

BENJAMIN MORGAN PALMER:
SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN
DIVINE

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT
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The purpose of this dissertation is to provide an updated life-and-times biography of a major religious and political figure in nineteenth-century American history, Benjamin Morgan Palmer (1818-1902). Palmer rubbed elbows and held sway with a virtual “Who’s-Who” of American religious, political, and cultural life, both North and South. He was the most influential religious figure in the largest, most cosmopolitan southern city before, during, and after the Civil War. The only published biography of Palmer, however, was produced in 1906. A figure of such stature is due for an updated treatment, especially in light of several new primary source documents that were not available to Palmer’s original biographer. Much of the evidence challenges and enhances current commonly held understandings of religious, familial, and political historiography.

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INTRODUCTION

That I, whose experience of teaching is extremely limited, should presume to discuss education is a matter, surely, that calls for no apology. It is a kind of behavior to which the present climate of opinion is wholly favorable. Bishops air their opinions about economics; biologists, about metaphysics; inorganic chemists, about theology; the most irrelevant people are appointed to highly technical ministries; and plain, blunt men write to the papers to say that Epstein and Picasso do not know how to draw. Up to a certain point, and provided the criticisms are made with reasonable modesty, these activities are commendable. Too much specialization is not a good thing. There is also one excellent reason why the veriest amateur may feel entitled to have an opinion about education. For if we are not all professional teachers, we have all, at some time or another, been taught. Even if we learnt nothing – perhaps in particular if we learnt nothing – our contribution to the discussion may have a potential value.

– Dorothy Sayers, *The Lost Tools of Learning*

Why a biography of Benjamin Morgan Palmer? Many academics today may look on such a project with understandable suspicion. A “life and times” is admittedly an old school approach, rather than cutting-edge American historiography. In addition, biographies of religious figures often tend to be more for devotional purposes, erring toward hagiography, and deficient of serious scholarship and objectivity. Such a project can quickly become so specialized that its only real significance is to a small subgroup of history buffs within one particular denomination. Conscious of all of these pitfalls, and a host of potential others, this biography aims to present an objective and scholarly treatment in a sympathetic and understandable way – a work that finds value with academics as well as a potential broader audience.

To explain the approach used in writing this biography, it is helpful to borrow from stylistic categories developed by historian Edwin L. Ayers.¹ According to Ayers, there is a continuum between two basic approaches to the writing of professional history – fixed narratives and open narratives. Fixed narratives emphasize twentieth-century forms of social science and formal, linear arguments. They rely heavily upon formalized and labeled introductions, chapter summaries, conclusions, arguments, and historiographical markers, all tailored to academic audiences. Fixed narratives seek resolutions to tensions in professional debate, and feature displaying evidence and making judgments. On the other hand, open narratives emphasize storytelling, and are comfortable with irony and tension. They grapple with problematic sources, fold analysis into the story itself, and are accessible to a broader audience. Open narratives intentionally leave ambiguities and tensions unresolved in the evidence, characters, and situations. Open narratives hide documentation and historiography in footnotes. According to Ayers, most works of professional history contain elements of both approaches. The approach in this work has been to follow more of an open narrative than a fixed narrative. There is also an intentional interdisciplinary nature to the study, drawing from the disciplines of history, theology, biblical studies, and rhetoric.

Admittedly, most modern scholars would categorize Palmer as a figure of secondary importance in American history. Even in the denomination spawned under his moderation in December 1861, now the Presbyterian Church in America, the vast majority of its almost 400,000 adherents do not recognize his name. Palmer, however, rubbed elbows and held sway with a virtual “Who’s-Who” of nineteenth-century

¹ Edwin L. Ayers, *What Caused the Civil War? Reflections on the South and Southern History* (New York: Norton, 2005), 176-178.

American religious, political, and cultural life, both North and South. He was the most influential religious figure in the largest, most cosmopolitan southern city before, during, and after the Civil War. A survey of major works dealing with the role of southern clergy and intellectual elites in the growing sectional crisis and the interpretation of the South's defeat shows that Palmer's significance is at least partially recognized.² His only published biography, however, is dated from 1906, and the handful of journal articles and graduate studies on Palmer in the last century have mostly been highly specialized rhetorical, political, and theological analyses.³ In many ways, he is an ideal subject for a biography. He has certainly not been over analyzed, yet he is particularly notable and influential in a number of ways to demand more attention.

² For example, see the indices in James B. Silver, *Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Confederate Publishing, 1967); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, The Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); Mitchell Snay, *The Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2001); Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006); Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2006).

³ For published works in recent decades dealing primarily with Palmer, see Wayne C. Eubank and Dallas C. Dickey, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer, Southern Divine," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 30, no. 4 (1944): 422-428; Margaret Burr DesChamps, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer, Orator-Preacher of the Confederacy," *Southern Speech Journal* 19, no. 1 (1953): 14-22; Wayne C. Eubank, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer's Lottery Speech, New Orleans, 1891," *Southern Speech Journal* 24, no. 1 (1958): 2-15; Wayne C. Eubank, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer's Thanksgiving Sermon, 1860," in *Antislavery and Disunion, 1858-1861: Studies in the Rhetoric of Compromise and Conflict*, ed. by J. Jeffery Auer, 291-298 (New York: Harper & Row, 1963); Haskell Monroe, "Bishop Palmer's Thanksgiving Day Address," *Louisiana History* 4 (1963): 105-118; Wayne C. Eubank, "Palmer's Century Sermon, New Orleans, January 1, 1901," *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 35, no. 1 (1969): 28-39; Timothy F. Reilly, "Benjamin M. Palmer: Secessionist Become Nationalist," *Louisiana History* 18, no. 3 (1977): 287-301; Richard T. Hughes, "A Civic Theology for the South: The Case of Benjamin Morgan Palmer," *Journal of Church and State* 25 (1983): 447-467; Stephen R. Haynes, "Noah's Sons in New Orleans: Genesis 9-11 and Benjamin Morgan Palmer," in *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*, 125-145 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

During the nineteenth century, clergy held a position of tremendous influence in southern society, and perhaps none equaled Palmer in his ability to capture the hearts and minds of much of the South. In many ways, he epitomized Old South Presbyterianism. The Charleston, South Carolina native was educated at the University of Georgia and Columbia Theological Seminary. He pastored congregations in Savannah (1841-43) and Columbia (1843-56), and taught church history and polity at Columbia Seminary. After helping to found the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, the premier scholarly religious journal in the south, he served as editor and writer.

