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PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

A young vigorous organization looks forward to shining goals and moves emphatically toward them. As maturity sets in, there rises a tendency to look back to early struggles and early conquests. As long as a balance is held between pride in the past and action in the present and a sense of direction to new goals in the future — as long as there is no romanticizing of the past that paralyzes action toward a greater future — just so long will that organization flourish and progress. Like the ancient Janus, it must at once look backward and ahead.

The Southern Speech Association has enjoyed a vigorous youth. Now, in its strong maturity, it continues, among other ways, to plan for the present and future by providing for a study of its structure and its objectives that it may gain the greatest strength and best direction. At the same time, it is looking back to its past to record in permanent form the annals of its beginnings and its accomplishments.

However, as we all know, in the end the Association is kept strong by the individual efforts of each member. It has always been above everything else a friendly organization. Newcomers have exclaimed time and time again that they have never before joined a group in which they were so swiftly and warmly made an immediate part of the circle. You can continue the force of this healthy kind of solidarity by continually being on the watch for new members. You can help by writing for our JOURNAL. You can help by sending in suggestions for the Dallas convention. You may know of someone new in the area who should be asked to contribute to the program. You are the person to point out any area that you believe has not been given sufficient attention and emphasis.

This year the annual Convention returns to Texas. Those who attended the meeting at Waco in 1949 remember the splendid hospitality and support of our Texas members as vividly as the beauty of the bluebonnets that swept along the roadways. Make your plans early to come to Dallas next spring. Without *your* presence and participation the convention cannot be completely successful.

Cordially yours,

CHARLES MUNRO GETCHELL, *President*

University of Mississippi

BENJAMIN MORGAN PALMER, ORATOR-PREACHER OF THE CONFEDERACY

MARGARET BURR DESCHAMPS*

After the curtain had fallen on the Confederacy, many Northerners are said to have visited the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans to see "the big villain of the play."¹ The small agile man in the pulpit, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, derived this titled role from a sermon he preached on Thanksgiving Day in 1860.² It was undoubtedly the most publicized of many sermons preached in Southern churches during the 1860-61 crisis, and it designed Palmer's Confederate career. Portraying the fight for Southern independence as synonymous with the purpose of the Lord, he became the secessionist orator of the day.

Palmer owed much of his training for this role to James Henley Thornwell, Presbyterian clergyman, educator, and ardent defender of slavery and Southern society. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1818, Palmer entered Columbia Theological Seminary when he was twenty-two and began preparing for the Presbyterian ministry.³ As a student he became acquainted with Thornwell who was preaching and teaching in Columbia. Between these men of similar professional talents there developed a close personal friendship and somewhat parallel careers. In the forties and fifties both preached in the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, taught in the seminary, and edited the *Southern Presbyterian Review*.⁴

While Thornwell overshadowed Palmer, the high regard which

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¹R. W. Mallard, "Personal Reminiscences of Rev. Benj. Morgan Palmer, D.D., LL.D., *Union Seminary Review*, XIV (January, 1903), 111.

²Benjamin M. Palmer, *The South: Her Peril and Her Duty* (New Orleans, 1860).

³For sidelights on Palmer as a student see Diaries of John McLees, 1838-1864 (South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina). McLees was a fellow student of Palmer's.

⁴Thornwell also served as president of South Carolina College, 1852-1855. For biographical material on Thornwell see Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, 1875). For the life of Palmer see Thomas C. Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (Richmond, 1906).

his fellow churchmen had for the latter is shown by their desire to keep him in South Carolina. When he requested permission to move to a church outside the state the clergy "banded together as one man to retain him, [and] no argument could make any impression on their minds."⁵ It was not until December of 1856 that his presbytery reluctantly gave its consent for him to go to New Orleans to become pastor of the largest Presbyterian church in that city. Intimate association with Thornwell was no longer possible, but Palmer carried with him a store of Thornwell's ideas and beliefs which had become his own.⁶

