education had no place in considerations of theological seminaries and ministerial training

7 Ibid., 177–226; qtd. in ibid., 180.

8 Stowell, Rebuilding Zion, 20–22; Hunter Dickinson Farish, The Circuit Rider Dismounts: A
Social History of Southern Methodism, 1865–1900 (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1938), 255–
58.
in the Old South. Presbyterians were the most concerned about formal ministerial training among southern denominations. The Old School, the dominant Presbyterian faction in the South, maintained its national links until the eve of war. Conservative theologians from the Reformed tradition found a bastion for their thought at Princeton seminary. Archibald Alexander, a Virginian, exerted a controlling influence over the institution's educational program and theological reputation for most of the antebellum period, his tenure there stretching from 1812 until his death in 1851. Southern Presbyterians trusted the institution, often choosing to go North for their ministerial preparation before serving a pastorate in their home region. Union Theological Seminary, Dabney's home in Virginia, and Columbia Theological Seminary in South Carolina also trained their fair share of southern Presbyterians. However, Union, in particular, had problems in attracting students, due to its rural setting and a reputation for being behind the times. Union officials complained “that the Seminary has not had that hold on the affections, thoughts and prayers of our Ministers and churches, which it had the right to demand.” The sectional sympathies that fueled so many colleges failed to translate to the education of ministers.⁹

Methodists and Baptists, to the extent that either denomination required education as a prerequisite to ministry, utilized their colleges for training pastors. These


Ernest Trice Thompson notes that in 1859 there were 132 students at Princeton, 95 at Western Theological Seminary in Pittsburg, 45 each at Columbia and Danville Seminary in Kentucky, and 21 at Union. Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, 1:503.
denominations emphasized divine calling and charisma over orthodox theological training, meaning that even uneducated men could attain ordination. Instruction in theology was minimal at the South’s denominational colleges. Many schools only covered the subject in the senior capstone course on moral philosophy, if at all. Only a few institutions, including the University of the South (Episcopalian) and Furman (Baptist), required a trained minister to teach that course. The general expectation was that theology needed no special southern imprint, contrary to the expectations for the broader curriculum.\textsuperscript{10}

Public education was rarely considered in the Old South, but early advocates of a state-supported system touted the regional and religious benefits such an arrangement would bring. It should be no surprise that Presbyterians, members of the denomination that valued ministerial education most highly, showed a particularly acute interest in the topic. In 1852 Calvin Henderson Wiley, a Presbyterian, took office as the first state superintendent of common schools in North Carolina and developed the first southern system to attain a modicum of success. Underfunded and lacking sufficient oversight beyond the local level, the system struggled. However, Wiley proved a tireless advocate. Nearly single-handedly, he secured the passage of laws that allowed localities to tax themselves for local schools and then pushed the counties to do so. In the midst of his tenure as superintendent, Wiley attained preaching licensure through his church, and he was ordained in 1866, after the Reconstruction government forced him out of office.

\footnote{O’Brien, Conjectures of Order, 2:1095–97.}
Educational activism became a crucial part of his ministry, and the religious basis of his rhetoric explained much of his success, where others failed. He explained, “Religion and education must go together. ... It is my desire that all children shall be taught to read ... for themselves the revelations of Heaven’s will to man.” The superintendent also stressed that material success had its benefits, but care must be taken so that children avoid becoming “an infidel generation, devoted to Mammon” above all spiritual goals.11 Unlike educators on the collegiate and seminary levels, Wiley championed a pan-denominational curriculum that would include no precise doctrinal teaching. His assurances that Scripture and moral development, rather than a specific theology, would form the core of the curriculum convinced Carolinians to lend their support. By 1858 he reported that “ministers of the gospel of all denominations, professional men of every class, professors in all colleges, and politicians of every party” championed the cause, “laboring ... hopefully, and harmoniously on the platform of the Common Schools.”12

Not only would education ensure that more Bible readers inhabited the South, it held the potential to unify southern culture. The cause of public education and the fate of slavery were united in Wiley’s mind. He believed “the South is a Christian, a civilized, and a

11 Qtd. in Edgar W. Knight, Public School Education in North Carolina (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1916), 189.

12Qtd. in Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, 1: 476.

progressive land, and the owners of slaves are enlightened, civilized, and Christian men.”
Though the North Carolina system excluded African Americans, the enslaved were never
far from the reformer’s mind. Wiley thought about the institution extensively and
determined that slavery must be reformed, if not abolished. He published one treatise
arguing for the diffusion of the black population of the upper South, *A Sober View of the
Slavery Question, by a Citizen of the South* (1847) and completed a long manuscript on “The
Duties of Christian Masters” in the late 1850s, calling for extended ministry to the slaves.
However, Wiley recognized that no government had the authority to abolish slavery.
Change could only come if the populace experienced a change of heart, but Wiley had faith
that with time and Christian education southerners would reform, and perhaps end,
slavery.13

Wiley’s trust in the ethically transformative capacities of education outstripped
most of his contemporaries and foreshadowed postbellum developments in educational
thought. Some of the same regional and denominational concerns from the Old South
motivated the resurgence of educational boosterism, but the initial impetus arose from a
concern that the South was morally deteriorating. Southerners viewed Reconstruction as a
moral battle, in which the region’s longstanding ethical pedigree, already tried by war,
stood in danger of fully succumbing as the world of the Old South turned upside down.

13 Wiley, *A Sober View of the Slavery Question, by a Citizen of the South* (1847) qtd. in
Presbyterian layman Daniel Harvey Hill summarized a common sentiment in an 1868 editorial in *The Land We Love*:

*Every thing has been done to debase the moral perceptions of our unfortunate section. We have seen treachery rewarded, wickedness triumphant, the honorable thrust down, the base elevated, honesty despised, successful villainy applauded, consistent adherence to principle crushed to the earth, sleek subserviency raised to posts of honor and power.*

Southerners sensed a general corruption of southern morality, and they suspected a number of causes, or even more frightening, no discernable cause at all. The prospects of the nation’s future remained an uncertainty with morality in flux. Presbyterian minister William Swann Plumer was not alone in nervously asking of future Americans, “Shall they be rude? ... Shall they be refined? ... Shall they be free?”

White southerners had long assigned themselves the qualities of politeness, refinement, and, especially, freedom. Moral sophistication headed the list of southern advantages over northern culture, if not over the other cultures of the world. Especially among elites, the South stood as the last bastion of gentility, a place where education, social distinction, and masculine valor remained cherished. By the late antebellum era, evangelical piety was firmly entrenched as a component of southern morality. Belief in Christ became a prerequisite to the development of personal virtue and right behavior. Churches recognized that southerners were not perfectly moral, but the prevalence of disciplinary courts within the churches assured evangelicals that punishable offenses such as intoxication, swearing, gambling, social dancing, and dueling would eventually be

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eradicated from the culture. The church would also take care of the intangibles, the building blocks of “good Christian character,” each Sunday.¹⁵

Southerners also turned to history to learn moral lessons. The successes and failures of past individuals and nations provided ethical exemplars for present action and for judging current events as just or unjust. This phenomenon continued into the postbellum era, as Daniel Harvey Hill compared the defeated South to La Vendée, the area of western France that resisted the French Revolution due to a prevailing conservative ideology. The French and Haitian Revolutions piqued southern interest like no other historical topics, and most interpretations fixated on the horrors of the Reign of Terror and Touissant L’Ouverture’s armed slave insurrection. Clearly, the latter case struck fear in southern hearts, and southerners developed critical theories to explain their apprehension beyond the emotional. For these thinkers, radical social ideas and Enlightenment skepticism seemed to degrade the civilized and produce barbaric actions. Southerners defined their culture as the opposite of revolutionary France—civilized, stable, hierarchical, and Christian. Applying that historical lesson, Radical Republicans, both in the North and in Reconstruction governments, played the part of Robespierre redivivus. Seeing history repeating itself in the postwar South, Hill noted,

Every student of history must have been struck with the resemblance of the South to La Vendée, both in the principles for which they fought and in the fate which befell them. It was a struggle with both for conservatism against lawlessness, infidelity,

irreverence towards God and man, *radicalism*. Both gained prodigious victories, both exhibited miracles of courage and constancy, and both—failed utterly and hopelessly.

For Hill, there was a moral lesson to be found in this seeming injustice. No one interpreted the failure of La Vendée as a sign of providential judgment, so the South should free itself from that stigma too. Something was needed to “save us from that dreadful doctrine that ... the suffering of the virtuous man shows that God is his enemy.” The South needed to prove its righteousness, through defense of its past and action to secure its moral future.¹⁶

Seeking to solve the South’s ethical dilemma, religious leaders rooted out the causes of this supposed decline. Unsurprisingly, many alleged failings originated above the Mason Dixon line, and the religious failings of the North represented the starting point of that region’s immorality. Only the North could elect a president such as Abraham Lincoln, who, according to the Baptist *Christian Index*, displayed an “ignorance of the terms of admission into Christian churches.” According to the *Southern Christian Advocate*, “Infidelity is sweeping over the land with a fiery blighting breath” in the North. Governed by Unitarianism, Universalism, Spiritualism, and worst of all, atheism, Yankee “faith,” according to southern observations, was an impure amalgam of history’s worst heresies. The extended influence of northern culture over the South threatened to undermine southern religion by mere contact. A writer for the *Christian Index* predicted an invasion of Unitarian missionaries from the North. Capitalizing on the postwar disorganization and

poverty of southern religious organizations, these Unitarians would offer an easy message of multiple truths instead of the difficult doctrines of “orthodox and evangelical Christianity.” Likewise, Presbyterian minister Thomas B. Balch warned in 1870, “We are not ready for the snow of Pantheism,” and suggested that without a southern counter-influence “to mould our characters,” the icy precipitation might stick. As religion died, so too would morality. 17

Gabriel Manigault of Yorkville, South Carolina, offered one of the most extensive diagnoses of the South’s religious condition after Appomattox in an 1868 series of articles. Trained as a physician and a Confederate veteran, Manigault blamed northern action, both during the war and after, for the pitiful state of southern piety. His explanation offers little theological reflection, finding racial and economic explanations instead. First, emancipation and continued work among the freedpeople threatened the moral foundations of the region. Tutored in the impious ways of northerners, African Americans practiced their faith without the restrictions calculated to tame “the low order of their mental and moral endowments,” as the antebellum southern ministry of the slaves had supposedly perfected. Under Yankee supervision, a return to the “revolting mixture of heathen and Christian rites” seemed inevitable. Observing an African American funeral, Manigault chafed at the idea of female religious practitioners and their “rhythmical

powers” accompanied by “dancing body-guard and ... bacchanalian chorus.” The “religious tendencies” of African Americans required white supervision, or barbarism would inevitably result. “A tendency to corrupt Christianity is common to all mankind,” Manigault wrote, “but among the negroes it was found peculiarly difficult to abolish and keep out superstitious practices, to suppress a mere noisy manifestation of religious excitement to impress upon them the permanent nature of the marriage bond, and to convince them of the impossibility of divorcing godliness from righteousness.” In short, African Americans, left to their own devices, threatened the moral fabric of the South. ¹⁸

Manigault’s analysis featured a prominent economic explanation. “All history tells us,” he wrote, “that there is a close connection between the civilization and prosperity of a people, and their religious condition.” Thanks to Yankee plundering, the South “suffered an overthrow more disastrous to their material prosperity, than nine out of ten of the conquests recorded in history, ever proved to the vanquished people.” The razing of buildings, ruining of farmland, and the eradication of a social structure through emancipation “destroyed the very elements of prosperity.” Without the rudiments of an economic system, let alone money, the support of the clergy set up a considerable obstacle. More immediately than a “costly education,” ministers required food and housing. They also needed a physical space in which to work, yet “churches are closed and not reopened, they decay and are not repaired, they crumble to the earth and are not rebuilt.” Error

proliferated in this environment, and “groveling superstition” replaced orthodox piety. “Fanaticism” promised no moral guidance to a war-weary, impoverished southern flock.19

Northern cultural imperialism supplied another source of concern. The southern sense of literary inferiority had been in existence for decades, but the sense of crisis heightened during Reconstruction. As Michael T. Bernath has demonstrated, the Civil War produced a great swell in efforts to organize a southern “national” literature and a refined articulation of southern character. Pens and printing presses operated for the same cause as cannons and bayonets. In Bernath’s words, Confederate thinkers “portrayed intellectual independence as a nationalistic imperative, and emphasized the concrete wartime and future benefits to be gained from escaping northern dominance.” In addition to being a nationalistic expression, southern literati worked to counteract the dangerous influence of northern periodicals, books, and textbooks.20

The understanding of northern publications as detrimental to southern health continued into the postwar era. With the region’s already-meager infrastructure for publication decimated by combat and poverty, reliance on northern printed materials had never been greater. Intellectual culture represented yet another venue of helplessness and subjugation. Only economic disparity, and not southern choice, explained the ubiquity of northern texts. Northerners alone possessed the “large capital ... in joint stock” to support a large-scale publishing venture, and they exploited those resources. A more common refrain


20 Bernath, Confederate Minds, 27, 60–74.
lamented the consistent platform publications supplied for northern heresy and radicalism and the southern willingness to accept those outlets. As the *Central Presbyterian* addressed the situation, “We accepted the peace forced upon us because we could not help ourselves; but who can or does compel us to bow mind and soul under the yoke, as well as body?” The author continued this line of questioning, asking “Who *obliges* us to receive the rationalism and Christlessness of the *Atlantic Monthly*?—or the abolition philippics of *Putnam*?—or the libelous cartoons of *Harper*?... Why are we willing to see our best public men—our holiest principles—our institutions—our past, all traduced, vilified? “Worst of all were the "demoralized weeklies," newspapers that ideally synthesize and analyzed the week’s news in “calmer and more scholarly” tone but rarely fulfilled those expectations. Instead of reasoned study, one found in their pages cartoons and editorials unfairly mocking the South. Lurid stories of police gazettes narrated the exploits of criminals, seducing impressionable minds to the glamorous life of lawlessness. One writer compared the spread of northern writing to the spread of a virus or a poison, recommending “actual cautery” lest the destructive influence proliferate like that of “the freedman or Yankee emigrant.” Newspapers “exert[ed] a most powerful agency,” according to postwar southerners, forming children’s “religious principles, their views of goverment(sic) policy, their habits of thought and action.” Thus, northern publications posed a significant problem for religious leaders concerned about the South’s moral fabric.21

Southern ministers read northern challenges to religion and morality as one combined threat to the social order. The ability to rebuild the South after the war depended on erecting a successful bulwark against the two-headed beast of heresy and depravity. The link between religion and morality is perhaps as old as religion itself, but southerners claimed a special propriety over the connection. Their region stood out in history as home to a particularly successful synthesis of sincere piety and personal obligation. Postwar southerners referenced the region’s long history of respect for these values as a social bedrock, and they exhibited pride in the formal, governmental recognition of the place of the religious and ethical life. Writing in 1868, Albert Taylor Bledsoe, an ordained minister and editor of the *Southern Review*, lauded the 1817 Constitution of Mississippi. “The Deity, the Scriptures, the Moral Law and a republican government ... are assumed and established, as facts,” Bledsoe gushed. He continued to praise the state's founders for laying the groundwork so that “whatever abuses or perversions may arise” might be defeated by “the elements of a Divine life” residing in the legal structure. Illinois, by comparison, could boast no such safeguard.22

Embattled southern ministers turned to the same tool they used to communicate messages of dire consequences during the war—the jeremiad. The postwar jeremiad pointed out the significance of the times and issued a spirited call to action.Previewing the upcoming meeting of the Southern Baptist Commission in 1867, the editor of the *Christian Index*, October 8, 1868; “The North Is Being Condemned Here, Not The South,” *Southern Christian Advocate*, November 26, 1869.

Index argued that the South was in “a time of transition.” But this was no normal transition; Reconstruction represented an epochal transformation, as “one era passes away; another enters.” One speaker could only wonder, “What changes may lie before us!” The tone quickly changed from wonder to crisis. Decisions made in such times were each of momentous significance. “Instants are moments; the Now moves!” It was up to Christians, “raised up by the Lord, to see to it that Zion takes no harm amid the convulsions that shake the world.” “Duty,” “fidelity,” “decline,” “apostacy”—the consequence of inaction would be the spread of that “evil leaven” introduced by war, a vague conclusion but clear enough to white southern Christians. Only piety and morality separated southerners from the future of apostasy and subjugation, should Yankee culture triumph.23

Others were more specific about the South’s dystopic future, should religious efforts fail. The crumbling of morality spelled doom for both the spirit and the body politic. William M. Wightman, Methodist bishop from South Carolina, devoted several sermons in the immediate aftermath of war to the ramifications of defeat for the human soul. The bishop rang a hopeful tone throughout, arguing that the South’s morality would ensure its progress. In a December 1865 sermon, Wightman preached that true destruction was something that “a hostile army” could not achieve because it focused its efforts on the material and temporary. Buildings topple, loved ones pass away, and regimes change; these events were normal parts of the movement of history. True destruction was that of the soul, which was no easy feat. Wightman defined soul destruction as “the derangement, dislocation, the unreparable pulling down of its moral powers, the utter and final

23 “Southern Baptist Convention,” Christian Index, April 4, 1867
debasement of its moral sentiments, the ruin of its immortal hopes—the blight of its noblest energies and prospects.” The path toward this moral destruction began where “happiness” and “hopes” were erased, and it was “no very difficult thing” to see the process through.24

Wightman also delivered good news. Only by wallowing in defeat, by letting the woes of poverty preclude action, could the trials of the times triumph over the South. Moral destruction was easily preventable. The tides of history pushed southern Christians toward the shores of liberation. In another 1865 sermon, Wightman declared, “Progression is man’s glorious, dread destiny.” He advised his congregants to forget “vain regrets from the past.” Southerners “have lost all but the honor of our section,” the bishop preached, and that honor should replace “weak tears.” He counseled that memories of past trials were best channeled into reminders of the importance of morality and religion. Wightman returned to this theme regularly throughout Reconstruction. In “Patience in Tribulation,” the bishop made a case for grief as the cornerstone of morality, asserting that only through tribulation could the Christian cultivate “the brave soul” and “a ready submission to the will of God.” Productive reflection on the past and calculated action to secure the status of the Christian faith constituted Wightman’s recipe for progress in the postwar South. A

confident body of the faithful could improve Christ’s reputation, the only sure means of cultivating the morals of society and implanting “a deep sense of Responsibility.”

Wightman traced the effects of depravity from the soul to society. According to the bishop, Christ alone supports the work of the conscience. It is through this work that “Christ binds man to man.” “Sin,” Wightman proclaimed, “is discord in society.” The love of Christ and the love of neighbor developed in tandem. Wightman believed that Christianity was the key toward ethical behavior: “Let the spirit of Christ pervade society, and how soon would injustice and injury cease, the fevered pulse of ambition be calmed and the sword bathed in blood go back to the scabbard.” The Presbyterian minister William A. Cocke agreed. Affirming that “public virtue” was “the sum of private virtue,” Cocke declared unequivocally that “true and efficient religion” was the safeguard of morality, which in turn represented “the true and only basis of civil order.” Religion was thus the glue that held human society together; it “takes hold of a man morally, socially, and politically” and “infuse[s] its principles into the moral character of the state.” Cocke offered the clearest summary of southern ideas about the interrelation of education, religion, morality, and a successful society:

Whenever moral and political philosophy are based upon Christianity, and the religious principle derived therefrom permeates the body politic, by running from domestic circle to domestic circle, until its light shall reach the mind and heart of the great working majority of the people, then will purity and stability mark the life of the nation: and this must be the great educational mission of society in which every

25 William May Wightman, “Progression is Man’s Glorious, Dread Destiny,” June 1865; “Patience in Tribulation” [1870s]; “Christ as the Basis of ‘God’s Universal System of Being,’” February 1873, William May Wightman Papers, Sandor Teszler Library, Wofford College. Spartanburg, South Carolina.
member should be trained to perform his duty from early childhood to old age all along every department of life.26

In the years after Appomattox, southerners of all denominations turned to education, hoping that changing young minds would maintain what was good about the values of the Old South and proactively meet the new challenges of the postwar era. Daniel H. Hill began his new periodical’s first issue in 1866 with an impassioned plea, simply titled “Education.” He told readers to follow the biblical example of Paul and other “holy men of old” for whom “love to their own nation was a part of their religion.” With “thousands of elegant mansions ... now but heaps of rubbish and ashes” and “hundreds of sanctuaries of the Most High ... now marked by blackened walls or piles of ruins,” change had to come. While his rhetoric was controversial, the sentiment was universal. He proposed “a total radical change in our system of education” and interpreted the moment of urgency inspiring his call as the work of Providence. Finding the purpose in current events, Hill wrote, “The state of probation, pupilage, vassalage, or whatever it may be called, in which we have been placed by the dominant party in Congress is, we believe, intended by the

Giver of every good and perfect gift to give us higher and nobler ideas of education and the
duties of educated men.”

White religious leaders throughout the South agreed with the Presbyterian
layman—southern education needed work. However, the concord ceased with that general
proposition. Hill proposed “practical learning” in place of “scholastic lore,” in short, a
complete overhaul of the traditional southern pedagogy. A practical pedagogy would
improve the southern economy and enhance the region’s political standing. Restored to
power and possessing a new respect for labor, the values “manhood, patriotism, and
unselfishness” could then exist unimpeded. Traditionalists like Dabney, on the other hand,
balked at such situations, preferring a more direct assault on the religious and moral
problems of the day. The identification of morality as the central problem of
Reconstruction and education as the answer for the times bore the potential to bring an
agenda for southern cultural liberation. As strategies and rationales multiplied among
religious leaders, that common ground remained tantalizingly out of reach. Where unity
seemed most likely, clergy found another venue for divisive squabbles. Camps developed in
support of ministerial education, the revamping of denominational colleges, and public
common schools, and each venture achieved a degree of success. However, those fault lines
militated against a unified southern assault on the problem of education.