Beginning in 1856, the Old School Calvinist served as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans for over forty-five years – a multi-generational ministry of baptizing, marrying, and burying. There he wrote prolifically, and became well known in the North and South for his defenses of slavery and secession. It would be difficult to overstate his influence in swaying Louisiana, and much of the South, to vote for secession after Lincoln's election. In 1861, he was elected moderator of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States, and during the war served as a chaplain to the Army of Tennessee. Following the war, his efforts to make sense of southern defeat earned him the title "high priest of the Lost Cause" from one modern historian.⁴ In short, he was a pastor to the entire South, encouraging the hopes of a rising Confederacy, providing comfort after it collapsed, and working to resurrect what he believed to be its enduring principles. To understand Palmer is to understand nineteenth century southern Presbyterianism. And as a socially conservative, slave-holding, white, southern, protestant clergyman, he also provides an excellent case study

⁴ Stephen R. Haynes, "Race, National Destiny, and the Sons of Noah in the Thought of Benjamin Morgan Palmer," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 78 (Summer 2000): 132.

to test and enhance prevailing paradigms of religious, familial, and political historiography.

A final reason for writing a biography of Benjamin Morgan Palmer is that his life has all of the elements for a potentially wonderful story – the ubiquitous themes of romance, war, sorrow, loss, and death. At the heart of the narrative is the timeless struggle to explain events that run counter to what one believes to be God’s will, whether in one’s personal life or in the life of a nation. Perhaps this is what makes writing a biography personally difficult. To become so intimately familiar with the details of a man’s life, yet watch it pass before your very eyes over the course of a few years, is a surreal emotional experience that is difficult to describe – especially when it is a life that bears many personal resemblances. Ironically, in many ways I know less about the subject than before I started the project. Certainly the process gave rise to many questions that remain unanswered.

Regarding sources on the life of Benjamin Morgan Palmer, there is not a large body of extant letters and papers. Many of Palmer’s letters and personal papers were destroyed by Union troops during the 1865 razing of Columbia, South Carolina. A remnant of his personal library is located at the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, where several books marked “Columbia” were presumably left in New Orleans during his war years. The church also has a two-volume scrapbook from the nineteenth century with many helpful newspaper clippings, as well as two original oil paintings of Palmer. John W. Caldwell, Palmer’s son-in-law, wrote to Thomas C. Johnson, “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.”⁵

This is not surprising, as so many of Palmer’s letters include verbose apologies for his long delay in responding.

The largest collection of Benjamin Morgan Palmer papers was located at the Presbyterian Historical Society in Montreat, North Carolina during the research phase of this project. During the course of writing, in 2007 the collection was moved amidst great controversy to the C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Burlew Campbell Library at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. As far as I have been able to confirm, the collection remains intact. Located in the collection is Palmer’s diary from 1856-1857, which was not available to his first biographer. The diary gives helpful insight into the routine daily life of the Presbyterian minister in antebellum New Orleans. The Thomas Carey Johnson papers at the William Smith Morton Library at Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education in Richmond, Virginia contain a large, disorganized collection of letters and papers collected by Palmer’s 1906 biographer. Other significant holdings are noted in the footnotes and bibliography.

This work seeks to integrate analysis and arguments into the flow of the narrative. Chapter one looks at his childhood in the South Carolina low country through his graduation from the University of Georgia (Franklin College). Chapter two chronicles his decision to pursue the ordained Christian ministry, his days at Columbia Theological Seminary, his marriage to Mary Augusta McConnell, and his first pastoral charges in Savannah, Georgia and Columbia, South Carolina. Chapter three covers Palmer’s

⁵ John W. Caldwell, letter to Thomas Cary Johnson, May 22, 1904 (William Smith Morton Library, Union Theological Seminary and Presbyterian School of Christian Education, Richmond, Virginia).

ministry in Columbia and his rise in prominence in the Church and in southern society.

Chapter four looks at Palmer's antebellum ministry in New Orleans, with particular focus on his role as a pastor. Chapter five traces Palmer's highly visible role leading up to the war, and his activities as a chaplain during the war while exiled from New Orleans. The final chapter is an account of Palmer's active ministry on behalf of the citizens of New Orleans after the war.

Chapter 1

I am a South Carolinian

History loves to trace the lineage of those whose lives have been heroic.

– B. M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*

Until his last day, Benjamin Morgan Palmer was a self-described South Carolinian. Frequently, he would offer, “I am a South Carolinian, you know,” as a standard explanation of his various mannerisms, social ideals, or political views. In his mind, this summary phrase encapsulated a noble ancestry and refined cultivation – a unique combination of both nature and nurture. He believed his was a providential blending of Reformation, Puritan, and southern heritage, producing the ideal type of southern Presbyterian existence: gentlemen, statesman, and churchman.

The Palmer family was from Puritan New England. William Palmer, the first of the American family of Palmers, arrived at Plymouth aboard the ship *Fortune* on November 9, 1621.¹ From him descended a line of Congregational and Presbyterian ministers. Thomas Palmer (1665-1743) served as a minister in Middleboro,

¹ Johnson speculates a possible relation to Herbert Palmer, a member of the Westminster Assembly (Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 1). In 1640, Herbert Palmer wrote a catechism that became one of the prototypes of the Westminster Shorter Catechism, and he was known as the “Father of the Shorter Catechism.” See David W. Hall, *Windows on Westminster: A Look at the Men, the Work and the Enduring Results of the Westminster Assembly (1643-1648)* (Norcross, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1993), 135-137. Also, William Barker, *Puritan Profiles: 54 Influential Puritans at the Time When the Westminster Confession of Faith was Written* (Scotland: Mentor, 1996), 31-35. For a detailed account of Palmer’s family history, see Benjamin Morgan Palmer, “Sketch of Edward Palmer, Oct. 18, 1882,” in *In Memoriam. Rev. Edward Palmer* (N.p.: [1882?]), 17-24. Also, Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (1906; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1987), 17-24.

Massachusetts. Benjamin's great grandfather, Samuel Palmer, was one of the earliest students of Harvard College and a Congregationalist minister in Falmouth, Massachusetts, from 1730 until his death in 1775. During the latter half of the eighteenth century, Samuel's son, Job, moved to South Carolina, where he became a prominent contractor.² There he served as clerk and sexton of the Congregational Church of Charleston ("Circular Church")³ for thirty-nine years, devoting much of his energy to defending historic Christian doctrines then being questioned by New England Unitarians. Of his sixteen children, two became ministers. Benjamin Morgan Palmer (after whom Benjamin was named) graduated Princeton University and served as minister of the Circular Church from 1813-1835. The other, Edward Palmer, was Benjamin's father.

Born December 25, 1788, Edward Palmer was the eighth of sixteen children.⁴ Through his teenage years, he worked with his father maintaining the Circular Church, but he left the family business at the age of twenty-three to become a teacher. On January 1, 1812, he married Sarah Bunce of Weathersfield, Connecticut, and the couple set up home in the cultured city of Charleston, South Carolina. Sarah's father, Captain Jared Bunce, commanded the merchant ship *Georgia*, sailing a regular course between Philadelphia and Charleston. Over the years, Captain Bunce developed a respected reputation in Charleston, and two of his daughters married into the Palmer family.⁵ By

² Johnson wrote, "Mr. Job Palmer was for years the patriarch of the city of Charleston, S.C." in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 3.