During the years spent in New Orleans prior to the secession crisis, Palmer seems to have devoted his energies exclusively to his pastoral duties. A diary kept in 1858 is concerned entirely with routine activities — visiting, preaching, baptizing, marrying, and burying.⁷ At the same time Thornwell, who remained in South Carolina, was vigorously engaged in expounding pro-slavery arguments⁸ and strengthening loyalty to the union. He supported the union because he thought that governments, like society and slavery, were divine instruments of God instead of mere institutions made by man.⁹ It seems probable that while Palmer did not publicize his views through platform and press as did Thornwell, he was in accord with Thornwell's position. His sermons of the 1860's illustrate careful grounding in Thornwell's proslavery philosophy,¹⁰ and a personal letter written from Columbia during the secession crisis of 1850 indicates unionist leanings.¹¹ However, a marked change in Palmer's political attitude and policy came with the election of Abraham Lincoln in 1860.

⁵Robert C. Gilchrist to A. A. Porter, October 30, 1855, in A. A. Porter Collection (Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina).

⁶Johnson, 66-67. The writer further established the importance of Thornwell's influence on Palmer through an interview with Franklin M. Parker, Dean Emeritus, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, Georgia, 1949. Dean Parker knew Palmer during his post-war ministry in New Orleans.

⁷Diary of Benjamin M. Palmer, 1858 (Montreat).

⁸William S. Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1935), 109 ff.

⁹"The Rev. Dr. Thornwell's Memorial on the Recognition of Christianity in the Constitution," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XVI (July, 1863), 79-87.

¹⁰For example see Palmer, *The South: Her Peril and Her Duty*.

¹¹Benjamin M. Palmer to James H. Thornwell, September 10, 1850, in Anderson-Thornwell Papers (Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina).

The election of Lincoln to the presidency brought Palmer openly into the secessionist camp. In a famous Thanksgiving Day sermon on November 29 he described "The South: Her Peril and Her Duty." A week earlier his old friend in South Carolina had preached a sermon in the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia which summed up his belief about slavery and the state of the union and announced a changed attitude toward secession. The theme elaborated by both Palmer and Thornwell was that slavery, which was ordained by God, was threatened by the triumph of the Republican Party. Palmer further stated that slavery was essential to progress in the South; that God had entrusted its safekeeping to Southern people; and that the purpose in Southern civilization as planned by God was "to perpetuate the institution of domestic slavery as now existing." Since slavery was a divine institution and its continuation was the South's duty, he, like Thornwell, found secession the only course.¹²

There were many in his congregation and in the church at large who did not approve of his sermon, but Palmer was on the road to fame as a secessionist.¹³ On the morning following his sermon the New Orleans *Daily Delta* published it in full, stating that this discourse by a man who had not previously taken politics into the pulpit was too important to be disregarded.¹⁴ The tremendous influence which the sermon had throughout Louisiana is described in an unpublished autobiography of a Baton Rouge minister, Thaddeus McRae. "On the 29 of November, before the state seceded," he said, "I preached a Thanksgiving sermon in which I deprecated the threatened revolution and for which I received the [con]gratulations of my leading Church members. The next morning, the printed sermon of Rev. B. M. Palmer, D.D., appeared urging that it was 'the duty of the South to perpetuate slavery by secession.'" By afternoon McRae found that "his prominent elders and members" were won by Palmer's arguments. "That sermon," he concluded, "reconciled the majority of Presbyterians in the State to secession."¹⁵

Printed in pamphlet, book, and newspaper the sermon stirred

¹²Both sermons were published in *Fast Day Sermons* (New York, 1861), 9-80.

¹³Johnson, 223.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 220.