27 Daniel H. Hill, “Education,” Land We Love 1 (May 1866), 1, 2, 3, 9.

28 Ibid., 9, 10.
The reasons for channeling limited resources toward the growth and refinement of the ministry seemed glaringly obvious for postwar southerners. The ministerial shortage mentioned in the previous chapter coupled with the seeming onslaught of northern culture to compound the sense of religious crisis in the region. The current crop of ministers was not disciplined enough and too shorthanded to suffice. According to historian Ernest T. Thompson, one hundred Presbyterian ministers were lost during the war, “and the number decreased year by year on an average of ten a year until in 1871 there were 150 fewer ministers than there had been in 1861.” Methodist circuits lost hundreds of riders, from 2,458 in 1860 down to 2,116 in 1866. Young seminary graduates were uniquely blessed in the postwar southern economy with the ability to choose from a number of ministerial calls. From the other side of the search, churches, especially those in rural areas, hunted for years at times in search of a pastor. Yet the choices for young clergy were not glamorous. Methodist ministers in South Carolina, for instance, averaged a yearly income of six hundred dollars between 1869 and 1872. Religious leaders pled with congregations to give more in support of ministers, as they witnessed qualified young candidates go into more lucrative fields.29

Perhaps unsurprising for a seminary professor, Dabney was a strict critic of the ministry's inadequacies. In a speech delivered before the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1869, he contended that much work needed to be done. Pernicious northern influences had infiltrated the southern Presbyterian ministry, beginning decades before the Civil War. By 1800, Dabney noted, half of the denomination's ministers were

“from States north of Virginia.” While many demonstrated “an honorable fidelity to the principles of sound Christianity,” that supply of trustworthy and pious Yankees “is henceforth dried up.” To make matters worse, Reconstruction attracted many “nominally Presbyterian new-comers” southward, who brought with them “ideas which are so antagonistic to our cherished principles.” Here he referred to northern Presbyterians, who travelled to the former Confederacy to staff empty or confiscated churches or to minister to the freedpeople.30

The solution to this state of affairs shone forth as clearly as the challenge, according to Dabney. Presbyterians had to support the education of the ministry whole-heartedly. If “all our little churches” were “fully manned with enlightened ... Southern ministers,” Dabney proposed, “there would be at least a possibility that we might, by prompt, active, and kind reception, absorb and assimilate this influx.” Fully operational churches could soak up the spillover of the Yankee Presbyterians’ pernicious influence, but Dabney continued to warn that there was a bleak alternative.

But if these little churches are both feeble and vacant, and likely to remain long so, it is most manifest that the incoming Presbyterians will speedily begin to look for pastoral supplies from the regions whence they come. Then, our form of Christianity, instead of absorbing, will be absorbed.

This future need not happen, Dabney ensured his audience. Educational support had to bear results, for both piety and morality. “If our churches are held under a strict discipline, and present exemplary examples of Christian morality,” Dabney contended, “this will itself

30 “Dr. Dabney’s Memorial,” Central Presbyterian, July 7, 1869.
constitute the most valuable test to separate the good from the evil, the useful from the
dangerous, in the new candidates from membership among us.” Northern malicious
influences stood no chance of success when pitted against the concentrated forces of
southern piety.31

Other Presbyterians joined in chorus with the Union Seminary professor: the path to
progress in the postwar South would be paved by a well-trained ministry. Presbyterians
like Dabney strove, in the words of Dabney biographer Sean Michael Lucas, “to maintain a
cultural unity through a common theological education.” Ministers throughout the region
penned and orated defenses of education in many venues throughout the period of
Reconstruction. The question of ministerial training became particularly poignant in the
early 1870s, after the southern economy had recovered enough to make suggestions of
donations and expenditure more realistic. Yet education was not adequate as an end in
itself. The discussion surrounding ministerial education gained a new pragmatic facet, as
clergy insisted that professional training meet the needs of the times rather than an
abstract standard of the ideal minister.32

The practical bent to these discussions split Presbyterians into two camps. On one
side of the debate were those who argued that seminary should prepare a young man to
serve as a minister in a community, not as a cloistered scholar. B. W. Moseley, a minister
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31 Ibid.

from New London, Virginia, wrote several articles for the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, contending that over-education could block the advancement of the gospel. He summarized his philosophy of theological education, saying, “A living, healthy, active piety, and this combined with more than usual attainments in gracious knowledge, is the fundamental qualification for the gospel ministry. And of course every system of Ministerial Training should be such as to promote personal piety, and to insure a knowledge of practical godliness.” Moseley stressed that education should remain in high esteem, so that ministers might be “distinguished from ignorant men.” However, clergy in this camp expressed concern that Presbyterian standards ignored the professional aspects of the ministerial career. As Moseley put it, “We are not as well informed with actual human life” as with church polity and Reformed theology. Pastoral care, church finance, and other such duties occupied as much of the minister’s daily activity as doctrinal preaching, and young men should not be cast into the job unprepared for these aspects. Expecting a ministry unskilled in the world to deliver the South from the threat of Yankee moral tyranny was an unwise tactic, indeed.33

Dabney led the other party, which advocated for a synthesis of classical learning, pastoral training, and ethical character in the training of young ministers. This camp claimed that a rigorous seminar curriculum focusing on ancient languages and the history of theology offered the only hope for an improved clergy. Perfecting tradition, rather than jumping to a set of new ideas, was what the ministry needed. The seminary had always

been a place of robust scholarship, and so it should remain. Cutting corners or accepting unprepared men did a disservice to the church and certainly would not bring more to the church. Doctrinal orthodoxy was what made the southern Presbyterian church guardians of the true faith, and this belief required the continuation of traditional education. “Our church,” Dabney argued, “presents to the world the humbling doctrines of the gospel with faithful candor,” while other churches, like Arminian Methodists, soften the message. Desperate times called especially for the full gospel, i.e. Calvinist theology. Numbers were deceiving; a minister’s success was measured in preaching the truth, not in appealing to the masses.34

However, Dabney did not ignore the necessity of practicality. He shifted the responsibility for aspects of social refinement to the local presbytery. These smaller bodies could easily take up the task of monitoring and directing young ministers’ progress in a congregational setting, a task that put an undue strain on geographically isolated and already busy seminaries and their staff. Dabney also valued the moral standing of pastors, and contended that the church must take care not to put unrefined men in the pulpit. Indeed, the moral standing of the southern ministry was what separated his church from those of the North. “It is now manifest,” Dabney wrote, “that the character of the Presbyterian ministry in the Northern States has deteriorated for some cause; and many judicious men account for it by the introduction of so many persons of lower breeding and mercenary views. ... Now the ministry, especially in the South, must be gentlemen in bearing and principle.” This quote reflects Dabney’s belief in a hierarchical social structure,

34 Dabney, “A Thoroughly Educated Ministry,” Discussions, 2: 651–77, 653,
but he does not argue that only elites were eligible for contention. Rather, the markings of a
gentlemen were in “bearing and principle,” not wealth or social rank. As someone who lost
everything during the Civil War, Dabney understood intimately the illusory value of wealth
and could not erect secular values as the barriers protecting the ministry.  

While the Presbyterians debated about the proper course of action, their seminaries
languished. When Columbia Seminary closed its doors for two years beginning in 1880, six
of its students chose the southern alternative, Union Seminary, while fifteen went north to
Princeton. Given the continued invective traded between the two branches of the church,
the failure of the southern seminaries was put into stark relief. Year after year,
Presbyterians tried to raise the necessary funds to improve their institutions and offer
more scholarships, but the efforts were always inadequate. During Reconstruction, Union’s
student body averaged in the fifties, always fluctuating. Late in life, Dabney explained the
plight of Union as yet another area of Yankee domination. Blaming “the introduction of the
railways and the fall of the Confederacy,” the professor described the seminary’s failure as
a product of its “isolated” location “in the middle of the ‘black belt.'” Few southerners, in his
estimate, desired to relocate far from the cities of the New South and in the midst of African
Americans. Rural Virginia no longer possessed the luster Dabney once saw in it. “Without
the excellent society of country gentlemen,” the institution was “doomed to extirpation by

35 Robert Lewis Dabney, “Memorial on Theological Education,” Discussions, 2: 47–75, 69;
Lucas, Robert Lewis Dabney, 75–80.
the conquerors.” Clearly, by 1895, Dabney had given up on southern liberation through the seminary.36

More remarkable than the Presbyterian efforts to drive moral reform through ministerial education were the changes in Methodist and Baptist ideas about the value of an educated clergy. Traditionally disinterested in or even opposed to seminaries, these popular evangelical denominations stressed the value of the calling, extemporary preaching, and a natural ability to bring sinners to Christ. Calls for a more cultured pulpit were few in the antebellum era, but by war’s end, theological institutes seemed more attractive options. At the 1866 General Conference in New Orleans, the first such meeting since the war, southern Methodists debated organizing a seminary. Given the financial difficulties the church faced, delegates decided to use existing colleges as bases for “Biblical Schools,” at which ministerial candidates could train. As such, discussions of theological education and higher education in general occurred together in the years that followed.37

The wide appeal of theological education after the war is best demonstrated in the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary’s struggle for existence. Founded in 1859 in Greenville, South Carolina, the institute opened with only four professors and nine students. Each of the faculty was a young, well-educated, and highly motivated Baptist minister. James Petigru Boyce, a native son of South Carolina, had attended Brown


University and Princeton Theological Seminary. Basil Manly Jr. was the son of the Baptist South’s most influential men, a minister, president of the University of Alabama, and inaugural preacher for Jefferson Davis. After studying at his father’s university, Newton Theological Seminary, and Princeton Theological Seminary, Manly Jr. swiftly rose to succeed his father as a well-known figure throughout the Baptist South. The thirty-year-old John A. Broadus designed the seminary’s course of instruction, employing his education at the University of Virginia in his native state. William Williams rounded out the faculty, his legal education at Harvard and Yale giving him a unique approach to theology.38

These four men were by no means typical Baptist ministers, and they met significant opposition throughout the seminary’s early existence. Yet their novel idea of systematic ministerial education for southern Baptists achieved a remarkable degree of support throughout the region. As more young Baptists sought professional education, the need for an institutional home for Southern Baptist ideas became apparent. Having to choose between a southern education tainted by erroneous doctrines of baptism and a northern education full of anti-southern venom appealed to no one. The innovative curriculum instituted from the very beginning gave a wide swath of Baptists additional cause to seek further training. Boyce, who served as leader of the institution more than the other founding professors, envisioned the seminary as a place where educated and rough-hewn men could collaborate. For those without a common school education, rudimentary lessons would be provided. At the same time, college graduates could train in the finer

points of theology. Boyce and the others also had to take care to avoid creating a divisive environment, in which class-based concerns and jealousies would separate the two tracks of students. One way of meeting this end was to conduct Bible instruction using English rather than the original languages, breaking the tradition and later attracting imitation in other seminaries. Adjustments of this sort made it possible for the two classes of students to participate in courses side by side, forging a sense of commonality in the student body.39

The reputation of the seminary as a place where common people and the well-educated worked together became a prime selling point for the institution. Boyce publicized the plan widely even before the first class was admitted. A summary of the 1868 commencement, printed in Baptist newspapers, read more as an advertisement than a typical news article. The article emphasized the “peculiar” curricular layout, in which “no specified amount of scholastic education is required to enter.” The seminary’s purpose was pragmatic, aimed at solving the crisis of ineffective ministry in the South: “While due attention is given by the faculty to the attainment of thorough scholarship, the great object of the seminary is, and ever has been, to make men the most effective preachers of the gospel and pastors of the churches – practical working men.” Sharing the common appreciation for hard work, “brethren of various grades sit side by side in the same classes.” The seminary taught the important lesson of the gospel’s paramount importance, above any social distinctions. In this unique environment, “He who might be tempted to conceit because of superior scholastic education, or to depreciate his brother of more limited acquirements, finds that the latter can do many things as well or better than he.” At

39 Wills, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 26–30.
the same time, anti-intellectual bias met a strong challenge in Greenville, and uneducated men came to see the advantages of learning. By the end of a course at the seminary, "both parties are drawn closer to each other and mentally benefited."\(^{40}\)

Despite the appealing education to be had at the seminary, the war and Reconstruction threatened the institution’s existence while it was still of a tender age. The young school suspended operations in 1862, leaving faculty and students to find other activities. Having entrusted its endowment to Confederate currency, financial ruin compounded the misery of defeat for the seminary. Low enrollment also hampered the institution’s rebound. Only seven students enrolled in the first postbellum session, beginning November 1, 1865. Faculty members were forced to find extra income, through preaching in local churches and various secular engagements. Despite ever-increasing enrollment during Reconstruction, the seminary's survival never seemed secure, and in 1877, the institution removed itself to Louisville, Kentucky.\(^{41}\)

As news of the seminary’s plight spread, donations, however meager, poured in from those who saw the seminary's mission as integral to “sav[ing] us from Yankee subjugation, moral, intellectual and spiritual,” as J.D. Huffman of the *Biblical Recorder* wrote to Boyce in June 1866. The editor of the *Christian Index* mailed ten dollars “in behalf of the Zion of the Lord in the entire South,” despite the newspaper’s financial troubles. Another donor wrote that he gave because the seminary alone could help “crush all the isms – from


\(^{41}\) Wills, *Southern Baptist Seminary*, 53–72.
Romanism to Campbellism.” He expressed distrust that denominational colleges or Sunday Schools would rescue the South from heresy and corruption. Writing to Boyce, the author contended “your school is the only one I am willing to recognize as a legitimate work for our churches, as churches.” The burden of giving “lavishly” to “literary education” stripped the church of needed resources that were better applied to “educated ministerial talent.” All of these donations demonstrated a widespread support for the seminary and the prospects of Baptist ministers to provide religious stability during Reconstruction, even if the amounts given were small.\footnote{J. D. Huffman to James P. Boyce, June 29, 1866; Joseph S. Baker to James P. Boyce, August 26, 1867; W. M. Robertson to James P. Boyce, September 2, 1867, James P. Boyce Papers, Archives and Special Collections, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky.}

Southern Baptists linked the institution to the future of their denomination, if not the South itself. Struggling congregations hoped that the seminary could save the denomination from the brink of extinction by rectifying the shortage of Baptist ministers. One Baptist in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, wrote to Boyce, looking for help. Although W. W. Lea’s church “had a good brick house of worship” before the war, it was “seriously damaged by the Feds.” Without a pastor, the congregation languished while other denominations found success. Lea emphasized the plight of Baptists in Pine Bluff by pointing out, “even a Jewish synagogue is in building.” Yet this man had faith that a well-trained minister could turn their fortunes around, bringing reputation and members to the dying congregation. He implored Boyce, “Have you no young minister of good morals & piety, intelligent and one of social disposition who will come into this great missionary field?” Once again, morality and
piety appeared as the essentials for the faith’s triumph, expected products of a seminary education.43

Sara Noathery, a Baptist from Virginia, also hoped that support for the seminary would lead to the growth of the Baptist denomination. Only able to give five dollars, she blamed the state of the economy and northern tyranny for her failure to supply more. “The Yankees took all of our horses and stock,” she remembered, “so that we have been right hard put to it, to commence our farming operations again, we had them camping on us almost at our door, our loss was very heavey.” Despite this hardship, Noathery mustered what she could, as she was tired of going to the Presbyterian church. The closest Baptist churches were far away, in Charlottesville and Staunton. She recalled arguing with her fellow churchgoers over orthodox doctrines of Baptism. Yet hope of a Baptist resurgence kept her going, as she asserted “I hope by the grace of God to live and die a Baptist.”44

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Supporting clerical education skirted many of the problems that came with other levels of education. The application of collegiate curriculum to the gospel cause was not readily visible, whereas seminaries clearly aided the progress of Christ in the South. For those who could not appreciate the eventual evangelical fruits of the college curriculum, use of the church’s meager funds seemed a “waste [of] our strength and money,” to quote one minister who wrote to Boyce. Seminaries also avoided almost entirely the thorny issues that arose when colleges sought financial assistance outside the church. Economic

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43 W.W. Lea to James P Boyce, October 3, 1866, James P. Boyce Papers.
44 Sarah Noathery to James P. Boyce, September 24, 1867, James P. Boyce Papers.
survival during Reconstruction led colleges into positions that challenged reigning notions of the spirituality of the church. Associations with the state or with wealthy donors, often northerners, represented capitulation to the malign forces troubling southern morality, according to some observers, or unique opportunities to solidify the ethical foundations of the region to other educational boosters. Boyce faced the question of mixing the seminary’s mission with industrial lucre, but the school’s purpose precluded any serious doubts that entanglements with mammon would corrupt a ministerial preparatory curriculum. However, the new financial environment of Reconstruction prevented the resurgence of denominational college sentiments, preserved in their antebellum form. While some proponents assured the public that denominational colleges promised the same benefits of regional and sectarian uplift, even the most ardent higher education enthusiasts recognized that they were operating in a changed South.⁴⁵

Braxton Craven labored throughout the 1850s to put tiny Trinity College in Durham, North Carolina, on the map of higher learning in the South. The case of this school, which would become Duke University in the twentieth century, offered a model of what many hoped education could become in the New South. When Craven took control of the institution, it was known as Normal College, devoted to training teachers to serve in Calvin H. Wiley’s new state system. Only in 1859 did the moniker change to Trinity, after Craven secured patronage from the southern Methodist church. Licensed to preach in 1840, he secured full ordination as an elder in 1856. Throughout these early days, Craven made it clear that the purpose of the institution was to further religious education, with equal

⁴⁵ Joseph S. Baker to James P. Boyce, August 26, 1867, James P. Boyce Papers.
emphasis placed on both terms. Craven’s Trinity produced teachers and preachers as part of a unified curriculum. The appointment of a professor of theology to the Normal College faculty in 1854 could have created a stir, but Craven’s handling of the matter lead no one to question the move. One of Craven’s interlocutors advised him to name the position “Prof. of ‘Mental and Moral Science’ with the understanding that he is to lecture on Theology” to avoid unnecessary disputes over the intersection of sacred and secular in the institution. Craven also set up aid from the Education Society of the North Carolina Conference of the Methodist Church. The young men who received this assistance expressed a calling to the pulpit, with the agreement that they would “enter the travelling ministry” following the completion of their course of study. At early Trinity College, preachers and teachers studied side by side. Through Craven’s able leadership, the school avoided the treacherous terrain of the theology of spirituality.\footnote{William E. Pele \textsc{[?]} to Braxton Craven, September 16, 1854; Braxton Craven to Governor D. L. Swain, September 25, 1852, Braxton Craven Records and Papers, University Archives, Duke University; Jerome Dowd, \textit{The Life of Braxton Craven: A Biographical Approach to Social Science} (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1939), 81–86.}

The war disrupted Craven’s plan, temporarily leading him away from Trinity in service of the gospel as pastor to a church in Raleigh and in service of the Confederacy as leader of a Home Guard and overseer of the military prison at Salisbury. The war stripped Trinity of students, but the returning president was optimistic for the future, even in 1865. Trinity College, state education, the South, and Methodism (southern and national)—i.e., all

the problems Craven thought about—could recuperate and even improve, given the adoption of a proper system. His inclinations proved correct, as the college’s patronage and reputation increased during Reconstruction. Despite competition in the conference from Randolph-Macon College, in southern Virginia, Craven assembled the state’s and conference’s most successful denominational college.\footnote{Dowd, \textit{Life of Braxton Craven}, 91–118.}

Organization and planning occupied a central position in Craven’s thought after the war. Praxis surpassed purity in his mind, as seen in the antebellum plan of operations for the young college. With the correct strategy, Craven fully expected that the moral challenges of the postwar world could easily be dispatched. First, he tackled the subject of sectionalism in religion. Soon after Confederate defeat, Craven submitted a plan to Bishop Ames of the northern Methodist church aimed at reuniting the sectional branches of the denomination. The southerner asked the Bishop, “Why should not sectionalism be buried in the grave of the great rebellion?” Common complaints that the northern church had abrogated spirituality in its support of the Union and seizure of southern church property scarcely entered Craven’s consideration. Avoiding further “darkness and storm” through denominational bickering offered the best prospects for the true work of the church. Craven wrote that “the mission of the church is by divine assistance to spread scriptural holiness over the earth,” not sectional antipathy. “Accusations and tests” levied by one party upon the other had no place in the progress of Christianity and were “unknown to

\footnotetext{Dowd, \textit{Life of Braxton Craven}, 91–118.}

During Reconstruction Trinity surpassed the nearby state university. In 1870, the university at Chapel Hill was closed, but the Methodist college enrolled over two hundred students. Farish, \textit{Circuit Rider Dismounts}, 261.
Church History.” Craven offered a simple plan to remove the separation between the sectional branches of the church and unify their discipline, all for the sake of channeling effort where it most belonged—education.48

In the postwar period Craven maintained his advocacy of denominational education as the way forward, and his sectarian partisanship became even more pronounced. He delivered several addresses on the subject of Methodism and placed Trinity College in a central position when discussing the future of the denomination. In one printed speech from 1868, Craven argued that Methodism was uniquely poised to lead Christendom, not just the South. “In all history,” Craven contended, “no other Church ever arose like the Methodist; all others without exception have had a sectional, a theological, or an ecclesiastical basis of difference given as the real or ostensible reason of formation; but the only landmark known to the Methodist, was an ‘earnest desire to flee the wrath to come and to be saved from sin.”49

Yet, even Methodism needed work, especially when it came to the denomination’s theology. In an address delivered in December 1869, Craven argued for the centrality of theology. In his words, “Man must farm, merchandize, legislate, work in the shop, plead law and practice physic, but none of them can be allowed directly or indirectly to impugn the doctrines of his faith.” All Christians required a systematic theology to undergird their lived experience. Methodism’s most pressing challenge was its lack of organized intellectual

48 Braxton Craven to Bishop Ames, July 24, 1865, Braxton Craven Records and Papers, University Archives, Duke University.