³ During the colonial period, this unusual church had no official name, but "suffered itself to be called either Presbyterian, Congregational, or Independent: sometimes by one of the names, sometimes by two of them, and at other times by all the three. We do not find that this church is either Presbyterian, Congregational, or Independent, but somewhat distinct and singular from them all," (Circular Congregational Church records, February 5, 1775).

⁴ For a more detailed account of Edward Palmer, see Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "Sketch of Edward Palmer, Oct. 18, 1882," in *In Memoriam. Rev. Edward Palmer*, (N.p.: [1882?]), 17-24.

⁵ Sarah's sister, Mary, married Benjamin's uncle, Benjamin.

all accounts, Sarah was a remarkably intelligent and pious woman. She was known as a reader and thinker, with a deep appreciation for learning and culture. On January 25, 1818, in the family home on Beaufain Street, Benjamin Morgan Palmer was born.

In 1819, at the age of thirty-one, Edward Palmer gave “final surrender of his heart to God.”⁶ This was the culmination of a life-long struggle with “frequent and deep convictions of sin and guilt.”⁷ After years of vacillating and hesitation, he found great relief in his resolute commitment. Over the course of the following year, he also struggled with the growing conviction that he should give his life to the ministry of the gospel. How would he afford theological education? Could a thirty-two year old man learn the Latin grammar prerequisite for seminary training? And most daunting, could he bear the thought of leaving his wife to care for four small children for a period of four years? Edward had come to know a professor visiting Charleston from Andover Seminary who encouraged him prayerfully to consider enrolling at the school. Despite all concerns, he gave up his modest income as a teacher, said good-bye to his wife and four children in Charleston, and departed for Massachusetts in 1820. Fearful that his fragile son was not in good health, Edward reportedly held a puny, undersized two-year old Benjamin in his arms and lamented, “My poor little Benny, I suppose I shall never see you again in this world. You will hardly live to pass your fifth year.”⁸

Andover Seminary grew out of the growing Unitarian controversy in northern Congregationalist churches. The controversy culminated in 1805 when the overseers of

⁶ Palmer, *In Memoriam*, 19.

⁷ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 13.

⁸ Ibid., 38. For a good study on the rigors of nineteenth century motherhood and childhood, see Sally G. Millen, *Motherhood in the Old South: Pregnancy, Childbirth, and Infant Rearing* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

Harvard College appointed the well-known Unitarian liberal, Henry Ware, to fill the Hollis Professorship of Divinity. In reaction, a sizeable group of orthodox Calvinists withdrew from Harvard and organized Andover Theological Seminary in 1807. In light of the controversy, there is no doubt that Edward's father Job would have been most pleased that his son did not attend his grandfather's alma mater of Harvard College. After eighteen months of preparatory work at Phillips Academy in Andover, Edward enrolled in the Seminary.

Sarah Palmer's mother died at an early age, and with a father often away at sea, Sarah took on an extraordinary amount of responsibility in caring for her two younger sisters during her teenage years. Worried that the girls were not receiving an adequate education after the family moved to Philadelphia, at the age of fifteen she traveled with her sisters over three hundred miles to enroll them in a school in Weathersfield.⁹ Now with her husband Edward away at Andover, she found herself in a familiar position, alone and caring for a family. With the aid of a sister, Sarah moved to a larger house in south Charleston where they ran a small boarding school to help supplement the lost income from Edward's teaching. This period was extremely difficult for the young family, with Sarah losing two of her children within the course of one week. Wrought with grief, Edward determined Sarah should move to Andover with Benjamin and his sister, Sophronia, as soon as practical. In 1824, the family reunited in Andover and remained there together until Edward completed his seminary degree.

Young Benjamin was five years old when the family relocated from South Carolina to Massachusetts. Illustrative of his love for all things southern, on one

⁹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 16. Johnson indicates the young woman dressed herself to look as old as possible for the journey, wearing a "poke-bonnet."

humorous occasion the young boy rushed into the kitchen early one morning and demanding South Carolina grits rather than the New England breakfasts to which he had been introduced. Despite the food, Benjamin and Sophronia had wonderful recollections of their brief northern stint. They were particularly fond of playing hoop, ball, and kite. The brother and sister created wonderful memories roaming their neighbors' orchards and gathering wild moss roses for their mother. In the winter, the pair played in the snow, slid on the ice, and roasted apples.

While residing in Andover, Sarah poured her time and energy into educating her two children. The Bible, supplemented with classics such as John Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding*, provided the core text for learning to read and think. Sarah spent much time reading to Benjamin and Sophronia, and from the age of four the children were reading to her from the New Testament.¹⁰ After her death, her son fondly recalled:

Possessing a vigorous intellect enlarged by generous culture, she found opportunity even amidst domestic care for its continual improvement. The habit of early rising gave her an hour before the day began its busy hum, and through the long working hours she would snatch brief intervals for reading. Some solid book was always on her table, and some subject always on her mind for study and conversation.¹¹

Education was always a prominent concern for the Palmers, and Sarah demonstrated an intense concern for her children's progress.

Edward's hard work and perseverance during his time in Andover did not go unnoticed by the faculty. To his surprise, in addition to his degree from the seminary, his professors awarded him with a degree from Yale College in recognition of his

¹⁰ Ibid., 39.

¹¹ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Broken Home: Lessons in Sorrow* (1890; repr., Greenville, SC: Reformed Academic Press, 1994), 85-86.

outstanding academic achievements.¹² After graduating in 1824, Edward was ordained by the Congregational Association in eastern South Carolina, and installed as the pastor of the Congregational church at Dorchester. In 1827, the same Congregational Association merged with Presbyterian churches in the area to form the Charleston Union Presbytery. Though small, Dorchester was an influential location. Eighteen miles from Charleston, the village provided a summer residence for many of South Carolina's planters when diseases such as yellow fever were a great threat in coastal areas.

Describing the minister's time there, A.W. Lanneau wrote:

Edward Palmer was a "country-parson" – residing in the manse surrounded by as cultured and refined race of people who ever lived, and his home was the resort of that class of people, courteous, dignified without stiffness; "given to hospitality," of high social position without the vulgar pride which mediocrity so often exhibits, and with a passionate love for home and kindred – it was among such people that he moved – respected by and loved by many.¹³

Young Benjamin continued his education in Dorchester under the direction of his mother, reading with her William Shakespeare, John Milton, and Walter Scott. This training especially helped him to develop his own writing skills with a remarkable precision of style.¹⁴ While making progress in his studies, he also managed to find time for fun – even mischief. One such instance nearly ended the young boy's life prematurely. Despite warnings to the contrary, Benjamin delighted in sneaking up behind his father's horse, scaring the animal, and watching him run. His father allowed the horse to graze on the lawn around the house, and one day the boy got too close,

¹² Palmer, *In Memoriam*, and Johnson, *Life and Letters*, record that the degree was a Master of Arts. A brief biography of Benjamin Morgan Palmer in *Southwestern Presbyterian* 34, no. 18 (June 1902) reports a Bachelor of Arts.