¹⁵Autobiography of Thaddeus McRae (typewritten copy, Montreal).

up comment throughout the nation. At the request of friends in New Orleans, Palmer immediately printed it as a pamphlet;¹⁶ in 1861 a New York firm included it in a volume of sermons for and against secession.¹⁷ Even before it appeared in the *Weekly Atlanta Intelligencer* the editors received a letter from a reader urging that the voice of such a respected church leader be heeded.¹⁸ The second publication of the sermon in the *Daily Delta* was accompanied by an editorial calling the author a Christian gentleman, scholar, patriot, and minister worthy of his calling. On December 4 it was printed by the *Delta* for the third time in a week. The editor stated that although 30,000 copies had been issued, the demand was far from exhausted. From that time until he left the city in April, 1862, Palmer's sermons were frequently published by the New Orleans press.¹⁹ The minister had stepped into the limelight and his name spread throughout the South.

Schooled by James Henley Thornwell, so renowned an orator that South Carolina College built a new auditorium for him when he became its president,²⁰ Palmer was everywhere in demand as a speaker. One of his friends recalled: "Dr. Palmer used few gestures, had a silver quality in his voice, and was perfectly distinct. His voice would reach every corner of the room with no effort."²¹ Another admirer said that when he spoke "deep-toned artillery of the heavens rolled and rolled, and died away in echoes on the horizon's verge."²² A man of great vitality and enthusiasm, a dynamic orator — his hour was at hand.

When New Orleans troops left for the front, Palmer was a natural choice to speak at farewell ceremonies. With a stirring address on May 26, 1861, he sent the Crescent Rifles of New Orleans to fight enemies who cried for "a new Constitution, a new Bible, a new God." The following day he spoke to the Washington Artillery and an audience of five thousand people as troops left for Virginia. The war, he said, was the holiest battle of all history — a fight for

¹⁶Johnson, 222-23.

¹⁷See *Fast Day Sermons* (New York, 1861), 57-80.

¹⁸*Weekly Atlanta Intelligencer*, January 2, 1861.

¹⁹Johnson, 220-22.

²⁰Edwin L. Green, *A History of the University of South Carolina* (Columbia, 1916), 56.

²¹Interview with Parker, 1949.

²²Eugene Daniel and I. L. Leucht, *In Memory of Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer* ([New Orleans], n.d.), No Pagination.

home, fireside, family, freedom, civilization, and religion. Then, the soldiers were on their way amidst the firing of artillery and the strains of brass bands.²³

On July 21, 1861, the Washington Artillery participated in the First Battle of Manassas. In the midst of the battle Benjamin Palmer delivered his Sunday sermon to the congregation of the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans. Doubtless, the members were thinking of family and friends on the battle fields of Virginia. When the sermon was concluded, the minister stepped down from the pulpit. All day, he said, he had been oppressed by the sensation that a great battle was being waged in Virginia, and he asked his congregation to join him in prayer for the Confederate soldiers. The audience was electrified at the time, and one can imagine their feeling when news came the next day of the Battle of Manassas and the Washington Artillery under fire.²⁴

As report of this incident spread during the war, rumor credited Palmer with other remarkable feats. One story pictured him delivering a stirring address from horseback to a portion of Albert Sidney Johnston's army as it went into the battle of Shiloh.²⁵ A contradictory tale told of his being in New Orleans on the day of the Shiloh engagement and having a premonition of it which he related to his congregation.²⁶ Another popular story dealt with his holding a large Chattanooga audience spell bound "almost in sight of the enemy." When a shell struck the church he kept the congregation in their seats until he pronounced the benediction.²⁷ At one time the rumor circulated that he was achieving military fame as a colonel in the army.²⁸ To the popular mind Palmer doubtless assumed the appearance of a prophet of the Lord.

Fragmentary evidence in such stories makes it difficult to sep-

²³Johnson, 237-39. For Palmer and the Washington Artillery see William M. Owen, *In Camp and Battle with the Washington Artillery of New Orleans* (Boston, 1885), 10-12.

²⁴Thornwell Jacobs, ed., *The Diary of William Plumer Jacobs* (Oglethorpe University, 1937), 93.