49 Braxton Craven, Methodism (Baltimore, 1868), 10.
tradition. As Craven diagnosed the problem, “Methodism is a system poorly developed, badly adjusted, and partially embraced.” Despite its well-placed priorities in evangelism and Gospel-centricity, “the subordinate but necessary machinery has scarcely been attempted and to this day Methodism finds itself a homeless wanderer, without material possessions or mental accommodations.” In other words, Methodism risked having no intellectual heft to back up the emotional attractions of its revivalism. Calvinists possessed stability and tradition in spades, but Methodist Arminians rejected creed in favor of religious practice. Craven’s deepest regret stemming from this lack of theological sophistication was the neglect of ethical thought in the Methodist tradition. He chided his denomination, “There is not and never has been a system of morals published, that philosophically springs from Arminian Theology, and accords with Methodist doctrines and discipline.” Compounding the problem, Methodism “neither has nor desires a dominant system of education.” The scattered denominational colleges relied on systems devised for other traditions, in effect training young men “for the ranks of the enemy.” If difficult, the solution to this situation was obvious: more organization. Through better institutional support for colleges such as Trinity and through a more rigorous theological program at those schools, the denomination could establish a foundation of theological ethics.50

Denomination, education, and progress operated together in Craven’s thought. The preservation of Christian values in the South depended not upon the remembrance and continuation of the past but active planning for the future. The Carolinian was jubilant in

the 1870s, proclaiming, “1875 is the grandest year ever marked by the calendar, and it is only preparatory to untold altitudes far in advance.” Craven’s optimism never flagged, even as the South struggled economically. In notes cribbed for a speech, the Methodist educator repeated a refrain he had been chanting for several decades by this point: “1. There must be more general education. 2. It must be higher. 3. Must be more general. 4. Must be higher morals.” In the 1876–77 session of the North Carolina legislature, Craven presented a plan for education on all levels, again finding fault with the state’s lack of organization. Public education exhibited “no form of control competent and able either to discover defects or to correct abuses.” The same accusation applied to the state’s colleges, which were nearly all denominational and disaggregated from the state university. Organizationally, the colleges were “independent corporations” with no “unity in anything.” Pedagogically, “they have no common standard to which they must conform,” while espousing “theories dissimilar and conflicting, requisitions subject to every kind of influence.” The state’s lack of standards determining what constituted “respectable scholarship” created a problem much like that facing Methodism. Uniform standards and concentrated planning bore the potential to lead North Carolina into future success, and not even taxation should stand in the way. In one 1875 editorial, Craven held that “a few thousands of dollars are not to be weighed against the quickening, inspiring influence of a great University upon the welfare of the people.” For Craven, education came first; money was a minor concern. He argued, “tax us to pay whatever is necessary.” Future generations would not mind the inherited burden, given the boundless potential represented in systematic education.51

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51 Braxton Craven, “The Drift of the Century,” [1875], Braxton Craven Records and Papers,
Craven’s skill as fundraiser and diplomat combined with his willingness to mix the religious and secular ends explained the rising stature of Trinity College. The institution’s detractors seemed to base their antipathy on personal objections to Craven rather than theological conflicts of interest. Drawing money from donors North and South, Methodist and other, the college president established an example representative of the terms of success southern institutions of higher learning had to face: compromise on sectionalism and the doctrine of spirituality—or perish.\textsuperscript{52}

The notion of church spirituality offered more hazards than prospects for the perpetuation of orthodox morality through denominational education. The most telling example lies in the case of the Southern Presbyterian University. The denomination began considering a single, unified educational institution at its first general assembly, but only after the war’s end did the idea receive full consideration. James A. Lyon of Mississippi championed the proposal, stating his case at the 1867 General Assembly and in the \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review}. The Presbyterian church’s educational efforts lagged far behind those of other denominations, when it used to be the case that “the name ‘Presbyterian’ was a synonym for an intelligent and cultivated gentleman.” Lyon confessed that he and his fellow believers “have stood still, content with past honors,” when changing times required positive action. To avoid “falling behind the rapid progress of knowledge,”

\textsuperscript{52} Dowd, \textit{Life of Braxton Craven}, 104–14.
Lyon argued that the South’s Presbyterians had to unify, putting aside their concerns of centralized authority in favor of the denomination’s survival.\textsuperscript{53}

The time was right for “united and harmonious action of the whole Church.” Lyon feared “the influence of Roman Catholic institutions” creeping into the South, as well as the prostrated condition of the postwar economy. The denomination could also rely on the organizational motivation of the rising ministerial generation. Referring to the success of Confederate camp revivals, Lyon pointed out that the “younger clergy ... as chaplains in the army, had observed the mighty power of concentrated and systematic action in producing great results.” Likewise, these young men believed that “a grand scheme of education” could be built “which would not only restore our former precedence, but form a bulwark against the open and insidious encroachments of enemies and errorists.” Others wrote in support of the university, lest Presbyterians “send their children to Roman Catholic institutions, and to those of others full of deadly hostility to the Presbyterian Church.” Denominational sentiment mixed with sectional pride in these calls for a Southern Presbyterian University. Pleading for support, advocates stressed the need for an institution that “shall lead the education of the South, in its mighty destiny, through the coming years.” These sentiments, recorded in 1869, reveal the southern recognition that education offered the unique solution to Reconstruction’s auspicious problems.\textsuperscript{54}


Despite the promise of such an institution, Lyon defended his plan against objections that both the mission and funding of a university lay outside the prerogative of the church. Lyon and denominational stalwart Benjamin Morgan Palmer of New Orleans countered charges that education was a secular duty and that ministers had no business teaching in a college setting. Setting aside any doubt on the subject, Lyon wrote, “It is ... an exceedingly narrow and mistaken view of the province of Christ’s kingdom to suppose that it is to be restricted to the affections and moral faculties of man, passing by his intellectual attributes.” The Mississippian cleric echoed longstanding Presbyterian sentiment, contending, “in a religious point of view, the heart and the intellect are inseparable. To cultivate the former to the neglect of the latter is to make a fanatic. To cultivate the latter to the neglect of the former is to make an infidel or an atheist.” Not only could education be defended as a legitimate branch of church activity, the maintenance of higher education represented perhaps the most important extension of the church’s duty in preserving the religious and moral fabric of society. To that end, the church had no choice but to avoid “being too strict in our construction” or “being too straitened.” “The Church,” Lyon continued, should have free action and room to exert herself. Without this she fails to fulfil(sic) her true mission.” To that end, the education of young men into Christian traditions of ethical thought served as a directly evangelical profession. In Lyon’s words, “to educate ... to cultivate the mental and moral faculties of youth in accordance with the principles of Christianity is not a ‘secular,’ but a religious business. Any supposition to the contrary strikes us as a dangerous delusion.” Lyon was a bit more traditional than Craven,
but the motif of a loose construction of church duties ran through the educational philosophy of both men.\textsuperscript{55}

The Methodist and the Presbyterian also shared the obvious recognition that colleges and universities needed funding to operate, and arranging economic security in the Reconstruction South required innovative thinking. At the beginning of Lyon’s campaign, each synod funded its own educational ventures, leaving individual colleges dependent on a rather small pool of funds. Advocates of the plan did not anticipate a hearty opposition. After all, in the antebellum era, southern pupils flocked to the Old School bastion at Princeton. Supporters commonly cited the example of Princeton’s President James McCosh when appealing for the orthodoxy of the Southern University plan. Many Presbyterians agreed with the diagnosis Lyon offered: the southern system was broken. Synods could not support institutions of higher learning. Richmond’s \textit{Central Presbyterian} carried an article lamenting “the poverty of these institutions.” However, problems arose when the denomination had to agree on a plan for funding. \textsuperscript{56}

At the 1871 General Assembly, the proposal faltered. Opposition came from two camps, whose members objected on the basis of financial concerns and the doctrine of spirituality, respectively. The first group was situated in the east, hailing from wealthier regions. These men had no interest in propping up the ailing institutions of the deeply impoverished Deep South. Dabney emerged as the leader of those who opposed the plan


\textsuperscript{56} “Presbyterian University,” \textit{Southwestern Presbyterian}, September 30, 1869; “Presbyterian University,” \textit{Central Presbyterian}, November 3, 1869.
on theological grounds. The church, Dabney maintained, strayed outside its proper bounds when it taught anything but theology. Failure to cooperate in financial or theological details rendered the university plans moribund. The old system of local patronage had to suffice, but few schools prospered under that arrangement. Even urgent pleas for the necessity of education in the preservation of southern morality could not unify a single denomination, let alone the region as a whole.57

Distrustful of denominational politics, the Georgia Methodist minister James Osgood Andrew Clark issued an innovative proposal for higher education in his home state. With degrees from Andover College and Brown University, Osgood Clark had seen functional education and hoped that the South could match northern institutions. As a professor of Latin at Emory College from 1867 to 1871, the Savannah native was heavily invested in the fate of denominational colleges in the state. Clark’s ideas were printed in pamphlet form and covered in newspapers throughout the state. Yet, from their initial utterance, it was clear even to sympathetic Georgians that the plan had no chance of success. Outlining a unification of state and denominational institutions, Clark’s Plea for Unification of the University of Georgia and the Denominational Colleges brazenly violated the strictures of spirituality. Clark realized that the doctrine worked against the region’s interests and, like

the antebellum educational arrangement, had to be left in the past "to promote all true progress."\textsuperscript{58}

Clark ignored matters of theology, focusing on the practicality of joining all higher education in one system. Denominational colleges and the state university essentially taught the same curriculum. Moreover, supporters of each institution paid the same taxes. That money, Clark argued, should go to their chosen school. For graduate education, connections with the state institution would obviate the need for each denomination to establish universities of their own. Anticipating challenges from non-Methodists, Clark distanced denominational education from sectarianism. In his words, "these colleges are denominational, but not sectarian – Christian, but not bigoted." Creedal particularity remained a matter of personal choice, not curricular necessity. Even in courses predisposed to theological conflict, there was little room for indoctrination. Clark maintained, "Indeed, in colleges widely differing in theological views, the same text-book on moral philosophy is often used. Theological seminaries are the places to teach church polemics, not the colleges." At the same time, the denominational colleges would exert a positive influence on the university by policing the ideas taught there. Thus, "there would be no place there for the Darwins, the Spencers and Tyndals of modern infidelity." Remove religious control, and the university would give way "to the infidel and scoffing scientists of

\textsuperscript{58} "Georgia," \textit{Atlanta Constitution}, December 13, 1872; James Osgood Andrew Clark, \textit{A Plea for the Unification of the University of Georgia and the Denominational Colleges} (Macon, Ga., 1874), 22.
these modern days.” Denominational colleges would unify rather than divide state education, benefitting Georgians of all creeds.59

While Clark foresaw doubts centered in the blurring or crossing of Church/State boundaries, he failed to appreciate the sincerity and ubiquity of the spirituality doctrine. He proposed a merely institutional union. Theology had no place in this scheme. In Clark’s words, “the State, under this plan, prescribes no religion, fosters none to the exclusion or injury of others, but recognizes all denominations as entitled to equal protection, and with equal rights to govern their colleges in their own.” This reasoning gained little traction, even among educational boosters, as few could follow Clark’s proposal to divorce theology from these institutions. Fellow Georgia Methodist Addison G. Haygood recognized the weakness of his colleague’s rationale. Contending that “no matter how guarded with ‘checks and balances’” the plan were, the joining of state and denominational institutions would always be seen as “an ‘entangling alliance’” between church and state.60

Furthermore, Haygood worried correctly that the proposal would reflect poorly on the denomination. “It seems to me,” Haygood wrote, “that the Methodist church is likely, by many persons to be held responsible for trying to accomplish what others will claim the credit of defeating.” In other words, Haygood predicted that other denominations would joyfully ridicule Clark as a means of laying public claim to the title of spiritual orthodoxy. Methodists, seen as defenders of a brazen breach of spirituality, would suffer a devastating public relations blow. Luckily for Haygood, few seem to have given the plan any

59 Clark, Plea for Unification, 2-4, 25, 29.

consideration. Although an outline of the plan appeared in many Georgian newspapers, the most common reaction was to reject it out of hand. Clark’s plan was the subject of very brief conversation at the state Baptist convention, which gave the idea short shrift. According to one report from the event’s proceedings, the plan was “checked and ... defeated entirely.” The harshest criticism came from fellow Methodists, one of whom called the scheme “a plan the devil could not improve upon.” The fate of Clark’s plan demonstrates that without paying homage to the concerns of maintaining church spirituality, proposals for supporting religious education had no hope of success. 61

Despite Clark’s misguided campaign, Methodists did accomplish the task of assembling a southern university, where Presbyterians failed completely. The Southern Methodist Convention, meeting in Memphis January 24–27, 1872, slated a “Central University” as a long-term goal, but at the time this action represented wishful thinking more than a practical expectation. Bishop Holland N. McTyeire of Tennessee refused to rest on his laurels and accept poverty as an excuse for the South’s intellectual destitution. Money was all that stood in the way of the new institution, and the enterprising Methodist devised an unlikely fundraising strategy. Cornelius Vanderbilt bore a reputation as a stern man with little affection for the ministry or the church, but McTyeire cleverly pitched the plan for a university in Nashville as a business opportunity. Sectional reunion promised even greater wealth for the railroad tycoon, and the bishop convinced the Commodore that the improvement of higher education offered the quickest-working salve for the sectional

rupture. Sales pitch or not, McTyeire publicly articulated a vision of southern uplift based on religious education, which tabled all considerations of church spirituality and sectional antagonism. For this minister, the liberation of the South trumped ideological purity. Vanderbilt, of course, agreed, writing,

I want to unite this country, and all sections of it, so all the people shall be one, and a common country as they were before. Though I never had any education, no man has ever felt the lack of it more than I have, and no man appreciates the value of it more than I do and believes more than I do what it will do in the future. How much do you want?62

With funding secured, McTyeire was able to organize a coalition in support of the new university as a place of both secular and sacred training. Those like Landon C. Garland, who envisioned the decline of religion in the South’s new cities, supported the institution as a proactive response to the challenges of the era. However, the foundling university met opposition from a variety of quarters, the strongest of which came from strict interpreters of church spirituality. Chief among this party was Georgia’s Bishop George Foster Pierce, who failed to be persuaded that education would help the South. Religious vitality could only be achieved through the work of preaching and revivalism, beginning at the grass roots with the average believer. No academic training, in university or seminary, could create a better minister. Methodist tradition offered better preparation than formal training. “There is no preacher in a man,” the bishop said, “with such a chance if the work of itinerancy does not bring him out.” Real-world experience was cheap and reliable, so why should such an expensive new undertaking be preferred? A populist thread ran through

Pierce’s critique, as well. He pointed to the example of the Baptists, who “have never done much in the line of theological schools.” Yet, they dominated the rural areas of the South, the territory Peirce valued most. The church should stand apart from secular values by preferring “the masses of society” not “the select few—a favored class,” that is, those able to attend university. “High culture,” he claimed, “can never be general. ... It is Utopian to dream of its commonness.”

Similarly, Georgia’s Atticus G. Haygood argued that Vanderbilt obviated from the path of Christian education by including secular funding and curriculum. An alumnus and future president of Emory College in Oxford, Georgia, the Methodist minister backed the denominational college as the proper locus of education. Speaking in front of Emory’s alumni in July 1874, Haygood delivered a screed against Vanderbilt’s founding principles, only a few months after McTyeire and company broke ground in Nashville. By including secular curriculum, the university risked compromising the principles that allowed religious education to boost moral capacities. A university curriculum led to unprofitable association with the “strange and unholy,” including Catholic, Jewish, Darwinist, and atheistic thought. Teaching trades or professions also polluted the mission of religious education. Haygood believed that “man’s moral nature is ... susceptible of educational influence ... and requires education” in order to prevent “depravity” and “crime.”

Professions could be learned later, but education’s social function depended on its ethical grounding. 64

Vanderbilt’s backers countered these arguments, insisting that the Methodist university could also serve a moral purpose. Great fanfare and ceremony accompanied the school’s opening, and crowds gathered to hear several of the Southern Methodist church’s greatest orators at the dedication. Each speaker reiterated one key theme: the South required a university to secure its ethical foundation. Methodist minister Charles F. Deems spoke on the “Relations of the University to Religion,” underscoring the need for religiously affiliated experts to make clear the relationship between science and religion. Darwin challenged the foundations of the faith, but the new university would lay bare the schemes of “unreasonable and wicked men” who repeat the false plot of antagonism between theology and science. If the popular dialogue about science and religion were not corrected, Deems foresaw an ethical impact, as academics would lose sight of “the eternal difference between right and wrong.” The faculty at Vanderbilt would stand up for fact over hypothesis paraded as fact, thus blockading the slippery slope from wrong-headed science to outright atheism that had impacted other regions. 65

While Deems placed the university in a context of ethical decline, A. A. Lipscomb described Vanderbilt as the latest advancement in a progressive vision of southern history.


65 Dedication and Inauguration of the Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, Oct. 3, 4, 1875 (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1875), 43
The Methodist minister and former chancellor of the University of Georgia listed the new university among “that phase of American civilization which began with George Washington and ended with Robert E. Lee.” The “enlargement of the idea of education” stood out as the most telling bit of evidence in favor of history’s upward tilt. Not only was knowledge expanding seemingly boundlessly, but education’s impacts proliferated socially, impacting “the community, the nation, the race.” Successful modern societies required universities, according to Lipscomb:

A world without abstract truths, without the profundity of logic, without the subtle analyses of metaphysics, without the rules and formulae of rigid science, could not be the world of either student or scholar; nor, indeed, could it be, in any significant sense the world of political economy, or government, or trade and commerce. Southern hopes for redemption hinged on the success of higher education.66

Yet, Lipscomb’s progressive vision was remarkably broad-based in its conception of regional progress. Sectionalism and southern chauvinism only made improvement more difficult. Higher education advocated “against what is local and sectional... against every thing even tinged with self-idolatry... and take[s] its stand on whatever is large-minded and enduring.” Vanderbilt’s effects promised to trickle down and “make itself felt in mines, and foundries, and workshops, in the cottages of the poor, and the mansions of the rich.” These wide-ranging effects, Lipscomb asserted, paved the way for cultural progress. By touching nearly every segment of society, higher education would reform values along the way, but only with input from religion. Cultural progress served as Lipscomb’s shorthand for reinforcing Christian standards of morality. He described the process as such: “as [culture] advances, it increases its capacity to assimilate with Christian virtue and be

66 Ibid., 69, 71.
absorbed in its incomparably higher excellence. Now, in this respect, the university can accomplish much for learning and piety by the spirit animating its efforts.” In short, Vanderbilt would liberate the South economically, spiritually, and culturally, leading the South to its rightful place alongside other modern nations.67

Ultimately, Cornelius Vanderbilt settled the debate over the Southern Methodist university. Discrepancies between theologies of education were no match for the influence of money. Yet, arguments concerning the spirituality of the church and the merits of a university curriculum divided the faithful and slowed the development of southern educational institutions. During Reconstruction, both conservatives and progressives aimed for the economic and cultural liberation of the South through education of a certain sort. By the 1880s, the Vanderbilt model seemed ever more persuasive, and former opponent of university curriculum Atticus Haygood, as president of Emory College, added professional training to the school’s mission. Vanderbilt, Emory, and Trinity provided clearly visible results, in terms of economic growth and reputation. Rural critics still regretted the denomination’s engagement with universities, but financial gains mitigated the impact of the continued debates. Higher education became cemented in its place as an extension of the church’s activity by means of its success.

No benefactor could render the southern discussion about public education moot. Reconstruction forced the issue of state-supported primary and secondary schools on recalcitrant southern states, so that North Carolina was no longer alone in considering it.

67 Ibid., 77, 77–78, 78.
These state systems were consistently underfunded and controversial in their very existence. The debates about seminaries, colleges, and universities usually skirted questions about race, as white religious leaders either rejected the ability of African Americans to enter such institutions or ignored freedpeople’s hunger for knowledge. The public school question required these same ministers to confront the reality of emancipation. During the antebellum years, white clerics lauded the religious training of the slaves, so long as they were not taught to read. After the war, practical education of free men and women divided opinion, as many southern whites feared that literacy represented the first step toward social equality between the races. At the same time concerns about the church’s proper sphere of activity and the doctrine of spirituality spilled over into the discussion of public education from existing conversations. The result was a volatile mix capable of dividing denominations, rather than unifying and uplifting the white South as religious leaders intended.

Republican Reconstruction marked the beginning of systematic efforts to spread public school systems throughout the South. In addition to each state’s empty coffers, politicians butted against white southern political traditions of local autonomy and resistance to taxation. When states did accrue some funds, legislatures often chose to borrow from education to pay down the state debt. States eschewed central organization in favor of county-based school boards, making results and funds disaggregated and variable by locale. Yet state systems expanded throughout the 1870s, attracting both black and white students to segregated schools. From the outset, even the meagerly funded white schools received more money from the state than African American schools, prompting many freedpeople to support literacy from their own communities. The Freedman’s Bureau
and northern missionaries aided black schools, adding another layer of separation between southern whites and African American education. The very fact that freedpeople were receiving education angered many southern whites, and the perceived foreign control of the process compounded former Confederates' feelings of oppression.\textsuperscript{68}

The combination of political and racial issues involved in the subject of public education motivated intense public debate. White religious leaders frequently joined in, citing moral concerns to justify their involvement. They pondered the merits of public education and the role that religion should have in the new institution. Race and power also entered into their calculations, as ministers sparred over the proper arrangement of government and society in general. Public education represented yet another arena in which the battle for the South's future would be fought. For some, expanded popular literacy and industrial training, coupled with moral guidance, represented the region's greatest hopes for liberation from the doldrums of defeat. But other clerics stood firmly behind the old system, denouncing the social and racial leveling effects public education would bring and the rampant atheism that resulted from a secular or even non-sectarian pedagogy. As with the other discussions covered in this chapter, religious leaders insisted that educational decisions were at the same time religious and ethical.

