A Christian Moral Order Without a Christian State:
Southern Presbyterianism and the Public Authority of Scripture

By Miles Smith IV

Americans take the relationship between the Bible, the church, and Christianity for granted. But in the late 18th and 19th Century, few Americans outside of the Northeast and urban coastal areas actively and regularly attended church. Populations on the frontier nonetheless prioritized the Bible as a source of moral and spiritual authority even as they tended to see the church as a luxury for the educated. Those same frontier populations often had a low view of ecclesiastical authority and order. Conditions on the 21st century American landscape mirror that of frontier America in more ways than one. There are no establishmentarian structures to enforce a specific type of relationship between the Bible, the church, and the citizenry. Do religious American accommodate themselves to not having particular custodial power over the public use of the Bible in politics or society? J. Gresham Machen and others preferred to remove the Bible altogether form the public sphere for it not to be misappropriated. Or should modern Christian and Jewish leadership accept a more malleable relationship with Scripture in the public?

To answer this question, I want to look at how the tradition that reared J. Gresham Machen—southern Presbyterianism—interacted with a non-churched frontier society, void of institutions proclaiming Biblical morality, in the late 18th and early 19th century. Readers will undoubtedly be curious, in our very politized age, to know what this work's proposition mean for present conversations in Protestant churches concerning Christian nationalism and the nexus of religion and politics in general. For all the manifold inability of Presbyterians to square their social practice on human bondage with Biblical practice, they offer an important lens through which to understand religion and politics in the increasingly unchurched twenty-first century. Southern Presbyterians at the turn of the nineteenth century faced the similar problem of perpetuating a Christian-influenced moral order in a time and place when the church itself lacked all social authority. Their solution was not to overthrow the Anglican establishment in favor of a Presbyterian one. Nor did they look for a magistrate to be a vehicle for increased political or social influence. Instead they sought a politics wherein the church was free and independent, able to speak prophetically into the social order, but not so involved with the state that it was seen as base and partisan. Southern Presbyterians, more than Evangelicals of our day, carefully delineated the limits of church and state. Moreso than modern *Christian* nationalists, Presbyterians of the nineteenth century policed the limits of their interaction with the political realm aggressively and ferociously guarded the church from state interference and anything that seemed remotely Erastian. Unlike *nationalists*, they loathed political centralization in or through a national state or central government. Diffusion of power was sacrosanct, in politics and religion. They also derided what passed as populist politics of their day. But Southern Presbyterians were not libertarians, nor did they see the church as entirely apolitical. The church's public moral voice—ostensibly based on the Christian scriptures—informed the civil and social

order on how to live well, and that voice was chiefly found in pulpits and college and seminary classrooms, not in the halls of political power.

This work is not a moral or even political affirmation of southern Presbyterianism of the nineteenth century. Its goal to offer them as an interpretive lens for the problem of institutions, morality, the Bible, and public Christianity in our own time. In his seminal biography Robert L. Dabney, Sean Michael Lucas offers helpful and necessary qualifications for the study of southern Presbyterianism; very often, laymen and writers are interested in southern Presbyterians because of their slaveholding southern nationalism, their social conservatism, their strict views on Calvinism, or their views on patriarchy. And the people who are often interested in southern Presbyterianism are so because they are enthusiastically supportive of, or opposed to, one or more of the hallmarks of nineteenth century southern Presbyterianism. Each of the features of southern Presbyterianism have been treated capably in their own right by other historians and scholar-pastors, and it is not my intention to relitigate those in this work. Nonetheless, I content that the study of southern Presbyterians is important for not only Presbyterians, but for other Protestants as well. Th essential reason I center this study on southern that, alone among Protestant traditions in North America, southern Presbyterians had to solve the problem of Christianizing a moral and social order that was largely unchurched within a republican and disestablished political regime. New England and the Mid-Atlantic states were settled earlier than the vast geography of what became the American South. In New England, a theocracy enforced—relatively successfully—a Christian moral order. In the Mid-Atlantic States, the legacy of state churches was not as pronounced as in New England, but relatively high rates of church attendance and a history of religious schools influenced New York, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey by the middle of the eighteen century. The southern colonies, however, were hardly governed at all outside coastal cities. Society was as close to a state of nature as possible in the Atlantic World and remained so until well after the American Revolution. Only five percent of colonial and Early Republic southerners regularly attended church. The South's massive geography, the unencumbered mobility of colonial settlers, and the permissive nature of establishmentarian colonial regimes meant that nature, rather than the Christian religion, governed human interactions. And that raw natural politics made the Early Republic slaveholding states. As late as 1830, an observer charactered the South as a place where there was "no one here but carries arms under his clothes. At the slightest quarrel, knife or pistol comes to hand. These things happen continually; it is a semi-barbarous state of society." Southerners knew that their society under a Christian prince, and in a state of completely natural politics, was deeply flawed. The missing ingredient, they believed, was the moral voice of the church.[1]