¹³ A.W. Lanneau, letter to Thomas Cary Johnson from Manning, SC, May 23, 1904, Thomas Carey Johnson Papers, Union Theological Seminary [hereafter cited as UTS].

¹⁴ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 40.

resulting in a swift kick to the head. Though the kick did not prove to be deadly, it did leave a reminder, and the slightly disfiguring scar of a slit lip and nostril would remain with him for the rest of his life.

Benjamin's father had the reputation of exercising an exacting discipline with his children. On one occasion, Benjamin received a sound whipping from his father for skipping family prayers one morning to chase a cat around the yard. On another occasion in Walterboro, Benjamin's father noticed the ten-year old boy playing with a hoop that did not belong to him. When Benjamin explained that it belonged to their neighbors, his father abruptly replied, "Son, get your hat and return it at once."¹⁵

Perhaps the most notable incident occurred when Benjamin was particularly resentful over an unknown action taken by his father. In a heated act of vengeance, the boy took several valuable writing instruments from his father's desk and threw them into a nearby creek. When soon questioned about the matter, Benjamin declared to his father that he had no idea what had happened to the prized possessions, and proceeded to help search for the missing tools. As an older man, Benjamin Palmer would recount the story, admitting, "I lied straight through for a week." After several miserable days of losing sleep and his appetite, he rushed into the house one morning, crying, "Where is father?" When his mother indicated the boy should not interrupt his father while in his study, Benjamin insisted, "I cannot help it – I must interrupt him!" He burst into the study and

¹⁵ Mrs. George F. Fraser, interview by Wayne Carter Eubank, Walterboro, SC, January 29, 1942 in Wayne Carter Eubank, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer, A Southern Divine" (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 1943), 24-25.

made a full confession to his father. For the rest of his life he often referred to the whole incident as reason enough never to tell another lie.¹⁶

After serving a few years in Dorchester, Edward moved the family to Walterboro, South Carolina in 1827 to serve Bethel Church. Like Dorchester, the small village was primarily a summer residence for planters. The plain, one-story cottages that marked the village were modest, but comfortable. Despite the simple dwellings, Walterboro was a place of refinement and culture.¹⁷ There, at the age of twelve, Benjamin began his formal educational training outside of the home, under the tutelage of the Reverend John Brevoort Van Dyck. To date, his mother had been his primary teacher, and by all accounts had done a remarkable job preparing him and his siblings.¹⁸

Van Dyck graduated from Amherst College in 1826, and then completed his ministerial studies at Princeton Seminary. In the Spring of 1831 he received a call to serve at the nearby Saltketcher Church, while residing in Walterboro.¹⁹ It was often common for the local minister to also serve as a school master, and Van Dyck founded Walterboro Academy to serve the planter families who summered there. Daniel J. Pope, a student with Palmer at Walterboro, recounted of Van Dyck:

He could, and did, excite the ambition of his boys. Some men have great learning and no power to impart it. Others have no great learning but power to impart all they have, and to stimulate their more gifted pupils to attainments beyond their own achievements. Mr. Van Dyck belonged in the latter class. Without any extraordinary learning, he had wonderful power of impartation.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 41.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

¹⁸ Edward and Sarah Palmer had a total of four sons and four daughters, but only two sons and two daughters lived to maturity: Sophronia Lucia (b. July 27, 1814; m. William Ferguson Hutson); Benjamin Morgan (b. January 25, 1818; m. Augusta McConnell); Sarah Elizabeth (b. May 12, 1824; m. Isaac M. Hutson); Edward Porter (b. June 3, 1826; m. Annie Buchanan). Palmer, *In Memoriam*, 21-22.

¹⁹ George Howe, *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: W.J. Duffie, 1883), 463; Charles Woodward Hutson, letter and biographical sketch to Thomas Cary Johnson from College Station, TX, June 8, 1904, UTS.

Another student, James Glover, remembered that Van Dyck was “remarkable as a disciplinarian, being rigid to the point of severity.”²⁰ Making use of the traditional classical model of education, Van Dyck trained his students in Latin, Greek, and mathematics. To hone their rhetorical skills, he also established a debating society. Both Pope and Glover remembered Ben Palmer as a good boy who played little, studied hard, and earned the reputation of being the “prince of debaters and speakers.”²¹

In the Fall of 1831, Edward Palmer accepted a call to the Presbyterian Church at Stony Creek in the District of Beaufort, where the Palmer family would set up home from 1831 until 1844. Charles Hutson described the two Protestant congregations located in Beaufort:

The church at Stony Creek was Congregational in form of government, Presbyterian in doctrine. The Episcopalians of South Carolina were at this time Low Church or Evangelistic in their views; and hence, though the families of the community differed widely in their mode of worship, their creed was substantially the same. Besides, they intermarried largely; and there was less bigotry than elsewhere, except perhaps in Virginia, where there was like religious harmony.²²

Edward did not move his family to be with him at Stony Creek for about a year, allowing Benjamin to complete another year at the Walterboro Academy before leaving for college.²³

During his years at Walterboro, Ben Palmer was growing in knowledge and honing his academic skills in preparation for college. He was also coming to embrace the

²⁰ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 43.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 43-44.

²² Hutson, handwritten letter and biographical sketch.

²³ The Palmers later returned to Walterboro from 1844-1855, where Sarah died in November of 1847. Edward remarried in 1849, moved back to Stony Creek in the Beaufort District in 1856, and returned again to Walterboro in 1861, where his second wife, Frances Perry, died in a tragic fire in November 1873. He retired from the ministry in 1874 and passed away in 1882. Palmer, “Sketch of Edward Palmer, Oct. 18, 1882,” 21-22.

principles of South Carolina civilization. The region prided itself in a rich heritage of patriotism, stateliness, chivalry, influence, refinement, and independence. During the 1820s, there was a growing anxiety that this unique society was being threatened. Pressing on the minds of many leading South Carolinians, the Missouri controversy over the issue of slavery had led to the compromise in 1820, maintaining the balance of free and slave states while excluding northern expansion of the institution. While popular in the North, the Compromise was widely viewed in the South as a sacrifice for the good of the nation, raising alarmed suspicion in South Carolina of any future federal encroachment on the institution of slavery.