Although religious and secular newspapers throughout the South carried opinions about public schooling, perhaps no state's debate grew more heated or appeared in a wider array of publications than Virginia's confrontation between William H. Ruffner and Robert

Lewis Dabney. In 1868 the Republican government drew up a new Constitution, the so-called Underwood Constitution, which stated that the Commonwealth must establish a public school system by 1876. Under this system, the General Assembly would select a superintendent, who would collaborate with the governor and attorney general in a State Board of Education. Ruffner, the conservative candidate, won the office on March 2, 1870, with only one of the Republican legislators voting against him. Many Virginia conservatives hoped that Ruffner and the conservative-controlled legislature of the early 1870s would ignore the constitutional requirement. The politicians upset these expectations, passing measures establishing segregated yet well-funded and widespread schools. With state tax revenue directed specifically to education and frequent northern donations, the system spread throughout the state, with about 3,000 teachers instructing 130,000 students in 2,900 schools during the winter of 1870–1871. Year by year, the free schools became more popular among voters. Yet rising public opinion could not put the matter to rest. Ostensibly concerned with timeless principle rather than temporal whims, Dabney and some other white clergymen insisted on fully examining the question of state-sponsored public education’s merit.69

With ministers leading the discussion, Virginia’s consideration of free schools served as arguably the most prominent forum for the postwar public theology. Ruffner was an ordained Presbyterian minister who had served a church in Philadelphia in the early 1850s. The Virginian struggled to adjust to northern culture and “city life,” confessing to his

mother that his “love for green hill & mountain air will burn unconsumed.” One elder minister advised him to avoid trying “to make your church & congregation Virginian. ... Northern ways may or may not be as good as Southern, but they are fixed & we cannot change them.” Illness and failure to adjust led Ruffner away from Philadelphia by 1853, and he returned to Virginia. During the war, Ruffner served in the Home Guard, while managing his father’s mining interests. Witnessing Union troops “killing without leave chickens, hogs & sheep” while staying on one farmer’s property, Ruffner could not help but denounce the “injustice” of Yankee “scoundrels.” A few years in the North made Ruffner no less the southerner. He was also a reformer, who charged that slavery needed to be changed (though not abolished) and worked for the American Colonization Society to bring about that transformation. The combination of Ruffner’s roles as minister, southerner, and reformer informed his work as superintendent, shaping the plans he made for the system and the rhetoric he used to defend it.⁷⁰

Early in his tenure as superintendent, Ruffner told state officials, “Education has to be propagated like Christianity.” Public education, alongside the Christian religion, represented one of the hallmarks of modern nations. Indeed, Ruffner affirmed that “almost every nation having any just claim to be called civilized” boasted a “public system of education.” This connection was no coincidence. Public education, Christianity, and social

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prosperity existed in a reciprocal relationship, which supported and perpetuated the
ethical basis of the nation. In his 1871 defense and explanation of the new education
system, Ruffner described a symbiosis between “the parents, the State and the Church” that
made moral improvement possible in a society. Attempting to allay the suspicions of those
who viewed public education as governmental intrusion, the superintendent argued that
no one source of influence could produce a complete young mind. Rather, each of the three
institutions must uphold its responsibility for any to find success. Families served as the
bedrock of a child’s training, directing the transmission of “moral and religious truth.”
Churches supplemented this activity, handing down doctrine and the specifics of
evangelization through Sunday Schools and the pulpit.71

Ruffner insisted that family and church alone could not make a society prosper. The
state’s input proved crucial around the world, and Ruffner supplemented this argument
with evidence that Virginians, in particular, should relax their fears of governmental
agencies. For one, the moral education done in Virginia’s public schools would be based
upon the Bible and the “religious common law accepted by everybody.” The Bible was such
an excellent ethical sourcebook that even the English biologist and educational booster,
Thomas Henry Huxley, “a distinguished sceptic,” championed its use in public classrooms.
Supplementing this text, only Christian teachers would be allowed in the schools. In the
superintendent’s description of their profession, “every teacher has an ethical work to

71 Ruffner qtd. in Walter J. Fraser, Jr., “William Henry Ruffner and the Establishment of
Virginia’s Public School System,” Virginia Magazine of History and Biography 79 (July 1971),
259–79, 267; Ruffner, Virginia School Report, 1871: First Annual Report of the
Superintendent of Public Instruction for the Year Ending August 31, 1871 (Richmond, 1871),
76–77, 56, 59.
perform, which is second only to the work of the Christian pastor.” The task of the teacher “is Christian ethics, not Christian theology,” and this moral code was able to unite “Christians ... Jews [and] unbelievers of every grade.” 72

This unifying moral theory comprised part of Ruffner’s idea of a “religious common law,” which was similar to the modern notion of civil religion. He described it as “not dogmatic religion in any full sense, but it comprises cardinal religious doctrines, and a complete code of the highest and purest morality.” Moreover, “men of all creeds and characters in our land acknowledge in some form the authority of this religious common law.” Its existence could even be traced to the “common and statutory law of the land,” which Ruffner claimed could serve as the basis of teaching “a good system of religious ethics.” The “severe judgments of society against immorality” convinced Ruffner that there was an ethical basis ingrained in good peoples, who valued duty over government by fear and coercion.

For Ruffner, a good society simultaneously relied on a prerequisite religious and moral foundation and adequate institutions to preserve morality’s standing. Public education could not succeed in any location, only those whose values contained a strong “religious common law.” The South was such a place. In Ruffner’s words, “the moral worth of a State was never more united and powerful than it is in Virginia to-day.” Virginia already possessed the proper relationship between strong families and vibrant churches that a moral training required. Why should education be neglected? The superintendent

ensured Virginians that corruption only sprang from corrupt societies. “The general moral and religious tone of a public school,” Ruffner asserted, “is usually the same as characterizes the neighborhood in which it is situated. If there is good salt around it, the school will not remain unseasoned.” Virginians were already good, the argument went, so they had nothing to fear in adding another prong to the assault on immorality through the patronage of public schools. Only such a full-fledged assault could effect “the regeneration of society,” undergirding a “government given to the moral protection and uplifting of the poor.” In short, public education represented the state’s best chance to revive southern culture, government, and economy, thereby recovering from the lasting woes of war.\footnote{73 Ruffner, \textit{Virginia School Report, 1871}, 57–59; Ruffner, \textit{Public Free School System}, 40.}

One of the most controversial workings of this plan was its inclusion of African Americans. No advocate of full African American equality, Ruffner was still nearly alone among white religious leaders in his racially inclusive vision of southern liberation. Any lasting change to southern culture needed to secure the ethical and religious standing of whites and blacks alike. He pleaded, “we should not be insensible to the \textit{moral} claims these people have as human beings upon their fellow men.” While he depicted freedpeople with prejudice, claiming them to be “an amiable, docile people” whose “moral condition is deplorable,” nevertheless, the superintendent refused to shut them out of the schools. Ruffner repeatedly referred to the work going on as being of a “moral” nature. Teaching African Americans to read, rather than spelling the doom of the existing social order, would


Albert Taylor Bledsoe, the Virginia native and ordained Methodist, agreed with Ruffner that public education could uplift the morality of southern culture, provided that pedagogy be sufficiently Christian. See “Culture and Religion in their Relations,” \textit{Southern Review} (July 1874), 37–68.
help them progress, to develop a “pride of race” and become productive members of society. 74

In his 1871 defense of public education, Ruffner scoured the history of southern slavery and British emancipation for “evidences of improvability.” His survey of the black character suggested that the deficiency of their race was moral in nature. Thus, with a fitting pedagogy, African Americans were fully capable of economic and political participation. According to Ruffner, the difference between “savages” and “Christian civilization” existed in the willingness of the latter to take responsibility for “poverty, ignorance, mental derangement ... bodily disease and moral depravity” by providing “guardianship” rather than simply casting out the needy into the wild. By extending the paternalistic conditions of slavery, southerners would be undertaking a type of Christian mission, preventing freedpeople from descending once again into the barbarism of African culture. Ruffner drew upon his long-held passion for colonization, arguing that the history of Liberia demonstrated that republicanism and Christianity could prosper in a nation fully under the control of black people. He also pointed to free blacks in the Caribbean and Louisiana, who demonstrated the capitalist virtues of thrift and hard work. These political and economic qualities would not go to waste, given the innate religiosity of the African American character. Education represented the key to combining these ingredients into a civilized mixture. Regular instruction would guarantee “their moral principles would

74 Ruffner, Public Free School System, 9, 10.
become more settled, and more efficacious in controlling their habits.” Literacy alone
guaranteed that these principles would remain permanently. 75

The superintendent classed the uneducated of both races together, as a common hurdle in the way of southern advancement. Ruffner described the problem: “Although ignorant minds may be powerfully affected through the emotions, such impressions are not durable unless there is intelligence enough to comprehend the meaning of the truth presented in its proper relations, and to retain its substance in memory.” Though his words in this context referred to African Americans, he imagined all of those with "low ideas of honor and morality" as a single impediment to a nation’s fortune, giving way to “corruption and degredation.” Ruffner warned, “Give to people of this sort, whether of one color or another, the ballot, a place on juries or in Legislatures ... and there is no calculating on the results which will follow." Inverting a popular argument against African American suffrage, the superintendent contended that all races needed intellectual, moral, and religious training for democracy. The need for this type of education was urgent, as corrupt bossism became an epidemic in northern cities, “Red Republican doctrines” ruined national politics, and “communistic outbreaks” ran down European cities. The same fate did not have to await the South, but Ruffner urged that action could not be delayed. “There must very soon be a virtuous uprising of the people for the purpose of cleansing the temple of our liberties.”76

76 Ibid., 120, 122, 125–28, 127.
However, other ministers interpreted Ruffner’s plan as the true threat to southern political and religious liberties. Opponents quickly pointed out that the places filled with corruption, crime, and irreligion championed public education. In 1868, two years before Ruffner’s appointment as superintendent, Albert Taylor Bledsoe warned of the dangers northern-style public education posed to Christianity’s place within the social structure. Done right, education would “put all the true friends of Christianity upon the same side,” paving over difference and reinforcing a common set of values. Bledsoe focused on Illinois’s system, which removed all mention of religion and moral training in order to prevent sectarian disputes. Under this plan, children’s moral “natures are kept barren,” removing any hope of the pupils becoming proper citizens. Instead, this northern pedagogy trained soldiers, who approached all problems through “war and bloodshed” rather than rational appeals to “moral obligations which attach to obedience in the civil and political relations, and of responsibility to God.” The excesses of Union soldiers stemmed directly from northern secular philosophies of education. The “zeal” for the Republican Party and rampant atheism permeating the North drew from the same source—a corrupt and misguided educational system. As Reconstruction governments included public education in new state constitutions, the classroom came to symbolize the most hated aspects of Yankee rule.77

Regionalism suffused Virginian clergy’s attacks on state-funded public education. Ruffner anticipated that opponents would refer to the presumed rampant crime and

irreligion in the North and conspicuously avoided examples from those systems in his 1871 apologia for the system. Instead, Ruffner described common schools in colonial Virginia, England, ancient Israel, and even China to demonstrate the historical precedent. This sleight of hand had no effect on Dabney, to whom “State primary education” was always by nature a “Yankee system,” a “cunning cheat of Yankee state-craft.” Dabney evidently could not consider the subject of public schools without thinking of an imagined Boston rife with theft and religious heterodoxy or revolutionary France’s bloody social upheaval. Like Bledsoe, Dabney believed that northern degeneracy and ultimately the sectional conflict emanated from public education. The secular system, unable to communicate mollifying principles, instead transmitted godlessness and expectations for social mobility. Yankee education encouraged diversity, allowing “Papists, Unitarians, Chinese, Jews and Atheists” to “have equal rights” in determining the curriculum. For Dabney, southern civilization thrived on its closed society, with rigid hierarchy supporting a stable socioeconomic order and thriving Christian piety. Public education threatened to undo the very things that made Dabney’s South great.78

Dabney and others focused the bulk of their secular objections to Ruffner’s plan on African American education. Equally outspoken, Bennet Puryear, a Baptist professor at Richmond College, issued a series of articles under the penname “Civis.” The second spate of these missives appeared in the Southern Planter and Farmer between December 1875

and May 1876 and examined the effects of African American education in public schools. Together, Dabney and Puryear mounted a formidable challenge to Ruffner’s contention that African Americans could progress morally. Puryear repeated the conventional wisdom of white supremacy, saying, “Inferiority is stamped plainly and indelibly on the negro alike in his intellectual, moral and physical being.” Dabney agreed, finding immorality in Ruffner’s plan, not the condition of the freedpeople. He excoriated the “unrighteousness of expending vast sums ...to give a pretended education to the brats of the black paupers, who are loafing around their plantations.” True education, as moral improvement, could never be forced, hence all state systems were bound to fail. Moral training, Dabney maintained, occurred through “a certain amount of aspiration and desire in its subject,” and, as such, the state could never mandate it. For “the major part of the human family,” white and black alike, the average person developed “the moral virtues by fidelity and endurance with which he performs” manual labor. Plenty of white men proved themselves through this system in Dabney’s estimate. If African Americans were as capable as Ruffner suggested, opponents like Dabney and Puryear insisted they prove their mettle through their providentially ordained subordinate station. Fearing that public schools guaranteed a future of racial “amalgamation,” these critics displayed relentless energy and a frantic hopelessness in their extended attacks on the moral capacity of the freedpeople. For these men, public education represented the final nail in the coffin, which the Union army had made for the Old South.79

79 Civis [Richard Puryear], Public School in its Relations to the Negro (Richmond, 1811), 8; “Bennet Puryear,” William Cathcart, ed., The Baptist Encyclopaedia: A Dictionary of the Doctrines, Ordinances, Usages, Confessions of Faith, Sufferings, Labors, and Successes, and of
Common schools contaminated everything they touched, according to conservatives like Dabney. With a pervasive influence over the lives of every child, education’s contaminants could spread through southern ideas about social hierarchy, family, and religion. It became a theological imperative to expose the peril facing southern Christendom. The war changed nothing when it came to Dabney’s thought. He subscribed fully to the mudsill class theory. All prosperous societies required a large laboring class, which remained rooted to the land and uneducated. Though Dabney placed African Americans at the very bottom of the heap, poor whites also lived lives of drudgery by God’s design and should not hope to advance materially or socially. Public education shattered the divine plan, offering expectations of progress and the accompanying intellectual tools to those unfit to use them responsibly. Dabney’s interpretation of the Bible featured contentment in one’s place and social stability. Scripture “directs the honorable aspiration of the good man to faithful performance of its duties, rather than to ambitious purpose to get out of it and above it.” Public education’s presumption that people should improve was “anti-Christian.” It was this expectation for advancement that fueled the violence of the French Revolution, and the South should expect a comparable scale of vicious upheaval should public education go unchallenged. Dabney also styled working-class people as “moral lepers,” who would spread their contagion to children of more refined sorts if

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educated in the same classrooms. A godless chaos would replace the virtuous decorum of the Old South should Ruffner succeed.\textsuperscript{80}

The religious culture of the South rested on the pillar of the family in this conservative worldview. By taking education out of the hands of mothers and fathers, the state threatened to loose the most basic bond holding society and belief intact. Perhaps the most popular argument against state education, many southerners held that “next to feeding and clothing, the parent must educate his children,” to use the words of Richmond’s \textit{Central Presbyterian}. This pedagogical activity germinated “not only society but also the Church.” The basics of Christian piety and morality grew in each young soul through the example and instruction of parents. Dabney believed that when the state made basic pedagogical decisions, it usurped “powers and rights” that were guaranteed to parents “by the laws of God and nature,” the very opposite activity that should be expected of “a just, free government.” When nation rather than family determined the content of early religious training, the fundamental structure of the relationship between church and state changed.\textsuperscript{81}

This modified political economy under state education promised to set off a chain reaction that would sap the productive energies of the people and undermine Christianity. Puryear published his first set of Civis essays in Virginia’s Baptist newspaper, the \textit{Religious Herald}. In 1875 he contended that the “public school system ... tend[ed] to relax individual

\textsuperscript{80} Dabney, “State Free School System,” 200, 205, 208.

energy by supplying its lack, and to emasculate the energies of a people.” Without control over education, families would steadily give up agency in all aspects of their lives, until they became convinced that government “will feed and clothe them too.” Instead of responsible civic agents, southern children faced a future as irresponsible wards of the public trust.82

More worryingly, the school system, if it were to provide any meaningful education, needed to provide moral training in addition to letters and arithmetic. Dabney minced no words, declaring, “The morality of the citizens is far more essential to the welfare of the State; and the only effectual basis for morals is the Christian religion.” Dabney represented a commonly expressed objection. E. C. Gordon, a Presbyterian minister from Savannah, Georgia, echoed Dabney’s ideas. Gordon wrote, “The general progress of knowledge and mere intellectual training in the case of individuals, when divorced from the constraining influence of active piety, increase and intensify (they do not ameliorate) the evils and miseries incident to human life.” Therefore, the state undertook the role of religious teacher by subverting the efforts of families and churches. Unlike the church, the state was not a voluntary association, and, as such, the diversity of American belief required the religion taught in schools to be a general piety, giving preference to no particular creed. To avoid union of church and state, the curriculum must not include Calvinist or Catholic principles. Dabney could not conceptualize a non-doctrinal faith; only Old School Presbyterianism qualified as worthy of curricular inclusion for this orthodox theologian. This mock religion amounted to irreligion; and when implemented in a curriculum, it

82 Religious Herald, April 1, 1875 qtd. in Rufus B. Spain, At Ease in Zion: Social History of Southern Baptists, 1865–1900 (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1967), 39.
would work to the detriment of moral training, producing “a generation of Atheists.”
Dabney pleaded with Virginians to recognize the clear lesson to be drawn from the
education saga: the church and state had providentially ordained functions. To modify the
definition of any of the basic social institutions was to invite chaos and downfall. 83

Dabney believed in a fully sacred society, one stratified according to divine planning
in which the elements of family, church, and state collaborated in the construction of a
Christian polity. This arrangement was what made the South different from the North and
held the godless modern age at bay. Dabney’s thoughts about public education reveal the
complexity of conservative doctrines of church spirituality. Though strict theology was
often central to his concerns, his arguments in the name of preserving Christianity touched
nearly every aspect of life in the postbellum South. Fellow Presbyterian E. C. Gordon argued
that even discussing public education violated the mission of denominational publications.
Yet, Gordon, Dabney, and others freely criticized the social impact of free schools, in
addition to any strictly moral or doctrinal concerns that fell within the church’s spiritual
nature. Arguments limiting the church’s sphere of activity frequently appeared when they
helped articulate the type of progress conservatives advocated. The urgent need for a
public theology to direct the South toward a future of both Christianity and white
supremacy surpassed notions of theological purity for these religious leaders. In Dabney’s
hands, the spirituality doctrine functioned as a tool in service of a particular vision of

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southern progress and demonstrated that the sphere of religion possessed mutable, permeable boundaries, at best.84

Meanwhile, other Presbyterians, like Ruffner, paid little attention to the doctrine of spirituality. Predetermined limitations to the activities of both church and state never entered into Ruffner’s calculations. Ever the pragmatist, the superintendent’s goal remained Christian moral progress for Virginia. His nonsectarian curriculum operated on an assumption, one Dabney shared, that morality and religion were inseparable facets of southern culture. The success of training literacy and the sciences depended on a solid foundation in Christian principles. A purely secular education seemed as much a contradiction in terms for all sides of the public education debate. United by common understandings of a sacred existence and a desire for southern prosperity, even religious leaders from the same theological tradition battled furiously. Interpretations of scripture and theological orthodoxy mixed with experiences of recent history and visions of the ideal social order in producing educational policy. The resultant theologies of education display the contextual nature of ideas and the futility of efforts to separate sacred and secular, even in the most capable minds.

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Taken together, the widespread discussion of education among southern religious leaders reveals the fragility of bonds tying southerners together after the war. Far from expressing a unified religious vision for society, the South’s Christians struggled to agree. Even single denominations disagreed about the question of implementing educational

84 Gordon, “Divorce of Education and Religion,” 240;
solutions to common perceived moral deficits. Regional and religious unity crumbled as denominationalism and theories of education spurred prolonged debate. Theologies of church spirituality at times successfully crippled church activism, but just as many spurned the notion of a division between sacred and secular as insisted upon isolation from political and social matters. Ideas about race and social hierarchy splintered paths of progress even among white southerners. While some anticipated a New South expectantly, others clung to the last remnants of the Old South, insisting that as little as possible change.

Yet, there was also something clearly positive and uplifting in each contribution to the various education debates. An underlying assumption that Reconstruction-era theologies required an element of praxis was consistently on display. Doctrinal purity did not suffice. Theological principles had to be enacted; messages of hope accompanied diagnoses of doom. And for each religious leader, a fitting type of education existed that bore promise for saving the South from moral torpor. Those ministers setting up roadblocks in the way of objectionable positions also busied themselves charting an alternate course of progress through education. In the midst of conflicting visions, southerners shared the understanding that theology must guide their region forward, leading toward cultural and economic independence that would mark liberation from the lingering wounds of the Civil War.
Chapter Five

“To Become Like The Conquerors:” Economic Theology in the Postwar South

In 1866 Methodist Atticus Greene Haygood, only twenty-seven, took on the role of presiding elder in a western Georgia district. A former Confederate chaplain, Haygood had become used to scenes of destruction. Yet, the images of the devastated and impoverished territories of his new charge burned into his mind, such that even as an old man he recalled the scenes vividly: “Crops failed ... nothing was organized. ... Fences burned, and many houses and homes. Horses and mules were scarce; broken down army stock were counted a treasure. ... There was ... hardly enough poultry to make a new start with. ... The scarcity of money can hardly be exaggerated.” Robert Lewis Dabney, nearly twenty years Haygood’s elder, also bore the brunt of the region’s poverty firsthand, as did many of the South’s established ministers. Though historians often focus on ministers’ treatment of the otherworldly, impoverished southerners needed practical guidance through the remade postwar economic landscape. Enduring and overcoming economic tragedy recurred in postwar religious discourse. As pastors before all else, both Haygood and Dabney used pen and pulpit to make meaning of the South’s impoverished state for their parishioners. The differences in their responses to the pitiable condition of the southern economy signaled deeper rifts in southern religious culture and illustrated the centrality of temporal concerns in Reconstruction-era theologies.¹

A poor young man in a district unable to provide for a preacher might be expected
to despair, but Haygood possessed an indefatigable spirit, which led him to approach
problems directly and positively. A deep faith in progress informed his understanding that
the South’s current trials were temporary. By relying on the strong Christian foundation of
southern culture, he believed, the region could rebound from poverty without developing a
love of lucre, as the North had done. Though a bit more reluctant in his support than his
fellow-Atlantan Henry Grady, Haygood regularly voiced the cry for a New South by 1880. In
a sermon that year entitled “The New South,” Haygood articulated a much-reprinted vision
of southern economic and moral advancement. The clergyman advanced the contentious
claim that the end of slavery marked the beginning, not the end, of the South’s rise to
grandeur. Without slavery around to valorize white lassitude, southern children were
“growing up to believe that idleness is vagabondage.” Trusting in free labor, the South
possessed the proper economic mindset to couple with its long-held religious “controlling
sentiment.” With capitalist striving and Christian morality working together, the southern
people could expect an unmatched regional resurgence.²

When Dabney, on the contrary, looked at the South’s economic problems in 1866, he
urged a distinctly opposite course of action, toward the renewal of a bygone Christian
political economy. By the 1880s he saw that only a restoration of the Old South could
counteract the eclipse of democracy in favor of a new feudalism, governed by “Wall Street”
over Washington. In an 1882 commencement address, Dabney told graduates of Hampden-

Sydney College that the most damaging course of action would be to follow the logic “that the surest way to retrieve your prosperity will be to BECOME LIKE THE CONQUERORS.” At all costs, the northern way to success had to be avoided, by preserving social hierarchy, limiting the expansion of suffrage, and impeding the industrialization of the southern economy. The godless chaos of the French Revolution loomed on the horizon, lest southerners affirm the superior standing of Christian principles to monetary gain.³

When religious leaders like Dabney and Haygood surveyed the postwar world, they perceived economic injustice and worked to explain and remedy southern poverty. Privation represented a common experience for nearly every southerner, and, as such, clergy responded when parishioners asked God why their reality contrasted so starkly with the dreams of Confederate grandeur. When investigating the root of economic suffering, most would have agreed with theologian Gustavo Gutiérrez’s assessment: “poverty is not a fate; it is a condition, not a destiny; an injustice, not a misfortune.” Even if the divine had caused the South’s depressed state, human agency could counteract the burden of paucity, just as continued northern oppression could prolong or worsen matters. Southern religious leaders agreed that poverty was not a marker of a new, postwar southern character, or a shameful replacement for the pride whites felt while enjoying slave labor’s riches.