Giving the church—and the Bible—a moral voice, much less moral authority, in a society was semi-pagan, and after 1789, governed by a secular state was the major philosophical, political, and religious dilemma Presbyterians in the South confronted. They were paradoxically, and radically, committed to what they understood to be separation of church and state, while at the same time aggressively devoted to enforcing

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[1] Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005), 15-16; Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Birth of the Nation* (New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976), 73 Jerry Elijah Brown ed., *Clearings in the Thicket: An Alabama Humanities Reader; Essays and Stories from the 1983 Alabama History and Heritage Festival* (Macon, GA: Mercern University press, 1985), 54

a Christian moral order in authoritative and binding ways on their society. Southern Presbyterians confronted a society that was vaguely Christian at best, and oftentimes downright pagan and antagonistic to Christianity. The Christ-taunting South was as much a reality as the Christ-haunted South in the era between the American Revolution and the Civil War. Merely natural association, they believed, even if governed by a de-facto and de-jure Christian prince or an establishmentarian political order, had led to moral degradation and was not sufficient to create a Christian moral or social order. Although separated, church and state cooperated. Each had a duty the other was bound to respect and not interfere with. James Henley Thornwell wrote "the provinces of Church and State are perfectly distinct, and the one has no right to usurp the jurisdiction of the other." Church and state were "planets moving in different orbits, and unless each is confined to its own track, the consequences may be disastrous." The general assembly of the new distinctly southern Presbyterian church, created during the Civil War, stated that the provinces of church and state were perfectly distinct, "and one has no right to usurp the jurisdiction of the other…The state is a natural institute founded in the constitution of man as moral and social, and designed to realize the idea of justice."[2]

Southern Presbyterians believed in separation of church and state to their bones. But they did not believe the church was a merely spiritual society unable to communicate and instruct temporal society or the state. The free and independent voice of the church, unencumbered by the state, was, Presbyterians believed, necessary for the enactment of a Christian social and moral order. The church was to give moral and religious instruction to the state and to society. Thornwell wrote that although the church and the state were entirely distinct, "religion as a life" extended "its domain beyond the sphere of technical worship." The church was the moral teacher of both state and society at large. [3]

The creation of a Christian socio-moral order was undoubtedly the aim of Presbyterians in the South in the years following the American Revolution. They did not believe the state was the appropriate instrument to create that order, but magistrate's job was to protect the social place of institutions that enacted particularly Christian specifics of the moral order—schools, churches, colleges etc—but not to do the job of churches or schools itself. A final reason for studying southern Presbyterians serves as an encouragement, and a warning. That southern Presbyterians were to a large degree successful in creating what they perceived to be a moral order provides a useful example of how Christians, particularly Protestants, can work through institutions to create a society wherein Christian morality can flourish in the twenty-first century. That they so obviously negotiated with raw Aristotelian natural politics in one area where their own tradition had spoken clearly—slavery—should lead our generation to ask what issues we might be negotiating on that will bring the censure of posterity.

Southern Presbyterians' commitments to moral order, their belief that human depravity marred humanity's natura ability actualize a moral society, and their

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[2] James Henley Thornwell, *"Address to All Churches of Christ,"* in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873), 454. Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1906), 315.

[3] James Henley Thornwell, "The Relation of the State to Christ," in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell,* vol. 4, 549–50.

conviction that disestablished churches still played a social authoritative role in creating that order, made them committed theological and socio-political conservatives in an era when Jeffersonian naturalism and mass democracy were increasingly *en vogue* in American political culture. In fact, most Presbyterians, north and south, were both theological and political conservatives. Gillis Harp notes that religious conservatives in the South and the North together "agreed about the importance of religion in the polity and intimate connection between church and state." Southern Presbyterians, particularly James Henley Thornwell, offered "among the clearest articulations of the vision of a Christian republic by a Southerner." Thornwell affirmed that the state was a moral person, and that "government should be understood as an ethical agent and it was due deference just as sons owed deference to human fathers. And Thornwell rejected the idea that the state was mere a collection of individuals. It had what the southern divine called an organic life outside the individual citizen. But, Harp reminds, us, "none of this entailed a formal religious establishment." Thornwell, and most other southern divines, inherited enough of the revolutionary movements of the eighteenth century to affirm the rights of conscience; he also affirmed, in a limited form, the social contract. But the political theology of southern Presbyterians, in important ways, was not that different from that of conservative New Englanders or conservative Princetonians. Thornwell, writes Harp, "sounded very much like his northern colleagues on the essential divinity of the state.