²⁵Johnson, 262.

²⁶Jacobs, 93.

²⁷Sallie C. Bird to Thomas C. Johnson, July 1, 1904, in Thomas C. Johnson Letters (Union Theological Seminary, Richmond). Johnson, who dates the incident August, 1862, believes that the congregation fled when the shell struck the church. Johnson, 264-65.

²⁸Robert L. Stanton, *The Church and the Rebellion* (New York, 1864), 175.

arate fact from fiction and to follow Palmer's actual career.²⁹ It is clear, however, that one of his first endeavors during the war was to stir up feeling for the formation of a Presbyterian Church in the Confederacy. In July, 1861, he served as chairman of a committee of New Orleans Presbytery which drew up resolutions advocating separation from the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. When the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States held its first General Assembly in December, 1861, Palmer was a logical choice for moderator.³⁰

In April of 1862 Palmer left New Orleans to preside over the General Assembly scheduled to meet in Memphis. Before he reached the city the meeting place was changed to Montgomery because Memphis was in danger of falling into enemy hands.³¹ Palmer never arrived in Montgomery—much to the disappointment of the assembly and the people of the city. Why he never got there is undetermined. Rumor in Montgomery was that he failed to arrive because he heard of the fall of New Orleans and returned to the city to "place himself in the ranks of the defenders of his country."³² This may have been his intention, but Palmer was turned away from New Orleans by warning from his friends that the Unionists regarded him as guilty of treason. Another version of his failure to attend the Montgomery meeting is that Governor John J. Pettus sent for him to come to Mississippi immediately to stump the state and win support for Jefferson Davis and his administration.³³

In any event Palmer went to Mississippi and traveled throughout the state speaking to civilian and soldier audiences. The letter of a minister in Mississippi states that he joined an artillery company at Corinth.³⁴ If this be true, the association was brief, for

²⁹The writer has found few letters written to or by Palmer which might clarify his course during the war. John W. Caldwell, Palmer's son-in-law, wrote Thomas C. Johnson, Palmer's biographer: "Dr. Palmer had no list of correspondents—he never wrote a letter when he could help it. And—as to letters received by him, they were almost invariably destroyed when answered." Caldwell to Johnson, March 22, 1904, in Thomas C. Johnson Letters.

³⁰Johnson, 240-62. Also see Minutes of New Orleans Presbytery, 1854-1864, July 9, 1861 (Montreat).

³¹Johnson, 262-63.

³²"The General Assembly of 1862," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XVI (July, 1862), 52-60.

³³Johnson, 263.

³⁴E. T. Baird to A. A. Porter, May 22, 1862, in A. A. Porter Collection.

the *Mississippian* (Jackson) on July 11, 1862, published an itinerary of Palmer's which showed that he had touched most of the military posts of the state. The newspaper stated that his services excited the admiration and gratitude of the whole Confederacy,³⁵ while a general in Mississippi believed he was worth more to the Southern cause than a thousand soldiers.³⁶

From Mississippi Palmer is believed to have gone to Tennessee where he encouraged the army of Braxton Bragg.³⁷ This seems likely as he spoke later of having spent two months with the Confederate army during the summer of 1862. He stated that he was forced to give up the work as he was sick nearly all the time.³⁸

By late August of the same year Palmer got his family out of New Orleans, then under Federal occupation, and went with them to Columbia, South Carolina. There he took the professorship at Columbia Theological Seminary made vacant by the death of his friend, James Henley Thornwell.³⁹ He seems, however, to have been given the liberty of traveling and speaking for the Confederate cause while serving the seminary.