Yet, beyond this basic agreement that the South remained a place with a special destiny, consensus proved fleeting. Economic diagnoses caused more division than

commonality, separating whites from freedpeople, industrialists from agriculturalists, and urbanites from rural folk. The topic of prosperity challenged denominational cohesion, as ministers debated the ethical import of money and the lack thereof. Some contended that the gain of industrial lucre was not worth the loss of the region’s agrarian soul, while others saw commercial prosperity as the only way to resurrect a moribund Christian culture. Even widespread deprivation could not unite the postwar South.⁴

The ever-presence of poverty mandated consideration of deeper questions about the South’s morality and economy. Determining the authors of the South’s impoverishment led to complicated moral calculations. Was the marauding Yankee to be blamed, or did southern spiritual failings induce a form of divine punishment? Southerners were unsure whether their poverty represented a test of their character issued from above or merely additional evidence of northern depravity. The answer to this question was important, for if the former were true, it meant that their suffering would have a redemptive value. However, if poverty had only earthly origins, the cause of Christ could be in a dire state, as underfunded churches failed to reach out to the needy. Disparity among answers to this basic question led to further dissension concerning solutions for the South’s broken condition. If poverty signaled something fundamentally amiss in southern tradition, then it made sense to change the status quo and adopt an industrial future. On the other hand, if one favored a view toward salvific suffering, to alter the foundations of a sacred society was to court utter disaster. The New South movement, through industrialization and

connection to northern benefactors, could eradicate southern distinctiveness and plunge the area into moral turpitude. The stakes in religious consideration of the postwar economy could not have been higher.

Historians have given only sporadic attention to the economic thought of southern clergy after the Civil War. Poverty appears as a given precondition or a passing thought in histories of Reconstruction. Overcoming a dearth of resources underlies nearly every step of the narrative Daniel W. Stowell creates in *Rebuilding Zion: The Religious Reconstruction of the South, 1863–1877*, but he focuses on the institutional machinations that made church renewal possible rather than the ideas informing the methods used. In Charles Reagan Wilson’s *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865–1920* poverty most often appears, mixed with defeat, as one ingredient in the cocktail that depressed a downtrodden people. Wilson does recognize the connection between postwar poverty and critiques of the New South, but he focuses only on those ministers like Dabney who opposed change. Likewise, Gaines M. Foster depicts religious leaders as steadfast critics of a new industrial order. Beth Barton Schweiger gives passing attention to considerations of the poor and the plague of debt. Studies of southern poverty concern themselves less with ministerial hand wringing than with the actions taken to assist the poor and missed opportunities. However, religion operated as more than a naysayer or bystander in the consideration of economic wellbeing. Clergy both aided and complicated the process of rebuilding by insisting that southerners not forget the spiritual when material wants were most pressing.5

Ministerial forays into the topics of wealth and its absence possessed a long history in the South. While the subject of religion and economics in the postwar era remains relatively unexplored, Kenneth Startup's investigation of the "economic mind of the Old South" shows a deep engagement with matters of money and power among southern clergy. Startup focuses on elite clergy and describes a world in which plenty rather than paucity posed the greatest danger to southern morality and belief. These ministers, often well-off themselves, preached to congregations of wealthy men who used the system of human bondage to stockpile riches. The white South, according to antebellum religious leaders, constantly flirted with forsaking the gospel for mammon. Though this analysis ignores economic diversity in the white South, there is reason to believe, following Walter


In his study of postwar veteran care in Pittsylvania County and Danville, Virginia, Jeffrey W. McClurken tracks church-based relief, analyzing strategies for distributing aid. See McClurken, Take Care of the Living: Reconstructing Confederate Veteran Families in Virginia (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009), 72–98.

Johnson, that the slave system also bound poor and middling whites in an obsession with material gain through the ownership of human bodies. As whites poured their mental and bodily energy into slave-driven agriculture, clergy worried that they might lose track of their soul.6

Many clergymen, slaveholders themselves, expressed no qualms with the human form of southern capital. Rather, they worried that "the commercial spirit, the love of riches, the lust for gain" that underwrote slavery had become an idol for the white South, turning people away from Christian virtues. Planters were becoming venal, proud, and arrogant, preferring ostentation to charity. The culture’s valorization of showy displays convinced some clergymen that white southerners had forgotten how to appreciate the slow process of earning success through one’s own manual labor. Georgia Methodist George Foster Pierce issued one scathing indictment against that “superficial age” that cherished “adventurous speculations of commerce—the abandonment of the former slow process of accumulation—in the wild schemes of men that make haste to be rich.” The world’s “impulse that scorns delay” informed a productive ethos that worked against evangelical ends. A constant fixation on gain left little time for the contemplation of one’s soul.7


7 Startup, Root of All Evil, 13; George Foster Pierce, “Education for Women,” Southern Ladies Book, January 1840, 5–6, qtd. in Startup, Root of All Evil, 36.
None of these clerics argued that wealth *per se* was a bad thing. Their economic critique drew strength from a prophetic conviction that southern wealth could be used, contrary to the examples of history, to serve as the basis of a successful Christian polity. King Cotton instructed an individual acquisitiveness, but it did not have to be that way. Antebellum religious leaders believed, in Startup’s words, that “if southerners could only be made aware of the dangers of materialism and greed, if only a remnant of pious men and women, free from the stain of mammonism, could be preserved,” then the South might yet become a Christian utopia. Instead of sourcing planters with the latest European finery, cotton’s profits might fund Sunday Schools and other educational ventures. With the region’s religiosity secured, southerners could then undertake the evangelization of the world. Though racial and economic hierarchies were rarely questioned, clergy did insist on aid to the unfortunate, but their cries for charity often went unheeded. Benevolence offered a way to help both the recipient and the giver, who would learn the joy of giving and the mutual connection between all southerners. Through steady earning and conscientious giving to evangelical and charitable ends, the South could become a model for other nations seeking to achieve the proper balance between capitalist striving and submission to God.\(^8\)

The Civil War put an end to those dreams. In the words of one South Carolina judge, “Perhaps no people in the history of the world have ever been so suddenly and completely ruined as this Southern people.” By 1865 poverty had supplanted wealth as the dominant economic concern. The groundwork of the southern economy had been destroyed during the fighting, with cities and towns in ruins, farmland churned up in battle and

\(^8\) Startup, *Root of All Evil*, 24, 96, 100.
encampments, rail lines and bridges incapacitated, and—as Megan Kate Nelson points out—sleeves rustling empty in the breeze. Most critically, emancipation meant that the entire labor system would have to be reworked. The Richmond Central Presbyterian summarized the layout well: “The desolating foot-prints of war are still visible. The people have been impoverished; bankruptcy has succeeded the horrors of the sword; commerce has not been restored to its old channels; agriculture has not resumed its former vigor and hope or recovered its former prosperity.” Reconstruction was a time of uncertainty, and the compromised solutions to economic problems left most people impoverished and few people happy.⁹

Yet in the midst of trials, southern hopes were buoyed by a seemingly unshakable faith in progress. Conservatives and progressives alike saw world history as an active process, led forward by a providential God. Even those like Dabney who longed for a world that looked more like the past couched their visions in the language of advancement. Perhaps no one articulated a more thoughtful theory of progress’s workings in world history than South Carolina’s James Warley Miles. Heavily influenced by Hegel’s assessment of the progression of geist in the world, the Episcopalian outlined steady, slow progress characterized by fluctuations in fortune. In 1863 Miles told graduates at the College of Charleston that humanity worked as “an organic whole, possessing one intelligence” and, as such, evolved “through the various stages” that made up “the plan of universal history, the


On the various layers of destruction in the Civil War, see Megan Kate Nelson, Ruin Nation: Destruction and the American Civil War (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2012).
deep current of which Providence has been steadily carrying on.” Though the Civil War destroyed his belief in the perfectibility of humanity, Miles held on to this notion of a progressive world history. In 1874 he reaffirmed his theory that “Humanity neither flows on in a direct, continuous course, like the unbroken stream of a perfectly straight river, nor does it revolve upon itself like a stationary wheel, ever repeating the same cycles.” However, Miles adamantly affirmed that “the evolution of humanity in history proceeds,” doing so “by recurring analogous periods of ascent and descent.” Reconstruction’s difficulties made sense within this conceptualization: “Each ascent has its corresponding apparent retrogression, again rising and descending in parallel and analogous, but not identical revolutions, while the general movement is still onward, is a real progress.”

Other articulations of progress were not as honed and philosophical as Miles’s but nonetheless pervasive and influential. The Baptist newspaper, The Christian Index, described a “law of progress” fueling both global events and Christian theology. “The world never stands still,” a fact that left room for infinite “self-improvement” in human “knowledge and civilization.” The truths of scriptural revelation offered believers anchor points in an ever-changing world. By rooting themselves to God’s truths, Christians could take advantage of riding the winds of change, assured that their souls would be safe in the process. In addition to this sort of practical advise, denominational and educational leaders

incorporated similar beliefs in progress into their mission statements. While struggling to rebuild basic denominational infrastructure, J. B. Jeter affirmed a progressive vision for the future of Baptist missions, stating, “We do not expect all the world to become Baptists in name; but we do anticipate the gradual, steady and successful diffusion of our principles among all Christian sects.” Meanwhile, southern academics in both religious and state schools affirmed the law of progress as well. In the words of historian Dan R. Frost, “southern academics ... created an idea of progress that inspired and supported their activities and policies for creating a New South.” This concept motivated the desire to work against the seemingly impossible odds to rebuild educational institutions during Reconstruction. Working within this progressive worldview, southerners were encouraged to see defeat and deprivation not as tragedies exclusively, but also as possibilities for making the rebuilt South even better than what existed before the war.  

The durability of the progressive mentality faced stern trials throughout Reconstruction. No class escaped the brunt of the war, including elite ministers. Many pastors had to enter the fields or find some other means of providing their families sustenance with churches poorly equipped to provide an adequate living. One Virginia


Beth Barton Schweiger sees progress as the unifying theme in nineteenth-century Virginia evangelicalism. Arguing against the Lost Cause school of interpretation, she maintains that religious leaders’ “vision of spiritual, social, and material improvement was inspired by a faith in progress, and they energetically built their denominations as shrines to the possible, rather than to the past.” See Schweiger, Gospel Working Up, 4 and throughout.
Presbyterian, John S. Grasty, narrated to his denominational colleague Calvin H. Wiley the trials that forced him to leave Virginia for Kentucky:

The surrender of Richmond reduced myself and family from affluence to poverty. My wife and myself were both brought up in pecuniary independence and knew nothing experimentally of those self denials which the poor have to practice. Deep poverty came upon us in a moment. We scarcely had a decent change of raiment for the five little children. There were not blankets enough in the house to keep the family warm during winter. During the war, article after article had been given out to others more needy than ourselves, in the hope that peace would come presently and with it comforts as of old. The cause however was lost, and with impoverishment [sic] of preacher and congregation, the prospect was gloomy indeed. My flock were unable to support the Pastor’s growing family and after many throes it was determined to leave Virginia. About nine months ago the 1st Pres. Church of Shelbyville gave me a call with a salary of between two and three thousand dollars, which was thankfully, but in one sense, sorrowfully accepted, and here we are, exiles from The ‘Fatherland.’” 12

Grasty’s words showcase the bitter emotions that those unacquainted with poverty endured, but for this one Virginian removal from his homeland seemed to eclipse the sorrows of having to do without.

For every tale of misery ministers could spin, white elites could produce one to match. Though many of the former plantocracy regained their position of dominance in the southern economic hierarchy, nearly all underwent a period of deprivation following the war. Wealthy sons had died in battle by the thousands, and investment in Confederate currency had left many families with only debts in their names. A class that defined itself by, in the words of an Augusta, Georgia, newspaper, “one single condition—the ability of the planter to command labor,” became unmoored, lacking direction as well as resources. Emancipation represented the evaporation of elite southerners’ net worth and forced many to redefine their expectations of the good life. As a result, many were filled with an antipathy toward African Americans that replaced the paternalist delusions that made slavery seem a positive good. While planters pushed renewed schemes for black deportation, elite clergy replaced their insistence on biracial Christianity with an obsessive mistrust of the black race. Where the cause of slavery had once inspired a regional mission uniting white churches, now whites found common cause in fears of “mongrelization of our noble Anglo-Saxon race.” Defeat and the experience of poverty turned the white southern elite into a bitter group, full of conscious hate.  


Historians have been debating the makeup of the postwar southern elite for decades, with arguments often vacillating between two poles. C. Vann Woodward argued for radical discontinuity with the antebellum South, marked by the rise of a new, northern elite. See Origins of the New South, 1877–1913 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951), 291–320. Jonathan M. Weiner and Gavin Wright, on the other hand, traced the persistence of prewar planters, as the former lords of labor held on to their power through the
Elites successfully exercised their will in forcing freedpeople and poor whites into peonage, but the wealth of the old days remained a chimera for most. Northern officials imposed Republican notions of free labor on confused or unwilling African Americans, leading them into contracts with their former masters as wage workers or tenants. Meanwhile, poor and middling whites’ ability to eke out a subsistence living collapsed as it became impossible to live without access to cash. Landowners accelerated the process by consolidating their power through actions such as fencing off lands previously open to grazing livestock.

Choices thus limited, poor folks of all races found themselves as one component of the new sharecropping agriculture, in which tenant, merchant, and planter became tied to the cultivation of cotton by ever-deepening debt. One North Carolina minister observed in 1870 that people in his area were “poorer now than they were at the close of war,” due to “the enormous tax laid on” tobacco. Low wages forced poor whites and blacks to leave the state for “cotton plantations, rail-roads and other public works.” Even landowners struggled when their property, valued “before the war at $20 to 30 per acre,” now sold for a paltry “$3 to $8.” Those not lucky enough to own land depended on unpredictable agricultural returns. Religious leaders joined the lament, such as one 1869 article, printed in a Methodist newspaper, that recognized, “The State of affairs, dark enough already, takes a deeper, darker shade from the widespread want threatened by the failure of the corn and ownership of land. See Weiner, Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860–1885 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978) and Gavin Wright, Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy since the Civil War (New York: Harper-Collins, 1986).
other staple crops of the country.” During Reconstruction, poor crops and a constantly fluctuating global cotton market kept most employed in the agricultural economy from success for the remainder of the century. As such, even after postwar rebuilding was complete, poverty persisted as an engrained component of life in the South.14

With so many southerners struggling to make ends meet, religious leaders took it as their task to make meaning of the ordeal of poverty. Though there was no single, agreed-upon explanation, clerical assessments typically fell into two categories: poverty as unmitigated evil and poverty as a hidden benefit. One’s stance depended on the answer to a deeper question: Who was the author of economic conditions? Was southern poverty a matter of providence or a consequence of human dealings? If God were the agent of privation, then surely a positive aim could be found amid the suffering; the failing in this case was one of perception. However, if humans were fully in charge of distributing wealth, cause and effect could be more easily deduced and heroes and villains identified. Or, the human fallibility that led to current travails could simply worsen matters, and a total cultural collapse could occur should the South’s condition be prolonged. Despite these differing explanations of the South’s economic drought, most analyses reached a similar conclusion: the answer to poverty was not a despondent wail but positive action to better the region’s lot. Should southern suffering be a human predicament, then human labor

surely could overcome current obstacles. If God had chosen to make the southern people
do without, then what better way to answer the divine test than through making do with
little and living happily in circumstances that would lead the unchurched who could not see
through the scrim of material reality to utter sadness?

Most ministers agreed that poverty was an unnatural state, bound to produce
depravity without the proper outlook. Methodist Braxton Craven, president of Trinity
College, explicated the scriptural phrase “Man shall not live by bread alone” to mean that
humans were not designed to struggle for mere sustenance like the animals, “gathering raw
food from the field ... and stream.” Rather, God created humanity for a “destiny” of
“systematic labor,” uniting “brain and hand ... with soil.” Strictly intellectual or physical
labor was degrading to the human condition. Rather, the ideal of human work involved
imaginative creativity, the implementation of a plan, and a return from the effort. In
Craven’s words, “Man must have the products of labor or be nothing but a brute, and he
must do his fair part of the labor or be a troublesome dead-head on the journey of life.” For
Craven, work and its rewards were critical components of the human experience, and close
care had to be taken in lean times to avoid an uncivilized future.15

Those who stressed the human agency in economic conditions tended to be
doomsayers. Their pronouncements typically took the form of if, then statements, in which

15 Braxton Craven, “The Labor Problem in Randolph,” [n.d.], Braxton Craven Records and
Papers, University Archives, Duke University.

I have been unable to date this sermon precisely, but the use of the phrase “labor problem”
and the subject matter suggest a date during Reconstruction, since the topics of white and
black work appeared frequently in many contexts in those years.
the if was always continued insolvency, and the then forecasted a variety of calamities. Presbyterian editor Daniel H. Hill demonstrated this logic clearly in his coverage of former Virginia governor and Confederate General Henry A. Wise’s 1866 plea in favor of an orphanage for the children of deceased Confederate veterans delivered at Second Baptist Church in Richmond. Previewing Wise’s emotional delivery, Hill called for “active, practical working” to overcome southern poverty in this one particular instance of the orphanage. After blaming Confederate defeat on the South’s sins, Hill contended, “we will commit a darker, deeper, more deadly sin, if we fail to provide for the children of those who died for our sakes.” Hill continued, urging, “such neglect will most surely bring upon us a heavier and more awful visitation of the wrath of God.” Hill’s framing of Wise’s speech shows a common expectation that poverty had morally detrimental effects, encouraging austerity that only worsened an already bleak situation. Poverty had a tendency to redouble its effects, dragging a society down into yet more suffering.16

The catalogue of other deleterious effects ran long. Wise warned that the financial fears of young men might spell the end of the family. Raising children and satisfying a wife in spare times might be enough to scare some into a bachelor’s life. Wise banished the thought, ordering young men to “repel the impious rebellion against God’s orders” and ensuring them that they had “not only the right to wedlock, but ... [a] duty to love as well as

16 “General Wise’s Address, Delivered at the Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia, January 30th, 1866” Land We Love, 1 (May, 1866), 15.
to labor.” With the poor economy serving as blinders, southerners needed reminders that happiness could be found through means other than the financial.\textsuperscript{17}

Poverty imperiled the South’s place in the newly re-forged Union. Without economic parity, southerners reasoned that they could not expect an egalitarian arrangement with the North on any terms. Gestures such as the national thanksgiving day observed in 1868 carried a different meaning in the South. A Georgia Methodist newspaper opined that southern observation was coerced rather than genuine, as there were few “who ceased from toil, to spend the day in merely worldly pleasures.” The surplus that allowed northerners to celebrate the holiday in its full meaning existed only as a dream for most southerners, who played along not “because they felt under any obligation to obey an injunction from the secular power.” Rather, the hypocrisy of “rulers and officials who are themselves robbers” calling for acknowledgement of divine favor reinforced the importance of “cultivating a sense of dependence” on God alone. As long as politicians’ actions showed them “greedy of gain” rather than sincerely focused on southern prosperity, odes to national unity would only cultivate distrust in the impoverished South.\textsuperscript{18}

The Richmond \textit{Christian Advocate} echoed these concerns, placing part of the blame for the “thousands of laboring people ... now employed only on half time” on an untrustworthy political system: “Politically we have promises made to our ears and broken

\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, 17.

\textsuperscript{18} “National Thanksgivings,” \textit{Southern Christian Advocate}, December 4, 1868.
to our homes.” Poverty served as “a thorn in every heart,” producing a “painful uncertainty” about the individual’s ability to survive and the region’s future. This constant pain intensified feelings of oppression during Reconstruction. Northerners turned a blind eye to southern sufferings. “The South,” the Methodist editor imagined a fictive northerner saying, “has no ground of appeal to our sympathy and our help while she presents herself as she does,” i.e. acting too needy. These high society benefactors chose the “useless glitter of the party and the ball rooms” over deserving causes of the countless numbers of widows and orphans appealing for bread, for shelter, for clothing, [and] for education.” Though the author surely exaggerates the North’s wealth, his accusations represent a real sentiment that the existence of need only reminded southerners of their subordinate place in the nation.19

Many intellectuals, including religious leaders, worried that Reconstruction’s power dynamics placed the South in a position of ideological vulnerability. Southerners devoted endless hours to the cultivation of a regional intellectual life in the antebellum years as well as during the Civil War. However, without the money for students to pay tuition, for colleges to pay professors, for printing presses to roll, the region’s intellectual infrastructure crumbled. Those in the religious press frequently assaulted northern reading materials, especially periodicals that threatened “rationalism and Christlessness” without a southern alternative. Northern printed materials that found their way South only reminded the editor of the Christian Index of “our inability to buy books,” thus reinforcing

feelings of economic inferiority so common during Reconstruction. Methodist Bishop of
Tennessee, Holland McTyeire, offered guidance for those traversing this unfamiliar
intellectual terrain in an 1869 speech at Andrew College in Trenton, Tennessee. McTyeire
witnessed declining admission standards and pedagogical shortcuts taking place in
Tennessee, due to the state’s poor financial condition. In this context, he urged,

Political troubles and material poverty must not breed mental indolence. Sovereign
States may be reduced to military districts; but let not colleges with chartered rights
to confer degrees in the republic of letters, come down to be mere academies. There
is danger here.