That Thornwell and the southern Presbyterians were political and conservative did not mean that they were not committed to the doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church. This doctrine posits that the mission of the church is primarily spiritual: proclaiming the Gospel of Christ and ordering his church by word and sacrament. The goal of the church is not, according to the doctrine, the enactment of a particular political or social program. For antebellum Presbyterians, writes Alan D. Strange, the church was a "spiritual entity, a corporate body of those in whom the Spirit has worked. It is the spiritual aspect of the life of the church that determines the nature of its power." Strange helpfully notes that northern Presbyterians like Charles Hodge were measured in their application of the spirituality of the church. Hodge, argues Strange, "developed his doctrine of the spirituality of the church in a subtle and nuanced fashion that permitted him to distinguish the church from the state while permitting the church to retain a prophetic voice to society." Strange rightly warns modern readers to avoid repristinating Hodge's—the southern Presbyterians'—doctrine of the spirituality of the church. For our purposes, however, Strange's most important insight is that he identifies—accurately—Thornwell and southern Presbyterians were on the "radical spirituality of the church wing." [4]

Southern Presbyterians, as it were, were *more* dedicated to keeping the church silent on politics than their northern counterparts. No figure and no Protestant group in American church history has been more associated with the doctrine of the spirituality of the church than James Henley Thornwell, and for good reason. Southern Presbyterians worked as state-supported intellectuals—Thornwell served as President of South Carolina College—who articulated the most aggressively disestablishmentarian articulation of Calvinist political theology in 19th century North America. Southern Presbyterians were not, at least in their understanding of establishments, theocrats. And

[4] Alan D. Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017), Kindle, Preface.

yet the disestablishmentarian order certainty allowed southern Presbyterians to exercise outsized cultural, social, and political power. The southern paradox was that disestablishment in a geography the size of Western Europe with little federal or state institutional presence meant that the church as an institution filled civil and social functions it otherwise would not have. Southern Presbyterian churches were socio-political hearts of communities where children were educated and where political meetings were held. Disestablishment by the middle of the 19th century led to an ecclesiastic order in the South, where practical secularism had been the norm during the Enlightenment-influenced 18th century. In the 19th century South, secular politics created the conditions for unparalleled ecclesiastical socio-political influence. That influence was profoundly conservative, and republican.

To be a republican in the late eighteen and early nineteenth century United States was to committed to Classically informed ideas about the common good. Protestants committed to republican political philosophy were not devoted to individualism, or liberalism: the expansion of individual or even economic rights for their own sake. Neither were they friendly to ever-expanding democratic or populist politics. But they were suspicious of political centralization. Bernard Bailyn notes in his The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution that the religious traditions of dissenting Protestantism like the Scot-Irish Calvinist that settled the Carolina backcountry were intensely suspicious of political power—especially state power—and they understood that human beings were inherently corruptible. Southern Protestants, with Presbyterians in the van, reconciled their fear of political centralization with their need for moral governance through the idea of a Christian republic, to which Presbyterians believed they were uniquely suited to provide moral and religious guidance to. Thomas Smyth believed that Presbyterians practiced "ecclesiastic republicanism" in which was contained "principles which lie at the foundation of human conduct, and which come ' home to the business and bosoms of men.'" Smyth cast aspersion on those who denied the practical political ramifications of religion. Those doubters who considered "the great questions which divide religious denominations as mere logomachies." They wrongly regarded "any alleged connection between the systems of ecclesiastical and civil government…as a mere visionary dream, concluding, that because politically distinct and separate, their moral and intellectual relations are equally independent." For Smyth and southern Presbyterians, moral and intellectual relations were dependent, and any discussion of that dependency was deeply important to the civil and religious interests of this country.[5]