News of the minister's work with the army spread throughout the South and in the spring of 1863 many Presbyterians asked the General Assembly to appoint him Commissioner to the Army of Tennessee. General Thomas J. Jackson wrote: "I would like to see each Christian denomination send one of its great lights into the army. Cannot ours send Dr. Palmer?" However, when the General Assembly recommended Palmer as Commissioner to the Army of Tennessee, he asked that "the Assembly . . . pass over me, and select another commissioner and allow me to go to the army as a volunteer, and of course at my own expense." He felt that the state of his own health and illness in his family prevented him from accepting the position.⁴⁰ In June of 1863 he spent a few weeks with the Army of Tennessee, but was "compelled, by providential circumstances, to leave his field of labor and return home."⁴¹

³⁵*Columbia Daily Southern Presbyterian*, May 9, 11, 14, 1863.

³⁶*Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America . . . 1864* (Columbia, 1864), IV, 315-16.

³⁷John K. Bettersworth, *Confederate Mississippi* (Baton Rouge, 1943), 291. Also see Johnson, 263-64.

³⁸Stanton, 175.

³⁹Johnson, 264.

⁴⁰*Columbia Daily Southern Presbyterian*, May 14, 1863.

⁴¹Johnson, 264-65.

Throughout the war Palmer continued to be a favorite orator. In 1863 he twice spoke to southern legislatures on the days of fasting, humiliation, and prayer appointed by Jefferson Davis. Picturing the cause of the Confederacy as God's cause, he told the Georgia legislature that he would prefer death to subjugation by the United States.⁴² In December he delivered the most fiery address of his career to the General Assembly of South Carolina. He stated that because Southerners held slaves they were God's chosen people. God intended the Negro to be a servant, and it was the duty of the South to save the slave from a false philanthropy that would make him free. He concluded: "We strike not only for country, and for home, for the altars of our worship and for the graves of our dead; but we strike for the prerogatives of God, and for his kingly supremacy over the earth."⁴³

In the last year of the war Palmer preached frequently from his old pulpit in the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia. As Sherman's troops conquered Georgia and made their way toward South Carolina, his sermons were believed to have strengthened "the hearts and hands of many people." Mary Boykin Chesnut, after hearing him in November, wrote in her diary: "What a sermon. . . . There was more exhortation to fight and die than meek Christianity."⁴⁴

During these years in South Carolina the minister seems to have thought often of his friends in New Orleans. In February of 1863 he published a pamphlet entitled *Oath of Allegiance* in which he pled with the people of Louisiana not to take the oath of allegiance to the United States government.⁴⁵ In May, 1864, he wrote a letter to his former congregation sympathizing with them in their difficulties and reminiscing over happier days. In the burning of Columbia in February, 1865, he and his family suffered hardships

⁴²Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Rainbow Round the Throne* (Milledgeville, 1863). Palmer when requested for a copy of the address for publication said that he would have to write it since it "was prepared in great haste, & at short notice; & at present I have not a single note of its contents." Benjamin M. Palmer to Robert Tatum, *et al*, March 30, 1863 (Georgia Department of Archives and History, Atlanta).

⁴³Benjamin M. Palmer, *A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10, 1863* (Columbia, 1864).

⁴⁴Mary B. Chesnut, *Diary from Dixie* (edited by Ben A. Williams, Boston, 1949), 434-35, 451, 471.

⁴⁵Benjamin M. Palmer, *Oath of Allegiance, February 10, 1863* (n.p., n.d.).

similar to those endured by his former parishioners under Butler's regime. And, in July of that year, Palmer returned to these people — chastened and subdued, according to the *New Orleans Times*, but no less eloquent and with no loss of popularity.⁴⁶

In the 1870's Palmer played a leading role in the fight against the Louisiana lottery⁴⁷ and he continued to take an active interest in political affairs until his death in 1902. Perhaps his greatest success as a minister followed his Confederate career, for upon his return to New Orleans his church grew rapidly and his moral influence in Louisiana was tremendous. It was as orator of the Southern cause, however, that he is best remembered.

⁴⁶Johnson, 286-93.

⁴⁷The lottery was organized in 1866 for state revenues and outlawed in 1895.