Though he was optimistic about educational opportunities taking place even in business
and on the farm, the course of life, through “events, cares, [and] circumstances,” only
trained a few “rugged” minds for greatness. The bishop offered a strong case for a liberal
arts education as the only pedagogy capable of remolding minds and creating the leaders
that the church and region needed to progress. Maintaining the educational distinctions
cherished in flush antebellum times would be difficult but necessary.20

Perhaps expectedly, ministers’ prognostications often spelled doom and gloom of a
religious nature. They worried that religious institutions would be the last to receive aid,
and an indefinite future of neglect waited for missions, educational ventures, and ministers’
salaries. The problem, formulated in its most basic form, was that belief suffered in times of

20 “Plea for the Eclectic,” Central Presbyterian, September 8, 1869; “Northern Periodicals,”
Christian Index, January 28, 1869; Holland Nimmons McTyeire, “Liberal Education for
Young Men: A Plea for the Study of the Classics,” in McTyeire, Passing through the Gates,
and Other Sermons (Nashville: Publishing House of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,
1889), 302
poverty. One religious newspaper saw believers losing their “esprit du corps” when dwelling on “the changes in our economy.” Gabriel Manigault analyzed southern poverty from a long view and cautioned, “All history tells us that there is a close connection between the civilization and prosperity of a people, and their religious condition. We need but look at the degraded churches, and the corrupted faith of the Christian population of the first seat of our religion, and of the nations around it, now the servants of the Turk.” Poverty stood in the way of basic church functions, thus dragging down Christian morale and making the faith susceptible to outside influence. 21

Some religious leaders tried to brush away these dire predictions, redefining poverty as a spiritual rather than material condition. A speaker at the 1868 meeting of the Southern Presbyterian General Assembly tried to offer a different message, stating, “we talk too much of our poverty. We have a poverty we do not talk enough about – our poverty of faith and zeal.”22

However, such attempts to turn material poverty into spiritual gain faltered on the shoals of reality. When ministers were not being paid, Christian progress waited. Most commonly, religious leaders focused on securing a basic livelihood for their profession as a primary goal. Repeatedly, ministers called for minimum standards, not extravagance. In the words of Richmond’s Central Presbyterian, “A poor ministry, is a strong presumption of the purity, and is entirely preferable to an unsanctified one.” But a mendicant class could not


perform the duties of a pastor in a congregation; a “comfortable subsistence” was necessary to keep ministers sated and on task.  

When reasonable pitches did not work, religious leaders resorted to shaming their communities. If supporting a minister was not a priority, then surely there was cause for doubt when it came to the region’s ethical standing. A Baptist minister from Rome, Georgia, attacked the strange presumption that a required donation to ministerial salaries represented an affront to individual free will. Selfish greed stood behind the reasoning of those who “ease their consciences in view of the preacher’s poverty, by the consoling thought, that as the preacher is a man of faith, and a righteous man, God will not forsake him, but will take care of him.” This minister, writing as “C. H. S.,” continued, “Such a man ignores his own experience and outrages common sense and reason, to save his dimes. He would have the preacher do what Christ would not do, when the devil set Him on a pinnacle of the temple, and bid Him cast himself down.” The author traced out the consequences of this attitude, which would produce the end of the ministry and a subsequent rise of “noise, revelry, profanity, and social war.” Unless people freely gave to the ministry, “The laws would lose their hold on the mass of the people. No man could attend to his business in the day; no family rest quietly at night.” The obstinacy toward funding the clergy represented nothing less than “suicide.” Manigault echoed these concerns, linking the decay of religion with poor wages for religious professionals. “Although their calling relates chiefly to man’s interest in another world,” Manigault wrote,

“they must be fed, clothed, and housed in this.” Without an educated clergy, heresy and superstition would flourish, while a once-great civilization crumbled.24

This failure of self-sufficiency was exactly what northern denominations wanted. With morals failing and churches closing, the southern branches might be forced to return to their former colleagues on bended knee, or so cautious southern religious leaders warned. One Presbyterian editor summarized the words of the Philadelphia Presbyterian, which hoped that “our Church was so poor, we would be compelled to go back and draw sustenance from the breast of the Northern Church.” The distinctiveness and purity of southern religion depended on solutions to the crisis in funding.25

Amid all these catastrophic visions, some ministers worked only to provide solace instead of stress. Methodist Bishop William May Wightman offered such consolation, preaching about a Christian joy distinct from worldly happiness. In a sermon on 1 Thessalonians 5:16, the South Carolinian recognized the difficulty in heeding the passage’s words, to “rejoice always.” For the “toiling, burdened, sorrowing myriads of mankind,” the words “‘rejoice evermore’ ... sound[ed] like the refrain ... of some heavenly, far-off music, celebrating the possibilities of angelic condition: sadly out of place amidst the hungry discords, the wild storms of the present life.” The Methodist instructed his audience to observe the difference between joy, dependent upon God’s salvific plan of mercy, and happiness, mere “pleasure derived from outward fortune.” Whereas looking for worldly

24 “To the Deacons of the Baptist Churches in Georgia – No. 5,” Christian Index, April 1, 1869; Manigault, “Decay of Religion in the South,” 209.

25 “A Wise Conclusion,” Central Presbyterian, August 5, 1868.
happiness inevitably disappointed, Christian joy offered daily uplift and hope, that manifestation of the Holy Spirit which sustained the believer through the “cloudy pillar” of life’s troubles.\textsuperscript{26}

In another sermon, Wightman challenged his congregation to view life as “more than meat.” The bishop argued that intellectual and religious ends separated humanity from lower creatures, and, as such, poverty should not be an overwhelming concern. He preached,

The great struggle among men is too apt to be for meat. That is to say, the thoughts, anxieties and activities of mankind are to a large extent, confined to the acquisitions which the necessities of the mere animal department of our nature make desirable. Content with these – with the houses, lands, investments, conveniences which minister to the comfort and gratification of the present, mortal, transitory life, there is a most remarkable disproportion between the activities put forth to secure these, on the one hand, and on the other, the welfare of the spiritual life with the stupendous eternal destinies it implicates.

In a late 1865 Christmas sermon Georgia Episcopalian Stephen Elliott agreed that poverty must not be allowed to defeat the Christian. Instead, believers should always rejoice in the midst of sorrow. They possessed the blessing of Christ, which was “something to relieve the mind from the continued contemplation of trouble.” By adopting a truly Christian outlook,

\textsuperscript{26} “Rejoice Evermore,” August, 1867, William May Wightman Papers, Sandor Teszler Library, Wofford College. Spartanburg, South Carolina.
southerners could “cheer” the “humble abode of poverty” each day, realizing that they were victors on a deeper plane.\(^\text{27}\)

Then there were those who saw the southern economy as a sign of divine intentions, a test of God’s chosen region and the mettle of its inhabitants. Just as God had caused Confederate defeat for southern shortcomings, so did the torment of the faithful continue after the war. Again, General Henry Wise’s 1866 speech in support of establishing an orphanage exemplifies this logic. Wise told the Richmond crowd, “The Father of us all, in his economy of grace, has set poverty, the orphans of the poor, before us in the world, like many other trials, to prove our virtue and to test our obedience.” The logic of the trial was simple but not necessarily reassuring. While adequate performance did not guarantee rescue from hardship, ignoring God’s demands surely led to more suffering. “If you leave them to stumble for want,” Wise warned, “you shall be left to the canker and corrosion of selfishness and the greed of gold, which will be worse than having a mill-stone about the neck and being thrown into the sea!”\(^\text{28}\)

Georgia’s Stephen Elliott also described a divinely sourced poverty. In an 1866 sermon to commemorate a state-appointed fast day, Elliott preached, “When Dearth, and


Although the first sermon cited above is undated, there is good reason to believe it was written and delivered during Reconstruction. The bulk of Wightman’s preserved manuscript sermons come from the late 1860s and 1870s, and the paper used was the same type as manuscripts clearly dated in the 1870s.

\(^{28}\)“General Wise’s Address,” *Land We Love*, 18.
Famine, and Poverty, and Disease are concerned, man has to contend with a higher Power than his fellow-man, [and] is being chastised by a rod which a fellow-mortal's hand is not permitted to wield.” The Episcopal bishop continued, “Our controversy, therefore, my beloved people, is with God, and not with man: for it is He who has frowned upon our labor, and who has permitted our atmosphere to be laden with disease.” Elliott challenged his hearers to think beyond feelings of “bitterness and uncharitableness” for “God's human instruments,” the conquering Yankees. Continued hatred of the enemy only valorized “unforgiving.” Christians should know better than to trust base instincts; rather, banishing vicious thoughts, in imitation of Christ, befitted religious southerners. Elliott asked his audience, “can you suppose that God will permit His children ... to indulge such feelings without inflicting further chastisement upon them?” The bishop argued that southerners’ most difficult task lay before them: forgiving their enemy and oppressor. Otherwise, they did not merit God's favor.  

Divine punishment was by no means a wholly negative phenomenon. Suffering only showed the continued love of God, as a punishing father. Elliott continued his 1866 sermon, reminding,

It is better to be chastened, than to be let alone. It is better that your land should be smitten with blasting and mildew; that the palmer worm should destroy your gardens, and your vineyards, and your fig-trees, and your olive-trees; better that the pestilence should come among you; better that your young men should be slain with

the sword: than that you should hear the awful words, ‘Ephraim is joined to idols: let him alone.’

Deprivation could be purifying when approached with the proper mindset, Elliott maintained. “Humiliation is good for us when it comes upon us from God’s wisdom and God’s rod. It is evil, only when we bring it upon ourselves through fear of man, or through our own foolishness, or through looking at consequences when we should be looking at duty.” The South’s pitiable state represented God’s fitting punishment for a self-centered region, consisting of just enough hardship to reset this Christian region’s course. 30

South Carolina Baptist Richard Furman agreed that poverty must not necessarily be seen as an evil condition. The Charlestonian delivered a sermon in which he spoke of “the trial of affliction” placing southern Christians in the role of “pilgrims and strangers upon earth.” To be poor was the lot of the lot of the “Southern Churches,” who, like “the Churches of Macedonia” mentioned in 2 Corinthians 8, found abundant joy within poverty. To live happily with little was to pass the test. As the ancient Christians’ “works shone with a conspicuous luster” when surrounded by contrasting riches, so too did southern perseverance “proclaim the abounding wealth of their faith and love” in contradistinction to the showy practice of others, i.e. northerners. In 1866 Presbyterian George Howe also instructed his congregation to be content in the “day of small things,” referencing Zechariah 4:6. The Israelites of the Bible also suffered “the desolations of war,” but they found the strength to see all things, including misery and dislocation, as providential developments.

30 Elliott, Sermons, 507.
The South Carolina pastor encouraged his congregation to remember that “we must have observed that things and events inconsiderable in our esteem, are often the beginnings of the mightiest achievements.” Howe described a martyr’s mentality, using Polycarp, Ignatius, and Thomas Cranmer as examples for the South to emulate. After running through a catalogue of southern destruction, Howe called for an identification with suffering, which would motivate progressive action to regain the antebellum position of the South and “the extension of His kingdom through the wide earth.”

Many other ministers insisted on seeing poverty as a sort of blessing, hoping that a redefined understanding of the region’s troubles could provide a source of unity and hope. Writing under the pen name of “Poindexter,” a Virginia Baptist reflected that with the impact of the Civil War, “God had taught many of the people a lesson. There were many who in the days of their wealth would not give more than a small pittance but now in the days of their poverty their hearts were miraculously opened.” Southerners of all classes now stood “side by side fighting in the great cause of Christianity,” thanks to the experience of loss.

As southerners shared stories of loss and overcoming, the book of Job rang true, the protagonist’s tale of divinely sourced neglect and triumph striking a familiar tone. William Swann Plumer included an entire chapter in his 1867 treatise on Providence’s continued

31 Charleston Baptist Association, Minutes, 1867, 33, Special Collections and Archives, Furman University, Greenville, S.C.; “Day of Small Things,” Central Presbyterian, November 28, 1866.

activity, *Jehovah-jireh*. The Presbyterian asserted that the story was both real and applicable. Introducing the chapter, he wrote, “Some have surmised that Job was a fictitious character; but this is surely a mistake.” Job’s life offered “lessons of much value” that showed “the duty to be performed” and “[awakened] in the virtuous the desire of imitation.” Plumer went on to narrate Job’s successful life and subsequent loss, judging that he had “no sensible religious comfort.” His faith lay in something deeper than the ephemeral present. Plumer encouraged his readers to reflect on Job’s story and realize that “God generally chooses the poor as his children,” while also offering an almost second-class “mercy to the rich.” That basic fact should comfort the believer, who might otherwise be tempted to enter “a labyrinth of reasoning concerning God, his character and providence.”

God should be feared, respected, and understood as best as possible, but the story of Job offered an example of God’s mysterious treatment of God’s beloved. Religious leaders advised Christians to “trust God in the dark,” as one article in the *Southern Christian Advocate* put it. Bishop Wightman used Job to illustrate the virtue of patience, which “brings strength for the calm endurance of all evils.” Job’s forbearance illustrated the Christian character, in its stance “opposite to malign tempers and passions.” Christians, like all humans, must expect to experience tribulation; what made them distinct was “the quelling of all such dissatisfaction” and “abiding quietly in our lot.” Citations of Job all worked toward the purpose of cultivating the power to confront tragedy and live in the liminal space of overcoming grief and deprivation.33

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Drawing support from Scripture, southerners incorporated poverty into their collective identity. Biographies of church heavyweights became a popular genre in the postbellum years, and tales of tough upbringings often marked the starting point of a virtuous life. Benjamin Morgan Palmer’s life of James Henley Thornwell exemplifies this pattern. Thornwell provided intellectual leadership for the southern branch of the Presbyterian Old School before the Civil War, and his status as an example for the conservative Reformed life only rose as the nineteenth century progressed. According to Palmer, an early life deprived of finer things posed a danger to the formation of the intellect. “The worst evil of poverty,” he wrote, “is ... the complete engrossment of the mind upon petty and consuming cares, where the exactions of toil yield only to the weariness which buries all in sleep. It is the constant repression of the affections, which have no time for play, and the consequent blunting of the sensibilities.” Thornwell suffered this fate, stepping straight “from the nursery into the workshop,” and skipping boyhood. Though tragic, this stage of Thornwell’s upbringing resulted in a personality reared in hard work, which formed the basis of his intellectual drive in later years.34

Fellow Presbyterian Moses Drury Hoge agreed that poverty ought to be a cherished experience. Speaking at the dedication of Stonewall Jackson’s memorial in Richmond, Hoge


lauded southerners’ “dignity in the midst of poverty and reverses, their heroic resignation to what they could not avert.” These qualities “have shown that subjugation itself could not conquer true greatness of the soul.” Religious leaders agreed with John Warwick Daniel that “Hardship and poverty and emergency produce exertion; exertion generates strength; strength conquers.” These ministers assured southern Christians that poverty ought to be looked at as a refining process making the South better in the end.35

Of course, the desperate poverty besetting the South did not persist in every area. Eventually, economies emerged or resurrected, bringing success to a few. Even those who supported changes to the southern economic status quo approached any newfound wealth with a degree of trepidation. The insistence that southern poverty might come from a higher power produced a reticence to trade paucity for plenty. The meaning of wealth came under scrutiny equal to the investigation of poverty. Southern religious leaders’ pronouncements rang an uncertain tone when it came to wealth and its trappings. The subjects of wealth and poverty naturally led into a host of associated concerns about the southern way of life and economic changes. Most pressingly, ministers reflected on the relationship between wealth and the gospel, wondering if it were possible to be both well-positioned and Christian at the same time. Having adopted a mentality of embattled, righteous poverty, southerners had more difficulty processing any slight uptick in their fortune than might otherwise be expected. Religious leaders wondered if there were any

way to maintain a sense of divine chooseness, if God’s favor were understood to be with the poor, first and foremost. While most historians’ analyses of opposition to the New South movement focus primarily on the anti-Yankee regionalism in southern critiques, meaningful theological considerations took place on both sides of the debate. The widespread support for a liberationist understanding of the white Christian South’s postwar plight meant that the consideration of economic issues maintained a central place in southern theologies. Would a more stable, diversified economy make the South look like the imperialist North? Could wealth and the growth of the faith coexist? White southern believers wondered together, even as their conclusions drove them apart.

This complex arrangement of economic topics drove many to think about the meaning of wealth itself. What did it mean to have, when so many did not? Some picked up where Kenneth Startup argues that antebellum ministers left off—distrusting all wealth as a sign of misplaced priorities. An 1869 column in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* asserted that hubris prompted material gains. “We lay up all that we can ‘by foul means or by fair,’ and call it and regard it as wholly our own,” this anonymous writer contested. Southerners erred in “the want of entire consecration to God of all that we are and all that we have” and threatened to undermine religion in their lust for gain if this attitude were not reversed. One Methodist looked to the past to explicate current problems and found Francis Asbury a helpful mentor. Asbury’s system of ministerial rotation and meager payment represented the bishop’s fundamental assumption—in an 1866 article—that “wealth and spirituality” were “incompatibles in the Church of Christ.” This writer actively
hoped to maintain the South’s impoverished state, saying “We can answer for our poverty, possibly; but for all that wealth—let us pray God to lead us into temptation no more.”

Sectional and denominational differences were bridged in the name of critiquing wealth, as the *Southern Christian Advocate*’s decision to reprint a sermon from the pastor of New York’s Trinity Baptist church shows. This preacher, J. Sanford Holme, argued against the upsurge in charitable giving to ask, “How many pious people grow more pious as they grow more rich?” The answer was clear: “Very few.” Holme advanced the maxim “that men grow more pious as their wealth wastes away, and less pious as money is added to money and their store of worldly goods increases.” The wealthy gave to charity from a sense of selfishness not devotion to gospel principles, as “riches alienate the heart from God.” By 1873, this fear still lingered, as one religious editor located the “greed of money” as a “passion ... common perhaps to all people.” However, he continued, “Americans seem to be pre-eminent in their devotion to it, and certainly furnish the world with the most brazen-fronted exhibitions of its debasing influence,” found “in the high places of the land” and “permeating with its pestilent influence all grades of society.” A South Carolina Baptist newspaper warned readers in 1869 not to dive into the “dead sea” into which God had cast southern wealth during the war, for it was sure to be a “fatal dive.” A religious moderation offered the only antidote to this scourge.

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Another party adopted a more malleable approach to the times, offering a conditional support for economic growth. Working against the early Reconstruction gospel of poverty, these ministers posited that wealth, properly understood, would not be a detriment to society. According to Presbyterian minister William Archer Cocke, balancing wealth with morality was possible, albeit tricky business. He wrote in 1871,

The industry and the wealth of a nation constitute the great forces which impel it along the highway of civilization; but along this pathway lies an awful gulf, into which experience teaches us, every nation that has fallen has been precipitated by the abuse of wealth, misapplied knowledge, and a disregard of the laws of God; and nothing but an energetic and sustained effort against the natural tendency of man to wickedness can restrain this proclivity of nations to ruin.

The surest way to avoid these pitfalls was to value religious ends most highly in the use of one’s wealth. Religious newspapers appealed to those with spare funds to support the church in spare times. Even the middling poor were expected to invest with religious intent, to show that “God’s spirit” was active in their lives. By centering their lives fully in the church, southerners might chart a new course through the history of civilization, in which money was adequately prioritized.38

Cornelius Vanderbilt served as a model of the wealthy Christian life for southern Methodists. The railroad tycoon’s generous investment of $1,000,000 in the school in

Nashville that came to bear his name represented an ideal use of great riches. Rather than hoarding, Vanderbilt laid out the foundation for the solidification and expansion of both the southern economy and Methodist evangelism in the new school. In particular, Methodist bishop Holland N. McTyeire cast Vanderbilt as a model businessman and savior figure. Narrating the history of American Methodism, the Tennessee cleric depicted Vanderbilt’s intervention as the breakthrough in partisan rancor and endless debate that the denomination required. The need for and location of a denominational university added to tensions existing between conservatives and progressives within the church, but the injection of money solved those problems and improved the overall condition of southern Methodism, in McTyeire’s telling. Educational success was once deemed an “impossibility” in the South, where it “prospered greatly in the other branch of Episcopal Methodism.” However, Vanderbilt and other smaller donors broke through the morass and enabled southern Christians to take equal footing with their northern counterparts.39

The religious impact of Vanderbilt’s donations proved the merits of both his character and the thoughtful use of money. In a sermon delivered at the Commodore’s funeral in 1877, McTyeire proclaimed, "It is not money, but the love of it, that is the root of all evil. It is not wealth, but covetousness, that narrows and destroys." In fact, the bishop asserted, “There is no reason to envy the rich on account of personal luxuries; but it might almost be condoned if one should covet their rare power of ’doing good.’” McTyeire continued this point, claiming that the wealthy “are the real savings banks of their race, gathering and conserving what otherwise would be wasted.” Vanderbilt proved to the

Methodist bishop without equivocation that “the talent of certain men is to make money” and then use that money to improve society.\(^{40}\)

However, southerners navigating an uncertain economic world needed guidance when considering how to use money to advance the concerns of self and community. Religious leaders more frequently articulated the morality of wealth through practical advice than by offering reflections on the meaning of wealth \textit{per se}. Having established an identity as the righteous poor, southerners struggled with understanding the possibility of advancement. Should the poor strive to end poverty? If so, to what extent should they devote their efforts to making money?