Ecclesiastical republicanism and political republicanism's insistence on the diffusion of power did not mean that antebellum southern Presbyterians did not believe that even diffused power could be used to uphold the common good. Republicanism was not a synonym of individualistic or liberal politics. Philip Gorski's taxonomy of classical liberalism versus classical republicanism helpfully frames the limits of liberal politics and republican politics in the Early Republic. Southern society and much of the South's intellectual and political leadership in late 18th Century South Carolina had a view of human nature that was inherently conservative, in that it was selfish and jealous of individual or familial rights. By contrast Thomas Jefferson, particularly in his views on education, prioritized "individual autonomy over community obligation." By 1830,

[5] Thomas Smyth, *Ecclesiastical Republicanism: or, The Republicanism, Liberality, and Catholicity of Presbytery, in Contrast with Prelacy and Popery* (Boston, MA: Crocker and Brewster, 1843), vi-vii.

Southern intellectuals, with Presbyterian ministers in the vanguard, had an inherently sociable view of human nature which prioritized the common good over individual rights, positioned within a divinely sanctioned slaveholding hierarchy. Presbyterians in South Carolina change conceptions of human liberty. Communities that in the 1780s had a simple commitment to non-interference by the state by 1830 had a more complex view of human freedom that included self-mastery, rule of law, and a belief that God's law was binding on the body politic. [6]

The assertion that society at large outside the visible church needed God's law was not a rhetorical trope southern clerics used to grab political power. Southern society, particularly on the frontier, was minimally Christianized, and as a result, generally volatile and violent. The mental picture religious Americans have of pious frontier families—perhaps rendered from Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little House novels, or something like them—reading the family bible and then tromping off to church is largely fantasy. Most southern families did not attend church, and a substantial number of them did not own Bibles. The were at best clannish, and more often than not led by an every man for himself ethos. Baptist missionary John Mason Peck said of Tennesseans and Kentuckians in the 1810s that they were "sadly destitute of public spirit, and manifest a great degree of apathy toward benevolent institutions, even when they are obviously intended for their own benefit." Hundreds of families did not have a copy of the Christian scriptures.[7]

The liberal Jeffersonian South was not a utopia of peaceable Christian agrarians. It was course society where nature's laws—survival of the fittest, might makes right, and he who dies with the most toys wins—ruled. Jeffersonian society was not a vehicle to Enlightenment, and it also did not ameliorate the brutal conditions imposed on enslaved humans. Tavers were far more common than churches, and the morality of the barroom far more prevalent than that of the pew. In the case of Rowan County, North Carolina—a locale with a relatively large population of Scot-Irish—taverns were the places where people most often gathered and the most important nodes around which neighborhoods developed. Neither the church, nor the courthouse, were the center of cultural and social life in the 18th century South. The grog house was. Early Presbyterians Liberal freedoms led not to holiness and order—moral, natural, or spiritual—but to license and viciousness. The late Richard Beeman noted that Early Republic Virgina and the Carolinas were societies where "people routinely drank spiritous liquors from morning until retiring, where the legal sanctions against fornication, adultery, and bastardy were virtually nonexistent, and where the prevailing social pastimes were cockfighting and the tavern brawl." In a society so licentious, God's law—and sometimes nature's law—"were extraordinarily difficult to follow strictly." But Presbyterians did not believe that obedience to God's law was negotiable, for individuals or society. While they shrank from establishmentarianism, they nonetheless needed institutional vehicles to teach—and even culturally and socially compel, but not

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[6] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 33–34; Philip Gorski, *American Covenant: A History of Civil Religion from the Puritans to the Present* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 63; Alan Taylor, *Thomas Jefferson's Education* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2019).

[7] John Mason Peck, in Rufus Babcock, *Forty Years of Pioneer Life: Memoir of John Mason Peck, D. D.* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1864), 202–3.

politically coerce southerners—accustomed to Jeffersonian liberalism to follow God's law in the Bible.[8]

[8] Daniel D. Thorp, "Taverns and Communities: The Case of Rowan Country, North Carolina" in David Colin Crass, Steven D. Smith, Martha A. Zierden, and Richard D. Brooks eds., *The Southern Colonial Backcountry: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Frontier Communities* (Knoxville, TN: The University of Tennessee Press, 1998), 78; Richard R. Beeman, *The Evolution of the Southern Backcountry: A Case Study of Lunenburg County, Virginia 1746-1832* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press,), 116; *Acts of the General Assembly of the State of Alabama* (1843).