In addition to the slavery issue, a protective policy of using tariffs to guard American industry from the effects of cheaper British imports was increasingly seen as a benefit to the North at the expense of the South. After the enactment of the Tariff of 1824, the price of cotton fell in South Carolina from twenty-five cents per pound in 1825 to eleven cents per pound in 1826. Then, amidst increasing sectional tension, the United States Congress passed the highly protective Tariff of 1828.²⁴ Enacted into law during the presidency of John Quincy Adams, the tariff was intended further to protect northern industry from competing European goods by increasing the cost to import them. In the South, however, this “Tariff of Abominations” met great resistance, and was blamed for destroying the southern economy as the British further reduced imports of cotton grown in the South.

²⁴ For overviews of the Nullification Crisis, see William W. Freehling, *Prelude to the Civil War: The Nullification Controversy in South Carolina, 1818-1836* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); William W. Freehling, *The Road to Disunion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Robert V. Remini, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

South Carolina in particular felt the negative effects of the tariff, and state politics increasingly focused on the issue. Not only did the tariff have a negative economic effect, but if Congress used an interpretive principle of loose construction of the Constitution to pass legislation harmful to southern economic interests, what would stop them from doing the same with slavery? The same year, Vice President John C. Calhoun anonymously published his *South Carolina Exposition and Protest*, expounding a procedure for a state to declare a Federal law null and void, and if necessary, exercise the right to secede. Calhoun drew on the *Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions* of 1798, written by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, arguing that the power to determine if Federal laws are unconstitutional belonged to the states, since states created the Federal government. After review in December of 1828, the South Carolina State House of Representatives had five thousand copies published and distributed throughout the state. There was much popular support for the idea of secession in South Carolina. At the same time, there was also hope that with the election of southerner Andrew Jackson as President in 1828, relief would come.

Jackson's record had earned him the reputation of being a defender of states' rights. During the first year of his first term, however, unaware that Vice President Calhoun was the author of the nullification doctrine, Jackson showed little interest in the tariff controversy. Tensions continued to increase when Senator Robert W. Hayne of South Carolina defended the right of nullification on the floor of the United States Senate in a series of debates with Senator Daniel Webster of Massachusetts in January of 1830. Many southerners hoped that Jackson would side with Haynes over the issue of states' rights, but when the debate began to focus on the issue of secession, Jackson made it

clear that his priority was preserving the Union. Growing conflict led to the resignation of Calhoun as Vice President in July of 1832. The need for some compromise was becoming more apparent, leading Congress to pass the slightly reduced Tariff of 1832. The measure was considered too little, too late by South Carolinians. A November state convention declared that the tariffs of 1828 and 1832 were unconstitutional and unenforceable after February 1, 1833. Immediately, the state began military preparations in anticipation of Federal enforcement of the tariffs.

In short, during his most formative years Palmer was steeped in the patriotic fervor surrounding the defense of the rights of the state.²⁵ Certainly these political, economic, and sectional issues were the subject of much debate for Ben and his fellow classmates in the Walterboro Academy's debating society. And it was in the midst of such boiling controversy that the undersized fourteen year-old set out for Amherst College in Massachusetts. His father had high expectations and considered the young teenager man enough to make the journey without any assistance. Alone, he made his way from Walterboro to Charleston, where his uncle Benjamin Morgan was the pastor of the "Circular Church." From there, he secured transportation on a passenger vessel for the sea voyage to New York City, approximately 170 miles journey from his final destination to the village of Amherst.

²⁵ Hutson, in his handwritten biographical sketch, wrote, "The political situation in the Low Country at that time period may be summed up in one expression: it was the time of the Nullification struggle. The robbery wrought by the Protective Tariff had gone on so long and had so exasperated the South, that the great leaders in South Carolina, McDuffie, Calhoun, Hayne, and others, had recourse to a measure justifiable only on the ground that it was a warning that secession would follow it, if it proved ineffective. It did prove effective, for it forced a compromise measure and postponed secession for a generation. Well, both during the time of the Palmer family's first stay in Walterboro and during the time of their stay in McPhersonville, the State was hot with the question; and the Low Country, with the exception of a small party in Charleston headed by Mr. Petigru, was unanimously in favor of nullification and profoundly convinced of the right of secession and, as time went on, increasingly assured that it would soon be a duty – the duty of the hour."

Located on a picturesque hilltop at the fork of the Connecticut River, Amherst College was formally founded in 1821 “for the classical education of indigent young men of piety and talents for the Christian ministry.”²⁶ The founders of the college were orthodox Congregationalists who held firmly to the fundamental doctrines of the Protestant Reformation as formulated by John Calvin, and later interpreted for their generation by Jonathan Edwards. They viewed the growth of Unitarianism in the eastern part of the state as the greatest theological and societal threat of their time, and they believed that a well-educated ministry was the best way to combat the heresy.²⁷ Benjamin’s schoolmaster, Van Dyck, was an alumnus of Amherst. Less than one hundred miles away from Amherst, Benjamin’s father had engaged in his seminary training at Andover during the formative years of the college. He was familiar with the school’s purpose and reputation, and beyond the attraction of an affordable, quality education, prayed that there Benjamin would be converted to the gospel and dedicate himself to the gospel ministry.

During his time at Amherst, Ben Palmer took advantage of a solid, classical liberal arts education. The curriculum focused on the studies of rhetoric, philosophy, divinity, Greek, and Latin – all contributing to his development for his future calling.²⁸ Ben was an excellent student and stood first in his class. He also made several close

²⁶ William S. Tyler, *A History of Amherst College During the Administration of Its First Five Presidents from 1821 to 1891* (New York: Frederick H. Hitchcock, 1895), 6.

²⁷ Stanley King, ‘*The Consecrated Eminence.*’ *The Story of the Campus and Buildings of Amherst College* (Amherst: Amherst College, 1951), 14.

²⁸ *General Catalogue of Amherst College, Including the Officers of Government and Instruction, the Alumni, and All Who Have Received Honorary Degrees. 1821-1885* (Amherst: Amherst College, 1885). The faculty included the Rev. Heman Humphrey, President and Professor of Divinity and Mental Philosophy; Dr. Ebenezer Snell, Mathematics and Natural Philosophy; Rev. Nathan Fiske, Latin and Greek Languages, Greek Language and Literature, and Belles Lettres; Rev. Samuel Worchester, Rhetoric and Oratory, and English Literature; Rev. Edward Hitchcock, Chemistry and Natural History.

friends among his fellow classmates, including the future social reformer and abolitionist, Henry Ward Beecher. Palmer and Beecher had a natural attraction for one another. Both were active thinkers and powerful speakers. They also shared a passion for the game of chess, in which Ben generally excelled.