Church leaders worried that the postwar assumption of poverty along with the legacy of slavery tamped southern willingness to work. Virginia’s superintendent of public schools and erstwhile minister William H. Ruffner voiced a common sentiment, declaring, “the prosperity of every community is dependent upon the character of its labor.” Southerners could agree that laborers should be contented to work hard, but former slaveholders refused to enter that class, preferring to “die and go to hell” before picking up shovel or plow. Religious leaders and New South boosters worked to counteract this reticence to work. During the Panic of 1873, the \textit{Central Presbyterian} listed the virtues of the southern believer, including that one should strive to be “honest, pure, intelligent, active, industrious, obedient, steady, obliging, polite, and neat.” God cared for the hard worker but not for the “lazy, slothful, and sinful.” A Baptist newspaper suggested that “work is also good for the soul.” While people are naturally anxious and hasty, a life of toil

inculcates the values of moving "slowly toward the ends we wish to attain." As the farmer is subject to the seasons, so the laborer learns to submit to God’s control. While productive, work also teaches the human that the mortal life is one of weakness. As such, manual labor achieved economic and religious ends simultaneously.41

Southern believers worked to valorize hard work in an elite culture that still viewed toil as the task of slaves and a punishment. Margaret J. Preston, daughter of a Presbyterian minister, penned an ode to the value of hard work, entitled “The Gospel of Labor.” This 1871 poem encouraged putting away sadness, its author advocating, “I would hide now with garments of gladness/The sackcloth and ashes of war.” The way to get over the damages of the past was through hard work. “The hopes that we buried with Lee” ought to be applied to a reinvigoration of the southern work ethic: “Take heed to the Gospel of Labor/ ... / Put hands to the plough of endeavor; / Plant foot in the deep-furrowed track; Set face to the future, and never / One wavering moment look back.” Children in Sunday Schools learned to sing about labor as a normal routine. Children in a Mobile Baptist church rang out the refrain, “Work for the night is coming, / under the sunset skies ... work, for the daylight flies.” The simple pleasures of life, such as a peaceful evening, were made all the

more enjoyable when balanced against the work of the day. The new southern prophets of labor used all accessible venues to spread their gospel.\(^\text{42}\)

Perhaps even Confederate defeat had been a blessing, in the sense that it led an extravagant people back to basic values, work being chief among them. Daniel H. Hill spun a providential narrative, writing in 1866, ““We needed to have manual labor made honorable. And here a kind Providence has brought good out of evil. The best, the purest, the most unselfish, the most patriotic of our people are now the poorest.” The progress of manual labor marked the divine favor still present in the land. Hill continued,

Those who had no better sense than to despise [labor], have learned to respect it for his sake. It has become the badge of manhood, patriotism, and unselfishness. \textit{God is now honoring manual labor with us as he has never done with any other nation.} It is the high-born, the cultivated, the intelligent, the brave, the generous, who are now constrained to work with their own hands. Labor is thus associated in our mind with all that is honorable in birth, refined in manners, bright in intellect, manly in character and magnanimous in soul.”\(^\text{43}\)

As mentioned in the introduction to this essay, Atticus Haygood extended the theme of a providentially designed defeat to include an indictment of the past. Slavery, the Methodist bishop, editor, and college president declared, held back southern


\(^{43}\) “Education,” \textit{Land We Love}, 1 (May, 1866), 10.
industriousness, limiting the region’s potential rather than capitalizing on an ideal economic arrangement. Though a radical opinion, Haygood was thoroughly moderate when it came to race. He founded his arguments on the racial assumptions of the times, including the continuation of the antebellum trope that held slavery to be a regional burden more akin to parentage than brutal mastery. Rather than a revolutionary egalitarianism, Haygood’s arguments advanced a case for work as a Christian and southern priority, regardless of race. He championed labor of all as a means of regional progress. The system of convict labor that arose as a replacement for slavery actually marked an improvement because it confined lesser sorts to unskilled labor, leaving the trades in the hands of specialists. Convict labor supported the dignity of the artisan: “It was always wrong to insult honest mechanics by teaching convicts their trades,” again framing his case in terms of the integrity of labor. In 1881, Haygood put forward a similar argument, although this time couched in terms of racial empathy if not equality. His Our Brother in Black contended, in part, that “many negroes are fitted to be land-owners.” Through the benefit of self-improvement and hard work a class of African Americans might arise to instill similar moral standards and work ethic in the entire race, as “the land-owning negro is the sworn foe of ‘tramps.” The removal of slavery and the rarity of money in the South became positive developments through Haygood’s valorization of work. A New South could arise, only because it would be home to laboring classes of all races dedicated to improving their station in life.44

44 Haygood, The New South, 10; Haygood, qtd. in Mann, Atticus Greene Haygood, 127; 210, Haygood, Our Brother in Black: His Freedom and His Future (New York, 1881), 210, 216.
While work came off as an unmitigated good, striving too hard for money roundly met disapproval. In particular, debt emerged as a sinful structure, chaining the poor to full subservience to material ends. As cycles of debt became entrenched features of the postbellum economy, considerations of the topic took on an urgent salience. Debt was “a loathsome, creeping, poisonous serpent ... insinuating itself into thousands of homes, otherwise pure and happy, and leaving its slime on everything that is eaten, worn or used in them.” The greed of politicians and businessmen appeared as a bogeyman in the southern economic landscape, and laboring people faced increasing impoverishment because of the acquisitive policies of the powerful. The mechanisms by which the wealthy maintained their hegemony, according to a 1883 editorial by Richmond’s J. J. Lafferty, were “no question of party politics, no question of North and South ... but a question vital and profound of morals and religion.” An Atlanta minister echoed these sentiments, claiming that Methodists “are forbidden to borrow or lend money at unlawful interest” by church discipline.45

Still, within even unfair loan contracts, the Christian must operate with fidelity to the agreement. Failure to pay represented a slight against the fabric of society; it was unchristian to “impair the obligation of contracts.” Thus, when the state of Georgia enacted relief laws, the Southern Christian Advocate cried out in opposition. The paper clearly supported poor debtors in their trouble, but they fought “against that modern heresy which teaches that whatever is legal is right.” These economic entanglements endangered the

bedrock of virtue and respectability, and churchmen reminded the poor of the difficult truth, “no earthly courts can absolve man from the moral obligation to pay a just debt.”

Just as discussions of economic matters led from abstract to practical concerns, talk of money spiraled into many of the most pressing issues of the postwar era. Concurrent changes to southern demography and social norms drew critical attention from religious leaders. As the agrarian order’s faults came to seem intractable, urban areas were able to tap into a nascent industrialism, emanating from the North. Atlanta, Nashville, and Richmond became at once centers of southern cultural production, with rebuilt printing presses humming once again, and places that hardly resembled the countryside. The emergence of economic opportunity in unfamiliar venues polarized southern opinion. One party had no qualms with the emergence of a New South in which cities served as the centers of a diversified, industrial economy and home to a well-to-do elite. For these people, the defeat of poverty was more important than the preservation of an agrarian tradition. They articulated visions of social, economic, and religious progress, looking forward to a better day rather than dwelling in the past. Another, arguably more vocal, party stood upon antebellum principles and called for a restoration of the Christian polity they located in memories of the Old South. Led by conservative stalwarts like Dabney and Albert Taylor Bledsoe, these religious leaders lionized the rural life and the attendant virtues of agricultural labor. An urbanized path to profit carried more pitfalls than promise, these restorationists warned. While the former group looked for any way to effect

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southern economic liberation, the latter insisted that an industrial future would only trade economic oppression for subservience to the idol of mammon.

The rise of prominent urban churches caused much consternation for the rurally minded religious leaders. City believers developed a sense of superiority to their country brethren and preferred finery to heartfelt piety, or so the logic went. If the changes in northern churches were any indication of what might happen in the South, then these critics had cause for concern. As historian Jeanne Halgren Kilde describes, the postwar decades saw wealthier churches removing themselves from the urban poor, not to mention the needy in surrounding areas. Northern churches moved from city centers, away from the poor, and worked to satisfy middle class aesthetic desires before seeing to the welfare of the church, writ large. In Kilde’s words, church “became theatre.” In the South, religious leaders quickly pointed out dangerous trends leading toward ostentation over sincere piety. One 1873 observer recalled the scenes from a baptism at First Baptist Church in Richmond:

There is a great multitude of people looking from illuminated pews and galleries, the organ, the choir, the receding stage moving away to disclose the baptizing, the little steps winding down into water, the minister in his gutta percha,\(^47\) and the maidens in white robes, and the young men in their peculiar costume, descending from mysterious little rooms on either side, under a certain ‘dim religious,’ or dramatic light, it is hard for me to see the cross.

\(^47\) A fashionable, imported material used in making baptismal garments.
The end result was a cheapening of the sacrament. In this visitor’s eyes, “the scenic effect of immersion” exerted a causal influence on “the willingness to be thus baptized, upon other grounds than an extraordinary spirit of self-denial.” In other words, display came before sincerity in this urban environment.48

However, religious leaders more commonly asserted that city churches had the unique capability to do tremendous good, should the temptation toward social display be spurned in favor of concern for the church’s advancement. “S.G.H.,” writing in the Christian Index, reminded city churches of their responsibilities in 1869, pointing out that “our country churches ... have become comparatively feeble, while the churches of our large towns and cities are generally stronger.” Urban congregations’ “superior influence” meant that they represented the front line in confrontations with a changing world. “Country churches imitate city churches,” so as the urban went, the rural thus followed. In light of new “heresies,” the newspaper editor reflected, “Our city churches, and their pastors, must be bulwarks of our faith in this day of trial.” Additionally, their “wealth, intelligence, and high social position,” must be used to provide positive “influences over the length and breadth of our Zion,” i.e. the South. Prosperity and high culture were only enemies to the cause of religion if they became subservient to “amusements” and vanity. A Virginia Presbyterian investigated the churches of Richmond in 1873 to test out the “common charges” that religion was “made too expensive,” “the Gospel [was] not being preached to the poor,” and that preachers turned away strangers. The author’s verdict unequivocally

held that the “charges were unfounded.” To be sure, wealth bought prime positions in the urban churches under study, but the poor and visiting had consistent access to the sanctuary. Beautiful churches only motivated the poor and middling, according to this observer, who pointed out that “the poor, when they become rich, the first thing they do is to erect a costlier house of worship.” Vibrant, prosperous churches only showcased the extent of religion’s progress and helped to pull the region’s churches up by their own bootstraps.

Denominational leaders considered the merits of cities as homes for seminaries. A. T. Spalding of Louisville, Kentucky, was one proponent of the move away from isolated, rural campuses. His rationale was simple: the wealth and population density of cities would better support a larger number of poor ministerial trainees. The Baptist urged, “Plant our Theological Schools in our cities; bring the young men in contact with pastors whose hands are overburdened with pastoral duty... ; and teach them how to look out upon the masses around them ... ; and then the demand of churches for Pastors will be more nearly met.” The Baptist seminary at Mercer College in the town of Macon, Georgia, would thrive if moved to Atlanta. In a series of articles debating the Mercer move in particular and the proper setting for seminary training in general, most voices sided with urban relocation. However, urban distractions went duly noted. G. F. Williams of Mobile offered the clear observation that cities are a poor place for “six full days of unabated intellectual effort upon studies of the school’s curriculum, and six full days’ regular attendance at the recitation room!” The dual

49 “The Responsibility of City Churches,” Christian Index, April 1, 1869; “Observations of an Outsider,” Central Presbyterian, February 26, 1873.
benefit of money and opportunity for ministerial experience also influenced the Methodist placement of Vanderbilt University in Nashville.\textsuperscript{50}

Despite the benefits of urban growth, both possible and realized, southern clergy also urged caution about the transition from rural life. Noticing the stream of young men fleeing the country and “crowding into cities,” the editor of the \textit{Central Presbyterian} urged poor would-be migrants to exercise patience before making such a rash decision. Life in the country was “safe, healthful, and useful,” while all opportunities in the city were “speculative chances.” The chance of economic success in the towns and cities was by no means a certainty. The Richmond-based writer noted, “The double drain of the young and active, as well as the old and wealthy,” both of whom sold off what they had in order to move on, “is hurtful to the moral tone, as well as to the material power of the agricultural interest.” He called for greater intellectual effort to train smart farmers and improve the reputation of agrarian life, lest prosperity become valued above all other things in America. “Our chief wealth is in our lands,” and economic doom would be the consequence of forgetting this foundational truth.\textsuperscript{51}

Most importantly, southerners believed that economic choices had social consequences, and the direction of society would determine the fate of religion and

morality in the region. For Atticus Haygood and other champions of industry, changing the southern economic base would only improve regional character. Again, the Georgian blamed slavery for southern backwardness in “manufactures,” claiming that an influx of capital would bring a welcome help in cultivating desirable “traits of character.” The source of that capital did not matter; northern money spent the same as southern. Others agreed that even modest industrial success spoke more to southern ingenuity than to northern profit-motive. John Warwick Daniel lauded the southern “genius” that “burst forth in exploits of mechanical invention and economical skill not less splendid than her feats of arms.” Likewise, Benjamin Morgan Palmer explained that the southern “elasticity of character” promised that industry would limit the materialism that plagued industrialization in other regions and keep the region’s “social fabric” intact. As new “forms of industry” set up, “the usages and habits which formed around the old state of things, should gracefully yield to those which necessity enforces in the new.” In fact, the challenges of a new industrial order would promote reflection on individual values and new ideas. The Presbyterian trusted that pious southerners would only gain an appreciation of the individual’s duty “to contribute his quota to a public sentiment.” This public-mindedness and piety represented the bulwark against “steep declension into moral decay and death.”

Ministers regularly appeared at dedication ceremonies for new factories and railways, underscoring the connection southerners made between economic and religious

activities. Richmond Presbyterian Moses Drury Hoge opened the dedication of the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad in 1873 by asking for the divine blessing “upon all associations representing those industrial pursuits and mechanical arts upon which our prosperity so much depends.” Braxton Craven appeared at a similar ceremony for a cotton mill in Concord, North Carolina, in 1882. Comparing the factory to a Christian offering, the Methodist proclaimed, “‘This great factory is to be controlled by religious principle, the smoke from the chimney is to be daily incense to God, and the roar of the machinery will be work’s anthem’s (sic) to the Lord.” Business development was an essential Christian principle in his observation: “Christianity spreads most rapidly and takes deepest root where there is property and business prosperity. These great sources are reciprocal – beneficial and mutually cooperative.” Industrial development and proper use of wealth represented “the highest human development.” Society’s moral health would only improve under the new economy.53

However, there was not harmony concerning the new industrial order. Conservative critics urged caution concerning the New South status quo, fearing that movement too far in the direction of urbanization and industrialization would undermine the southern character. Typically an arch-conservative, Albert Taylor Bledsoe was comparatively moderate when it came to economic issues. In the pages of his Southern Review, which became affiliated with the Methodist church in 1870, he charted a course for a mixed southern economy. Agriculture should not be forgotten in the pro-industrial fuss. In one

53 Peyton Harrison Hoge, Moses Drury Hoge, 505; Braxton Craven, “Dedication of a Cotton Factory at Concord, NC, 1882,” Braxton Craven Records and Papers, University Archives, Duke University.
1879 article, the *Review* reminded readers that “the tobacco industry, like the plant, is a hardy, tough one,” but needed protection from heavy taxes to survive. Another article put forward a case that the North as well as England depended on the fortune of southern cotton. The tone was one of reconciliation rather than boasting, though. Improved southern agriculture offered a means of preserving tradition and an opportunity for all regions of the United States to “lay aside every feeling of animosity or ill-will, and unite their gigantic efforts to rebuild, and establish on a permanent basis, the fortunes of the New World.” To value agricultural tradition was not to disavow industry entirely, though. Bledsoe traced economic failures in European polities like Spain and Italy to an “opposition to progress” which “paralyzed their industry.” Supporting economic development offered the South an alternative path, which would also provide moral growth along the way. Bledsoe proposed “that a high standard of character and manners can be best maintained by the fruits of a permanent and adequate investment of capital.” Not only would values benefit, but “industry and investment” represented a means of political liberation, which still had not been achieved in 1879 despite the formal end of Reconstruction. Industrial interests could unite South and West, creating a powerful bloc in the national legislature. Thereby, “political honor” could be restored.\(^{54}\)

Bledsoe was equally vocal in his denunciations of the evils that industrialization could bring to the South. A conservative critical strand drew on a long tradition of southern thought about the nature of society and the individual’s place therein to warn that the New

South moved toward a socioeconomic arrangement that would collapse traditional individualism in favor of collective advancement. Bledsoe explained in 1869 that “acting in masses, or with masses” bred “the habit of political expediency.” When “principles are continually yielded to the will of others,” they “lose their value and sacredness.” Crowding into cities and into factories encouraged group-think rather than individual expression. Believing that “individuality is the nursery of all virtue, and of all greatness among men,” Bledsoe abhorred trends that destroyed agrarian individuality in favor of urban imitative passivity. The presence of cities in the South did not destroy this vaunted self-reliance; it was part of the southern character, which bore “fewer of the virtues of modern society.” As such, even southern urbanites maintained a balanced sense of priorities and ethics, but that balance could change if southerners should succumb to extensive imitation of the North.\(^{55}\)

Robert Lewis Dabney, Bledsoe’s bitter theological rival, joined in the assault against the corporatizing trends of the New South. As early as 1866 Dabney theorized that charitable efforts to alleviate southern poverty would undermine the region’s Christian individuality. The Virginian looked to the French Revolution to sketch a model of how charity worked in application. Though humans could dream up ideal ends, only God could determine the outcome of worldly events. Thus, the Jacobins served for Dabney as a prime example of human striving gone awry. As products of the fall, humans were incapable of impartial good. Every philanthropist possessed an “imperfect heart,” which was “never wholly disinterested” and operated out of “self-love, and appetite for applause.” Dabney

reiterated, “None but God can truly elevate fallen and suffering humanity.” Christian, communal reform was a mere delusion, the very idea a contradiction in terms. The religion owed its success to “address[ing] the individual” and leaving the big problems to Providence. When ministers of the gospel “agitate for ... reform, the individual is encouraged to lose sight of his own errors (the only ones he is responsible for, or able to reform), and to occupy himself with the wrong-doings of others.” Human sinfulness had caused southern poverty. How could it lead to prosperity?56

Dabney’s understanding of the postwar economy failed to change by the dawning of the New South movement. His 1882 sermon against the industrial current again invoked the Jacobins, as he claimed that Republican meddling with the economy and social order had produced an unsettling egalitarianism, on the one hand, and a concentration of power among an unworthy class, on the other. Development in the Old Dominion created great corporations and infrastructure, but “each of these roads points virtually to New York,” Dabney charged. Rather than enshrining personal liberty, the new Republican system centralized political and economic power in the North more reminiscent of feudalism than republican government. Money had turned the government into an oligarchic “spoils system,” propped up by the will of industrial tycoons. Thus, southerners were tempted “to make wealth the idol, the all in all of sectional greatness.” More development, a closer approximation of the idealized North, twinkled in the eyes of the South’s striving sons. As material concerns surpassed those of virtue and knowledge, the region’s prospects of true glory faded, especially in such dire times. Looking into history, Dabney concluded that

“wealth and material civilization have been the emasculators of nations ... only ensuring deeper destruction for the rich and cultivated people.” Yet, at the same time, the Presbyterian realized that he could not change the terms of debate; wealth determined power. As such, the South needed “high-minded men, undebauched by wealth” charged with the preservation of the region’s virtuous roots and the memory of “Jackson and Lee, and their noble army of martyrs.” Dabney valued southern character and distinctiveness more highly than the lucre of any industry, and change represented evil’s pathway into what once seemed God’s chosen land.57

Dabney’s theology, featuring a powerful God and a weak creation, spoke to some believers in the postwar South. Human frailty made sense to those who witnessed the destruction and loss of the Civil War. Others still sought peace, understanding, and progress, looking to God for hope for the future rather than the tough lesson that mortal efforts were doomed to failure. Economic hardship encouraged many southerners, regardless of their theological traditions, to look to the divine for answers that would explain the roots of penury and lead toward present sustenance and eventual prosperity. The faithful wondered if, in a world governed by watchful Providence, economic conditions represented cosmic truths. Religious leaders responded to these fretful ponderings, validating the connection between economic and spiritual wellbeing. Though their messages often diverged, ministers performed a practical task of both questioning alongside parishioners and leading them through troubling and confusing subject matter. Ministers offered variations on a theme: God was on the side of the poor and oppressed,

57 Dabney, “The New South,” 6, 7, 17, 18, 21.
even as they worked to improve their lives. Divine favor was conditional, though.

Prosperity must never surmount piety, went the preacher's refrain. As long as the South remained southern, holding tight to those various qualities of religiosity and virtue that separated the region from the patterns of world history, the region had hope for a coming liberation from political powerlessness and material want.
Epilogue

Religious Regionalism in an Imperial Age

Federal troops left the South in 1877, but as long as southerners self-identified as impoverished, oppressed others within the nation, Reconstruction endured. The theologies crafted in the preceding years encouraged a sense of southern separatism that worked against the sectional reconciliationist tendencies surfacing in the 1880s. Though meaningful agreement about the most pressing issues never formed among southern evangelical ministers, they believed that at least one truth persisted from the antebellum era: irreconcilable theological differences existed between northern and southern denominations. Region persisted as a determining factor in religious identity. Yet, on the cusp of the first age of American imperialism, southerners looked to expand their regionalism outward. Religious leaders scoured the globe for future Christians and suitable places to realize the ideal southern society. These efforts underscored the lengths to which southerners would go in avoidance of northern religious error and potential ecclesial domination. In many cases, the evangelicals of the New South era would rather engage the faithful of the globe and far-flung mission fields than cooperate with their neighbors to the North. As a sense of divine election sent southerners abroad, separatist passions began to mollify, collapsing into an understanding of a global Christian identity, informed by the regional past but part of a greater whole. By the final two decades of the nineteenth century, many southern evangelical leaders saw themselves as part of Christian missions on the world scale, including the efforts of northern denominations.
Invective directed toward northern political and economic action became less common after the formal end of Reconstruction, but within church politics, calm appeals for reconciliation struggled to be heard over the clamor of bickering partisans. Though each of the evangelical denominations’ polity operated under different rules, the narrative of attempted reunion was essentially the same. The trading of heresy accusations and blame for the schisms in the 1860s gave way to suggestions to pave the way for fraternal relations, i.e. recognition of the other party as legitimate, in the 1870s and into the 1880s. Total healing of the schisms, or organic union in the parlance of the debates, never seemed likely, even in the 1880s, for any or the evangelical denominations.