Ben was a young man who had proven his maturity in many ways by taking care of himself in the long journey to Amherst and excelling academically during his time there. All the while, he was aware of a sense that the North was hostile territory, and he particularly appreciated his band of southern brothers:

A small group of Southern students nestled like birds in a nest, in that far-off New England clime. Five of the number hailed from Virginia, four from Georgia, and one poor lone speckled bird from South Carolina. The heart lingers a moment over this little coterie, trying to keep itself warm in the cold region by building close together in the bonds of special friendship. . . . It was an uncanny time for Southern men to trim their sails for Northern seas. The Nullification storm had just burst over the country, and was not yet appeased. The abolition fanaticism was rising to the height of its frenzy. The elements of conflict were gathering in the theological world, which a little later resulted in the schism rendering the Presbyterian Church asunder. The sky was full of portents, and the air screamed with war cries on every side. The unfortunate South Carolinian, who fate reserves to record in these pages his own disaster, was too young and unformed in character to steer his bark over such tempestuous billows, and was soon wrecked upon a treacherous reef.²⁹

Ben found himself in an environment of constant conflict, frequently engaging in political debates, particularly defending his home state over the Nullification measure. He habitually heard the South attacked and maligned over the institution of slavery, with masters and mistresses described as semi-human barbarians.³⁰

²⁹ Quoted in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 47-48. Johnson notes the source as an unpublished manuscript by Palmer on fellow classmate, Stuart Robinson. The location of the manuscript is unknown. Another close friend that Johnson mentions is John Homes Bocock.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

Later in life, describing his experience at Amherst, Palmer exclaimed, “I was baited until I was as cross as a brown bear!”³¹ Having grown up among large plantation slave-holders, his view of slavery was quite different from the accusations made by his classmates. Far from abuse and neglect, he insisted that a general concern for the care and spiritual well-being of slaves was more typical of the masters he had known. Benjamin remembered his father receiving more slaves into his country churches than white members over his pastoral career. And regarding the Nullification controversy, he had experienced firsthand the detrimental economic effects of strongly protective tariff policies. Ultimately, the constant abuse begged more patience than the young teenager could muster. It was becoming clear that, even as a young teenager, Benjamin was not one to let such charges go unanswered. He soon developed the reputation as Amherst’s resident spokesman for the South, defending the culture and politics of the land of his birth.³²

Despite many indicators of a bright future for Benjamin at Amherst, his growing irritation with the unfriendly environment culminated in a conflict with the college faculty midway through his second year. Benjamin was a member of a secret literary society for students at Amherst. Edward Hitchcock described the significance of such exclusive fraternal organizations during this particular period:

³¹ Four sisters and close friends of Palmer: Ellena Elizabeth, Anna Calcock, Eliza Calcock, and Mary McCloud, interview by Wayne Carter Eubank, McPhersonville, SC, January 30, 1942. Eubank, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer, A Southern Divine,” 35.

³² For helpful discussions on the southern concepts of honor and Christianity, and the intense sense that the collective honor of the South needed defending, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982); James M. McPherson, *For Cause & Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Randall C. Jimerson, *The Private Civil War: Popular Thought During the Sectional Conflict* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Craig Thompson and Lorri Glover, eds., *Southern Manhood: Perspectives on Masculinity in the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004).

These, at different periods, have been fruitful sources of excitement, jealousy, and heart-burning among the students and towards the Faculty. The secret societies would of course have little prestige were they not strongly exclusive, so as in fact to leave out a majority of students, nor unless those selected embraced the elite as to scholarship. . . . There would be a desperate struggle among the students to obtain the leading men in the classes for the different societies, and they would ere long come to regard this matter as one of the most important interests in college, and they would of course suppose the Faculty took as deep an interest as they did.³³

The system of secret societies was common to most colleges, providing an instant basis for fellowship at the local campus, as well as a ground for social networking between branches located on various campuses. Hitchcock argued that in general, school faculty and presidents opposed secret societies for disrupting campus life, and for a wide-ranging negative influence on campus unity, morality, religion, and academics. Attempts to prohibit or end the societies, however, only seemed to cause their numbers and influence to increase.

Upon joining the literary society, Benjamin was required to take a solemn pledge of secrecy, forbidding him to disclose any of the content of the closed meetings. A regular practice at the meetings included reading anonymous papers solicited through a box at the door, and at a particular meeting a letter was read offering biting, though humorous, criticisms of various professors. An informant at the meeting reported the event to the faculty, betraying his pledge of secrecy to the fraternity. At the next gathering, the society received a written communication from the faculty ordering an end to the exercise of reading anonymous letters. Palmer moved that the order be tabled indefinitely, arguing that it was beneath the dignity of the faculty to decide a matter based

³³ Edward Hitchcock, *Reminiscences of Amherst College, Historical, Scientific, Biographical and Autobiographical: Also, of Other and Wider Life Experiences* (Northampton: Bridgman & Childs, 1863), 320.

on perjured testimony as evidence. When the president of the society expressed hesitation to put Benjamin's motion to a vote, two other members physically detained him until the question was put and carried. The same mole promptly informed the faculty of the decision to table the order.³⁴

This time, the faculty board determined itself to discover the author of the letter, and to discipline the society for tabling their order. Their plan was to force each member of the society to swear individually that they did not write the letter, and through the process of elimination, and an appeal to honor, identify the perpetrator. As members of a secret society, several students objected to the process of being forced to testify against one of their own. The leader and spokesman for those objectors was Palmer. When summoned before the faculty, Ben stood fast in his conviction that he was honor-bound by his pledge to secrecy not to disclose the events of society meetings. When the faculty board insisted they were as competent as he to judge that which was honorable, he absolutely refused to comply with their demand. Threatened with expulsion, the sixteen-year old replied, "Well, sirs, I will take expulsion at your hands rather than trample upon my sense of honor."³⁵ Though the faculty soon afterward reconsidered, indicating they would reinstate him to continue his studies, Ben Palmer had had enough. He determined to return home, and departed Amherst to the ringing cheers of the entire class of undergraduates who gathered to wish him well.³⁶ Close friend and colleague Rev.

³⁴ A brief anonymous account of the incident recorded in the *Confederate Veteran* claims the informant was Henry Ward Beecher, supposedly based on the testimony of both Palmer and classmate Stuart Robinson. "Doctor Palmer and Henry Ward Beecher," *Confederate Veteran* 10 (Jan 1902): 352.

³⁵ Quoted in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 50. Johnson notes the source as an unpublished account by the Rev. Thomas A. Hoyt, D.D.. The location of the manuscript is unknown. *Confederate Veteran* 10 (Jan 1902): 352 mentions a tribute to Palmer by Dr. T.A. Hoyt published in the *Christian Observer*.

³⁶ Palmer is listed as a non-graduate member of the class of 1836, with a list of accomplishments and publications, by W.L. Montague, *Biographical Record of Non-Graduate Members of Amherst College*,

Thomas A. Hoyt later described, “In the whole episode he had behaved like a true son of South Carolina.”³⁷

After two years in Amherst, he made his way back to New York, from there making arrangements to sail back to Charleston. As final preparations were made to the vessel that would carry him home, Ben strolled the New York streets to kill time. Wandering into a second-hand bookstore, he found several volumes that he decided to purchase. One fifty dollar bill was all of his money, and he handed it over, requesting change. The clerk, leaving his partner to mind the shop, assured, “I will go out and get the change.”

Ben waited patiently as the minutes turned to an hour, and finally he confronted the partner for an explanation, only to receive the cruel reply that his cohort did not intend to return with his money. Not only was he penniless, but he had not yet paid for his passage to Charleston. Devastated, Ben did not know what to do. He hesitated to search out a policeman to lodge a complaint, fearing his story would not be believed. Not knowing anyone in the great city, and in fearful desperation, the young man determined himself to stay in that store as long as it took until the clerk returned. After six long hours, the thief came sneaking around, peeking to make sure the coast was clear. Ben

During Its First Half Century. 1821-1871. (Amherst: Amherst College, 1881), 39. Tyler notes, “Mr. Palmer was a member of the class of ’35, but graduated prematurely in his junior year.” Tyler, *A History of Amherst College*, 90.

³⁷ Rev. Thomas A. Hoyt, D.D. quoted in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 50. Thomas Alexander Hoyt (1828-1903), Presbyterian clergyman, was a native of Beech Island, South Carolina. He graduated from the University of Georgia and was a classmate with Palmer and John Geridieu at Columbia Theological Seminary. Hoyt served a small church in Abbeville, South Carolina, then served in Louisville, Kentucky until the war began. He spent most of the war in exile in Canada, then settled in New York, where he entered into banking, and was elected as presiding officer of the New York Gold Exchange. In 1872, he moved to Nashville, Tennessee to serve as Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. Later, he served churches in Detroit and Philadelphia.

saw him, and quickly jumped the perpetrator, who gave the money up out of shame.³⁸

Into his old age, he would often retell the story of this frightening experience to explain his eager desire to help those in need, even to the extent of risking being taken advantage of:

Twelve imposters may hoodwink me, but in the thirteenth man I may aid a person in real need. I will give the money to the thirteenth that I may certainly give to him who really needs. I was once in awful straits and if my money had not been returned I had determined to go to some minister of my own church and tell my story and ask him for help. I am behaving now simply as I would have had others behave toward me.³⁹

Having recovered his money, he boarded his ship and sailed to Charleston.

It had been a long, difficult separation from his family, and as he made the final stretch of the journey up the Pocotaligo Creek in the spring of 1834, Ben's heart yearned for home. During his time away, his father had moved the family from Walterboro to nearby Stony Creek to serve as pastor of the Stony Creek Church. The church's membership was largely made-up of rice planters, who summered at McPhersonville about seven miles away to avoid the heat and fever. During the winter months, most of the families were on their plantations around Stony Creek. The church maintained a manse at both locations for their pastor's family, but the manse at Stony Creek burned the prior year. This resulted in the church renting an impressive house at a country plantation called Laurium for Edward Palmer and his family during the winter of 1833-1834. For a period of time, the pastor and his family enjoyed much nicer accommodations than those to which they were accustomed.

³⁸ Recounted in R.Q. Mallard, "Personal Reminiscences of Rev. Benj. Morgan Palmer, D.D., LL.D.," *The Union Seminary Review* 14, no.2 (1903): 116.

³⁹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 51.

Certain that his family had already received news regarding his expulsion from Amherst, Benjamin was not so anxious to answer to his stern father whom he so admired, and he quickly devised a plan to ease the transition. Adjacent to Laurium on Pocotaligo Creek was a plantation owned by Mr. William G. Martin, an elder in Stony Creek Church. Arriving late at night, Ben was dropped-off by schooner at Mr. Martin's landing and solicited his help to determine whether he would receive a welcoming reception for his unplanned arrival. After hearing his case, the kind gentleman went to explain to the Palmers the circumstances of Ben's arrival and returned with the message from his parents that he was to return home.

Edward Palmer was not at all sympathetic. Apparently, he had heard the details of the incident directly from the faculty before Ben arrived home and had made up his mind that his son's actions were foolish, disrespectful, and shortsighted. He had chosen to squander a remarkable opportunity, and the choice was ultimately inexcusable. Traditions vary regarding the degree of severity he showed Ben upon his arrival, but it was anything other than a warm greeting. Refusing to extend to him a welcoming hand, or to receive an attempted explanation, the father and teenage son had a cold exchange resulting in the boy accepting his fate to leave home and begin a future by himself.

This was not, however, a breach too wide for the love of a compassionate mother to mend. Where the father saw foolishness, and the son nobility, the mother found much to admire and condemn in both. Taking the time to talk to and listen to her son, she was sympathetic to his story, while explaining why his father's reaction was natural. And though it would be some time before the relationship between father and son was fully repaired, Benjamin Palmer was forever grateful for his mother's aid during the crisis. In

later years, remembering her love shown to him during this period, he would say, “Under God she was at this time my savior.”⁴⁰ And after her death, he wrote, “There are seasons of recklessness in youth when we can place our profane feet upon everything save a mother’s love; and a mother’s love has often quenched the fire which authority and force would have fanned into a consuming flame.”⁴¹

Young Ben Palmer evidently made a positive impression on William G. Martin, the kind elder who had helped him on the night of his return. That spring, Martin employed Ben to tutor his children. For the next two years, he spent his time his time also tutoring the children of other area plantation families, and serving as schoolmaster of the village school at McPhersonville during the summer months. In the process, he earned the reputation of a determined disciplinarian but an effective teacher. He discovered that he loved teaching, and the time spent tutoring the young students provided valuable experience for his future endeavors.

In addition to improving himself through private studies during this period, Palmer was also becoming re-immersed in the culture of South Carolina plantation life. As a tutor, his extended stays in the homes of planters allowed him to become more familiar with polished society. He was often invited to plantation house parties:

The houses of the planters were seldom without guests, especially during the festivities of the Christmas season. Indeed at all times there were city cousins paying long visits to one or more of the plantation houses; and, besides the hunting and fishing enjoyed by the younger men and boys, there was, except when the rains were too long and continuous, almost perpetual visiting from one plantation house to another, and the giving of dinners was an institution. Young Palmer was likely to be often the guest of some schoolmate for weeks at a time.⁴²

⁴⁰ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 53.

⁴¹ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 86.

⁴² Hutson, handwritten letter and biographical sketch.

Despite being from a family of moderate income, the elite Low Country society was quickly welcoming Palmer as one of their own.