Even independent-minded Baptists steered clear of entanglements with northern associations. In 1868 the American Baptist Home Mission Society made an overture toward cooperation, especially in funding missions. After the Southern Baptist Convention rejected the notion of organic union in 1870, the subject became moribund. Southerners cited qualities such as “uncharitableness” and a “partizan” spirit as detriments to association. Only in the late 1870s and early 1880s did individual state organizations consider cooperation in order to finance missions. H.H. Tucker, editor of the Christian Index, demonstrated the mood in the Baptist South, writing in 1879, “We of the South hold firmly to our separate organization as Baptists ..., and I think that the feeling will grow stronger rather than weaker with the lapse of time.” Separation was deemed a practical solution, without the trading of insults. Still, it was only in 1894 that the ABHMS granted control of
mission work, particularly as aimed toward African Americans, to the southern church. Full reunion never came.¹

Southern Methodists were particularly distrustful of the other branch after bitter disputes over church property following the war. The influx of missionaries to supervise freedpeople and convert members of the southern church also rankled. At the first General Conference after the war, Southern Methodist Bishops definitively stated their doctrine of regional separatism, accusing the northern church of “pushing forward radical measures, with all the influence of a powerful organization.” Despite northern offers of reconciliation, southerners saw only potential oppression in their former colleagues. The 1866 statement continued, “This reconstruction can never be effected on the basis of the Northern Methodist Church, unless it first destroys the Southern Church.” Northern Methodist newspapers did little to smooth relations either. In 1869 one northern newspaper called for the South “to be rejuvenated with new and in the main peculiarly ‘Northern’ ideas,” and this transformation was to be accomplished using “the Methodist Episcopal Church” as a primary tool “in the renovation of the South.” By 1872 tensions had abated only slightly, with one southerner comparing relations with northern Methodists to those with “Mormans (sic) or Mohammedans.”²


² “The Mission of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South,” Southern Christian Advocate, February 2, 1866; Methodist Advocate, December 29, 1869 qtd. in Hunter Dickinson Farish, The Circuit Rider Dismounts: A Social History of Southern Methodism, 1865–1900 (Richmond,
The southern General Conference of 1874 marked a significant turning point, as the northern Methodists sent fraternal delegates to the meeting for the first time since the 1844 schism. The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, returned the favor for the 1876 meeting of the northern General Conference in Cape May, New Jersey. There, a joint commission drew up guidelines for resolving disputes between the branches of the denomination. However, these formal proceedings failed to convince all southerners that union with the northern church was a good course of action. Though many favored dialogue and cooperation, firebrands on each side still hurled insults. In 1879 the Nashville Christian Advocate claimed that, after an analysis of the content in the New York Christian Advocate's columns, he found “no kind word for the South” but only “unkind thrusts, bitter charges, and ... petty spleen.” In an effort to change northern approaches to the South, George Foster Pierce traveled to New York in 1881. In a sermon, Pierce claimed that many treated the concept of fraternity as a buzzword that served only “to keep up sectional strife.” However, sincere reunion could only be “born of love,” not politics and debate. Instead of trying to understand southerners, those in the North relied on supposition, refusing to “come to see us” or “read our papers.” The Georgian urged northerners to learn about southerners first hand, rather than from “vindictive, malignant men.” Such sentiments delayed sincere consideration of organic union until the twentieth century.3

3 Stowell, Rebuilding Zion, 172–75; Nashville Christian Advocate, May 17, 1879; Atticus G. Haygood, ed., Bishop Pierce’s Sermons and Addresses, with a Few Special Discourses by Dr. Pierce (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1886), 333; Holland Nimmons McTyeire, A History of Methodism (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1911),
Perhaps the most hostile denominational politics took place between the South’s Presbyterians—the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS)—and the northern Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). Although the Old and New Schools ended their theological separation during Reconstruction in both sections, the Mason-Dixon line persisted as a demarcation within the church. Each accused the other of politicizing religion during the Civil War and expected a recantation of wartime actions from the other. Especially in this tradition-bound and orthodox denomination, accusations against northern heresy circulated freely. When the northern church expressed a desire to restore fraternal relations in 1870, Robert Lewis Dabney led the rejection of “the ‘affectional salutations’ of those sneaking Radicals.” In 1875 both groups agreed to send delegations to discuss fraternal relations, but further consideration of the barbs traded in the past prohibited dialogue. Southerners worried that the northern church remained tempted by the allure of politics and found northern racial views suspect, blind to the dangers of “the amalgamation of the two races.” Even after fraternal relations were established in 1882, a significant number of southerners rejected the decision. Union continued to be an impossibility well into the twentieth century, as suspicions of northern religious impurity proved hard to erase.\(^4\)

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Episcopalian offered an alternative model, but their meager numbers and evangelicals’ suspicions of their proximity to Catholicism limited the extent of their moderate influence. Their denomination split in 1861, but the northern branch never formally recognized southern secession. This technicality made for a quicker and easier reunion in 1866, compared to the evangelical denominations. Episcopalians were as ardent in their support for the Confederacy as any other southerners, but their more peaceful denominational politics calmed their sectionalism after the war. Henry C. Lay, a chaplain to the Army of Tennessee and missionary bishop of Arkansas during the Civil War, became missionary bishop to the Diocese of Easton, Maryland, in 1869. One constant theme in his postwar preaching was the error of division within Christianity, whether by creed or section. In an 1885 endowed lectureship, Lay continued to “bewail the sin and wretchedness of our unhappy divisions,” arguing that the American “political idol ... cultivated an indifference ... towards any godliness.” The bishop imagined a faith that included all Americans, even “Negro and Indian priests.” Lay concluded, “the Church is one house, but in the one house there may be many apartments. A household discriminated is not a house divided.” Thus, the Episcopalian recognized essential differences within the American population but insisted that Christianity unify all, under the large Episcopal umbrella.5

Where Lay imagined a new America, reshaped by religious unity, Robert Lewis Dabney nearly gave up on the nation altogether. The Virginian represented a minority of southerners who considered emigration in the early years of Reconstruction. James L. Roark estimated that as many as 10,000 actually picked up roots and left the South following Confederate defeat. Although this position never gained much popularity among southerners too poor to move anywhere, it was easier to find reports on conditions in other nations in the South’s religious newspapers than it was to locate a positive (or even neutral) word about northern Christians. Those who looked to Mexico or Brazil often did so in hopes of reestablishing slavery and escaping the racial turmoil expected of the emancipated South, but there were also religious motives for those like Dabney who believed that southern principles could convert. Oppressive Yankee control prevented the work of the Gospel in the United States; perhaps the southern remnant was chosen to preserve Zion in exile.  

Dabney was convinced in 1865 that the South could not maintain its distinctive character in its natal geography. He wrote to Moses Drury Hoge in August, “I fear the independence, the honor, the hospitality, the integrity, the everything which constituted Southern character, is gone forever. … The Yankees have literally killed what made the

Other denominations used the acceptance of northern Episcopalians to fan the flames of discord within their own church politics. See, for instance, “Union of the Churches,”* Southern Christian Advocate*, March 2, 1866.

South the South.” Drastic measures were required: “the only chance to save any of the true Christianity of the South is to transplant it as quick as possible.” For the Presbyterian minister, preserving southern Protestantism was more important than finding a location for slavery. Brazilian Catholicism likely would make that land incompatible, but Europe was too expensive. The solution he devised was an organized exodus. That way, “if so many Confederates go as to make their own community,” their culture would “absorb, instead of being absorbed.” With a qualified leader “(e.g., General Lee),” the “Confederate people and church” could secure “religious and civic rights” and quickly attain prosperity, particularly in places like Argentina or New Zealand. This plan represented “fidelity” to “the interests of Southern Christianity,” rather than desertion, as history had shown that oppressed religious groups risked eradication by choosing a course of stasis. Dabney firmly believed that the southern popular opinion followed closely, waiting only for the enactment of such a plan. As he wrote to his brother in 1866, “It seems to me nearly every person of any standing or intelligence I meet with, is inclined to emigration; & only needs an inviting outlet to determine him.”

Dabney pursued this idea with anyone who would listen, and many noteworthy Virginians and Presbyterians corresponded with him on the topic of emigration. New Orleans’s Benjamin Morgan Palmer offered one long reflection to his denominational colleague in 1867. Though many former Confederates regarded Mexico “as a future Eden,” New Zealand promised the most success in his view, even though he had never visited the

far-off land. It offered the benefits of European civilization, having been “settled by ...the very best class of English,” without the attendant costs of living in Europe itself. With a population dominated by Protestants, “freedom of speech and religion,” and situated “a long way from Yankeedom, the island seemed destined to “become the seat of a powerful people.” Palmer was convinced that any potential quarrels with the native population would be only temporary, as that “population is disappearing.”

Palmer’s rejection of the most commonly suggested settlement locations, Mexico and Brazil, on racial and religious grounds reflect the difficulties that paralyzed most emigration movements among former Confederates. The human products of Spanish and Portuguese colonization would never be suitable targets for conversion, as the Iberians had instilled a lasting Catholic civilization. Taking all facets of Mexican life into account, Palmer condemned the nation as a complete failure: “As to the condition of the country in a political, social, moral & religious point of view, there is a dreadful state of things, with no apparent prospect of improvement. Here is to be found a most signal rebuke of the efforts of man to counter ... the designs of Providence, by attempting an amalgamation of distinct races of men.” Neither would Brazil suit, since those people had “no prejudice of race.” Palmer believed that Brazil’s lack of racial hierarchy would soon lead to abolition and “perfect equality” among the races.

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8 Benjamin Morgan Palmer to Robert Lewis Dabney, February 25, 1867; Jubal Early to Robert Lewis Dabney, November 1867, Robert Lewis Dabney Papers, William Smith Morton Library, Union Theological Seminary, Richmond, Virginia.

9 Benjamin Morgan Palmer to Robert Lewis Dabney, February 25, 1867, Dabney Papers, Union Seminary.
Other southern observers agreed with Palmer. The temptation to leave behind the problems of the American South for the idyllic clean slate of a foreign land diminished as hopeful searchers realized such pristine places existed only in their minds. Still, they dreamed of this mythical other South and analyzed the culture and politics of other nations throughout Reconstruction. Newspaper articles continued to diagnose the failings of Brazilian society, even as the impetus to emigrate declined. The *Central Presbyterian* printed an article in 1869 blaming Catholicism for the “patent” Brazilian “immorality.” The author doubted “that under Catholic influence the Brazils are ever to know the only true and living God,” perhaps subtly chiding readers for not trying harder to fulfill the fantasy of Brazilian colonization. The newspaper continued to track Brazilian current events and, in 1878, found evidence of “decided steps towards the religious liberty which seems to be demanded by all classes of society.” By the 1870s most of those who considered emigration schemes settled for these sporadic bits of news from missionaries and the religious newspapers. Yet the continued interest in Brazil, in particular, shows that quashing the fantasy of a truly new South took some time.\(^{10}\)

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Gregory P. Downs has recently demonstrated the pervasive influence of Mexico on postwar American politics. Fears of following Mexico’s course of political chaos formed a recurrent trope, and this negative discourse about a potential emigration site likely influenced considerations in the religious realm as well. See Gregory P. Downs, “The Mexicanization of American Politics: The United States’ Transnational Path from Civil War to Stabilization,” *American Historical Review* 117 (April 2012), 387–409.

Much of that interest was redirected toward the Chinese. Although settlement in China was never an option, the Chinese people represented a foreign population uniquely unaffected by Catholic missions. Chinese “coolie” labor also offered one of the most promising solutions for replacing freedpeople as a cheap, malleable way to run southern plantations. Southerners believed the Chinese to be somewhere in between “civilized” and “heathen,” making them a much more realistic target for conversion than Mexicans or Brazilians. Northerners had similar ideas about the Chinese, but they viewed the Asians as targets of missionary activity who would always live elsewhere – overseas or on the West coast. Southerners wrestled with the implications of adding a third race to their social makeup.  

There was no doubt in southern minds that the Chinese tended toward heathenism, but several religious commentators found evidence that their idolatry might be shallow, only thinly covering a respectable, ethical base of values. In 1869 a writer for the Central Presbyterian wondered how the South would meet its “impending Chinese crisis.” This Virginian admitted the centrality of “the prejudice of race” in “the foundation of politics” and questioned how the “moral characteristics of various nationalities” might affect the political layout of the South. Rather than calling for limitation of immigrant suffrage or the quantity of immigrants allowed into the nation, he accepted a changing demographic

makeup as a fact of modern life. Diversity was the new status quo. The idea of the Americas as an experiment in breeding “the best elements of the European” into “a race which will be homogenous, ... having one language, one form of government and one idea of God” fit only in the past. Despite anti-Chinese violence among California whites, this writer expressed hope that these immigrants would acclimatize quickly, as good workers often did within the mythology of the American dream. The Presbyterian concluded that “in a few years, the small savings of these workmen will, by accumulation, transform the coolie of today into the capitalist, contracting to build railroads, owning large farms or factories and lines of ships, and making great commercial combinations.”

Southern religious leaders kept believers informed about the Chinese character. Religious newspapers routinely carried items from missionaries and notable current events pieces. Missionaries to China, like the North Carolina Methodist Marquis Lafayette Wood in 1869, toured extensively upon return to the South, speaking in local churches about the hope for a Christian China. These expectations were often founded on very positive assessments of Chinese civilization. One installment in the 1869 Central Presbyterian series of articles praised the Chinese possession of “the qualities that are essential in colonizers, especially that strongly marked national individuality which enables them to retain the best characteristics of their race in the midst of the effeminate customs of the inferior natives.” They also valued intellectual originality, as “every essential feature of their civilization, moral, social, political, industrial, is the offspring of their own minds.” This individuality was predicated on a sense of equality in Chinese society, a tradition that

12 “Our Impending Chinese Problem,” Central Presbyterian, June 30, 1869.
would fit well in this writer’s understanding of American political values. The Presbyterian newspaper even went so far as to praise Confucius as “perhaps the greatest mental wonder in the world” in an 1878 series of articles.\textsuperscript{13}

However, opposing conclusions were just as common in the postwar South. Methodist Bishop James Osgood Andrew wrote to the \textit{Memphis Christian Advocate} in 1868 describing a chaotic scene: “China to-day presents the most melancholy picture I ever contemplated. Her millions are confessedly acknowledged by many of the thinking class to be without \textit{God} and without \textit{hope}. All her ameliorating schemes have proved abortive and from religious systems have degenerated into consummate organizations devoted to the plunder and spoliation of the nation.” News of anti-Christian violence made headlines, and the persistence of Buddhist temples even in zones where Christianity made headway counteracted understandings of a loose sense of tradition in Chinese religion. As late as 1877 one missionary wrote to Georgia Methodists, “The Chinese are nothing more than adult children in many respects,” unable to understand even the most basic Christian concepts without the aid of illustrations.\textsuperscript{14}


In terms of both religion and labor, the Chinese continued to divide southern opinion, split between images of the virtuous, hard-working “cooie” and the “yellow,” “pagan” immigrant organized enough to thwart contract labor schemes. Yet, for most southerners, these stereotypes never met reality. In the words of historian Matthew Pratt Guterl, “the Chinese were rarely much more than an abstract or theoretical proposition in the South.” Like those who considered moving to Mexico or Brazil, most religious leaders who pondered Chinese civilization never met a person from China, let alone made the Pacific voyage. These ministers mainly stayed at home, imagining the dissemination of southern culture in new venues or among unfamiliar populations.15

The existence of these debates demonstrates the depth of regionalism in the postwar South. Amid calls for sectional reunion, the southern denominations refused cooperation with their northern counterparts on both domestic and foreign soil. Southern denominations continued to support their own missionaries to Latin American and China, and, as late as 1879, Southern Baptists found it necessary to appoint a missionary to the Chinese in America, despite an existing and better-funded northern enterprise. Though religious leaders never fully articulated the differences between northern and southern missionary tactics, the continued separation in such an expensive task suggests that the unhealed denominational schisms represented more than the lingering wounds of Civil War defeat. Despite the beginnings of denominational cooperation by the late 1870s, southern evangelicals still believed that the differences between the gospels presented by

the two sections were meaningful enough to require separate missions, engaging with the world in terms of a sectional rather than catholic faith.  

In 1881 the first World Ecumenical Council of Methodist Churches convened in London. The words of southern delegates reflected changing priorities resulting from an expanding worldview. The Southern Methodists looked forward to the meeting starting in 1878, officially declaring that the church “heartily approve” of the effort and committing seven representatives to any meeting of that body. The conference, initially proposed by northern Methodists in 1876, would consider all the problems facing Methodism in the late-nineteenth century, from doctrine and missions to poverty and “perils from the Papacy.” When considering the problems facing the worldwide Methodist empire, southerners began to understand their problems as part of a world growing imimical to the cause of Christ. Uniting in the global battle against intemperance and Catholicism, southern Methodists articulated a pan-denominational front that would work against various problems without fully joining in an organic union. Thus, southerners continued to assert their particularity within the great body of Methodism, as willing partners but subordinate to none.

During the conference, thirty-six southern representatives, both clerical and lay, reiterated their desire to participate in united Methodist efforts. Even before the conference convened, Rev. James Osgood Andrew Clark, no relation to the bishop

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17 *Proceedings of the Ecumenical Methodist Conference Held in City Road Chapel, London, September, 1881* (Cincinnati, 1882), xvi, xii.
mentioned earlier, listened in on presentations at a similar international meeting for the Young Men’s Christian Association. Accustomed to Georgia’s local organizations funding for themselves, Clark marveled at the success of the statewide model used in Pennsylvania, the subject of one address. Having thus come to the meeting sincerely hoping to forge collaborative networks, southern delegates welcomed the opportunity to work with, as Bishop McTyeire said in his opening address, “Canadians, and Texans and Gothamites, and the dwellers in ... Japan and China, in India and Australia” on the basis of a shared “Wesleyan” identity. Methodism mattered more than nationality at this meeting.¹⁸

The Methodist identity constructed at this meeting resulted not from an agreed theology, but from a generic connection to a shared founder and, especially, a common set of enemies. In many essays read and presentations given at the conference, delegates from around the globe named similar foes. Tennessee’s Bishop McTyeire, speaking about strategies to preserve the Sabbath, voiced a global concern, calling for the maintenance of “the Christian Sabbath in spite of Romanism, in spite of Continental university teaching, and in spite of infidelity.” American Methodists had already agreed to fraternal relations by this time, but in London their language took on an even more familiar tone. In light of such global threats, American delegates from all regions and of all races spoke as one. Rev. Augustus R. Winfield of Little Rock, Arkansas, declared on the matter of temperance, “I can simply say for America that we are all united. No matter what our name is, whether North or South, whether white or black, we are shoulder to shoulder to free the country from this

¹⁸ James Osgood Andrew Clark to Ella Clark, August 25, 1881, James Osgood Andrew Clark papers, Manuscript, Archives and Rare Book Library, Emory University; Proceedings of the Ecumenical Methodist Conference, 31
terrible evil.” In this instance, the white delegate supported even political rights for African Americans. “The black man with the ballot in his hand,” Winfield continued, “has come boldly to the front; he stands by the side of his Anglo-Saxon brother, and says the country should adopt prohibition as a part of the organic law in order to free our nation.” Rev. J. C. Price of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church agreed, stating that from his experience in North Carolina, “there was no democratic party, no republican party; no black men, no white men; but all were humanitarians laboring for the elevation of suffering humanity.” The markers of regionalism and race that had set apart white southern theology as a separate system appeared to be evaporating in light of this global conceptualization of human sinfulness and need.19

Yet, regionalism persisted, not through white evangelicals’ experience of being oppressed, but through their oppression of African Americans. The memory of slavery and changing conceptions of race became a more meaningful component in white southerners’ religious identity, as the postwar theology of uplift described in this dissertation faded away. An explosion in evangelical missions to other races accompanied the birth of scientific racism. This desire to “civilize” the non-Christian parts of the world was fully on display at the 1881 Ecumenical Methodist Conference. Southern delegates rose with pride to trumpet their expertise in the civilizing process. Rev. Wyman H. Potter of Atlanta described the outcome of southern slavery,

Synchronous with the complete opening of that great country [Africa] to the influences of the civilised world, God has set at liberty six millions of the same race

which He has had in training for two hundred years. These six millions speak the
English language, and are thoroughly orthodox in their belief, holding firmly the
doctrines of the Divinity of Christ, atonement through His blood, the necessity of
regeneration, the resurrection of the dead, and future rewards and punishments.
God has wrought so graciously among them through the Protestant Churches of
America, but chiefly those of the Southern States, that there are now over one and a
quarter million of that people communicants in the Church of Christ; and if there is a
downright infidel coloured man in the Southern States I have never heard of him.

The lesson to be drawn from this history was clear: the South’s history should be the model
for future engagement with racial others in the world. Cooperation between Methodisms
would allow the “weaker Methodisms,” as Osgood Clark put it, to exert a greater influence
on the church’s missiology. The benighted South stood a chance to surmount its poverty
and lead the Christian cause into the future.20

Although they stopped short of recommending a renewal of chattel slavery,
southern delegates clearly took pride from their development of what they saw as a benign,
Christianizing institution. Thomas S. Moorman, a judge from South Carolina attending as a
lay delegate, spoke on behalf of “that peculiar class of American people who were once
known as slaveholders.” Still identifying African Americans as “slaves,” Moorman also
spoke of “the Christian hearts of the Southern slaveholders,” describing a current class of
people, not a historic category. For Moorman, the paternal bonds of slavery were still

operating, tracing a “distinct line of Providence through the Southern slave” to “the great work of the evangelisation of Africa.” Though southern Methodists joined at the conference as equal partners in a cooperative venture, the history they narrated took on providential qualities. Though God’s eyes were now on global evangelization, the theological work done in the South represented a key step in progress’s march.  

Thus, as the nineteenth century ended, white southern evangelicals’ interests shifted to the priorities of a global civilizing movement. The end of Reconstruction did not signal the loss of regional particularity in southern theology, but it did allow white southerners to begin relinquishing their identity as oppressed. Southern evangelicals cast themselves as heroic reformers in both the local temperance movement and the global Christian crusade. Preachers heightened their rhetoric about the social evils of drinking, gambling, and dance, largely putting aside the issues of power, politics, and poverty that emerged from the Civil War. Meanwhile, a religiously informed white supremacy supported both segregation at home and race-based imperialism abroad. The American denominations joined together in preservation of white hegemony, if not in formal organic union.  

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21 Ibid., 512.

Still, southerners maintained their theological distinctiveness, largely through their “peculiar” approach to racial problems. White religious leaders, so skillful in leading the defeated Confederacy through the destructiveness of the Civil War and the powerlessness of Reconstruction, themselves became authors of injustice. The rise of bitter racial hatred, lynching, and disfranchisement prompted no corresponding soul searching, no doubting of God’s purposes. Possessing hawk-eye vision when spotting Yankee abuses of power, these ministers were blind to the worse crimes they committed in the name of racial control and purity. The white theology of liberation described in this dissertation was never fully legitimate, despite actual experiences of impoverishment and suffering. These “oppressed oppressors” negated the foundations of their theological claims through their efforts to subordinate African Americans. Decades passed before Gustavo Gutiérrez, James Cone, and others articulated true liberation theologies, aware of the complexities of race and power in the world and offering an inclusive vision of God’s preference for the poor.
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