Not only was Ben fully engaged with country plantation life, but the cosmopolitan city of Charleston was located just across the Cooper River. Thinking on these years later in life, Palmer lamented:

When I was seventeen years of age, I was thrown into a large city [Charleston] as much given to gaiety as this [New Orleans], without being the subject to any control. I was irreligious, nay, worse than that, I was hostile to religion, in decided hostility to God and the Gospel, in such evil posture that, had I fallen into the hands of scoffers I might have become as infidel as they. Surrounded by companions as unrestrained as myself, most of whom sank into premature graves, through the mercy of God I was saved.

Though he had been raised in a Christian home, at the age of seventeen Ben admittedly had not given serious attention to his relationship with the church. He would later reflect that the only thing that saved him from ruin during these years was his financial inability to continue to indulge, concluding “the poverty under which I chafed at the time, was God’s protection of me.”⁴³

Certainly the Christian people at Amherst had not helped to endear Ben to the gospel message, and for a period of years he was hostile toward the faith. Lifelong colleague Robert Q. Mallard explained, “The long rankling sense of injustice, as he saw it inflicted by Christian people, set him fearfully against religion.”⁴⁴ From his own pulpit, Palmer would some years later preach, “I have no idea that there is one in all this assembly who has ever been, in the worst crisis of his history, the guilty and blaspheming

⁴³ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *Formation of Character. Twelve Lectures Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, La.* (New Orleans: E.S. Upton, 1889), 125-126.

⁴⁴ Quoted in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 55.

wretch, that he was at eighteen years of age who this morning addresses to you the Gospel of the grace of God.”⁴⁵

The degree to which he overindulged in worldly activities during these teenage years is unknown, but Ben Palmer’s spiritual condition was about to change. His cousin and close friend, the Reverend Isaac Stockton Keith Axson, took a special interest in his soul’s salvation in the spring of 1836.⁴⁶ While he was staying with the Palmers for a few days, passing through on a trip, Ben had the responsibility of lighting him to his room each night. One evening, after placing the candle on the table, he naturally paused for a moment before saying goodnight. His cousin engaged him in a persuasive and soothing tone, “My cousin, you are growing up fast to manhood; is it not a good time to give yourself to the Savior, when you are soon to choose the course in life which you shall pursue?”

Palmer remembered that he was taken back by the direct question, his heart trembling, conscious of its bitter hatred of God and divine things. At the same time, he was subdued by his gentleness, and replied, “Cousin Stockton, I am doubtless regarded by all around me as thoughtless and flippant, because I turn the edge of every appeal with a jest, but I am free to confess to you that for eighteen months I have lived in the bosom of as fierce a storm as ever swept over a human soul.”

⁴⁵ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *A Weekly Publication, Containing Sermons*, reported by C.W. Colton, phonographer (New Orleans: Clark & Hofeline, 1875-1876) vol. 1, 595.

⁴⁶ Isaac Stockton Keith Axson (1813-1891) was the son of Samuel Edward Axson and Sarah Ann Palmer, the older sister of Benjamin’s father, Edward Palmer. He graduated from the College of Charleston (1831) and Columbia Seminary (1834). After serving one year at Dorchester Church in Summerville, South Carolina, he served as co-pastor of Midway Church in Liberty County, Georgia (1836-1853). He served as President of Greensboro Female College in Greensboro, Georgia (1853-1857), then as pastor of the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah (1857-1886).

“Close it up, my cousin, close it up, and be at peace with God,” was his direct reply as he retired for the evening.

Before reaching the door of his chamber, Ben vowed that he would make the salvation of his soul the supreme business of his life, no matter how long it would take to resolve the matter. Years later, in a memorial address of Rev. I.S.K. Axson, pastor of Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah, GA, Palmer remembered:

Six weary months, full of darkness and disappointment, elapsed before the prison door was opened and the captive was free, and the temptation was strong to abandon all in despair but for the solemnity of the form in which the vow was taken. When the peace came, it came to stay, and through five and fifty years it has deepened in the soul to which it came as the balm of heaven. Have I not a commission to be with you tonight and to speak the praise of him who then put his hand upon the burning brand to pluck it from the fire? I believe it was a comfort to him to know the agency he had in saving a great sinner from eternal death, and it was sweet to me to lay this memory as a laurel leaf upon his grave.⁴⁷

On July 10, 1836 he was received into the membership of Stony Creek Church at the McPhersonville chapel. As his cousin had predicted, this decision would dramatically alter the course of his life.

During these few years of teaching and settling personal matters of religion, Palmer’s interest was renewed in pursuing his academic studies. According to his father, South Carolina College in Columbia was not an option. “These were the days of Dr. Cooper’s influence in that institution; and, so great was the Rev. Edward Palmer’s fear of the contagion of infidelity on his son’s mind, that he decided not to send him to a college which bore the reputation of being a vestibule to perdition.”⁴⁸ Dr. Thomas Cooper, an American educationalist and political philosopher, served as president of South Carolina

⁴⁷ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, “A Memorial Address Delivered on the Night of the 14th of June, 1891, in the Independent Presbyterian Church, of Savannah, Ga.” in *In Memoriam. Rev. I.S.K. Axson, D.D., Oct. 3, 1813 – March 31, 1891* (Savannah: The Morning News Print, 1891), 13.

⁴⁸ Hutson, handwritten letter and biographical sketch.

College from 1820 to 1833, when he resigned under pressure for his liberal religious views. The University of Georgia, however, offered an attractive option with a reputation for strict moral discipline, and a strong Presbyterian influence among its administrative officers and professors.

Incorporated by an act of the state's General Assembly on January 27, 1785, Georgia held the distinction of being the nation's oldest state university. The first classes commenced in 1801, offering a curriculum of traditional classical studies at Franklin College, named after Benjamin Franklin. When Palmer enrolled in January of 1837, the university was ranked among the better colleges in the country, and was under the direction of President Alonzo Church, a devout Presbyterian.⁴⁹ His classmates included many men who later would become highly distinguished professors, ministers, physicians, lawyers, and judges.⁵⁰ Having completed almost two years of study at Amherst, he entered with the junior class, and his course of study for the remaining years included an emphasis on mathematics, philosophy, logic, and rhetoric, allowing him to continue to develop his debating and public speaking skills.

During his two years at Georgia, Palmer distinguished himself as an outstanding language scholar and mathematician, and he consistently impressed others with his oratorical skill. He was an active member of the College Temperance Society, and at the

⁴⁹ *Catalogue of the Trustees, Officers, Alumni and Matriculates of the University of Georgia, at Athens, Georgia, from 1785 to 1906* (Athens: E.D. Stone Press, 1906). The faculty included Alonzo Church, President and Professor of Ethics/Metaphysics; James P. Waddell, Ancient Languages; William Lehmann, Modern Languages; Henry Hull, Mathematics; James Jackson, Natural Philosophy/Physics and Chemistry/Geology; Malthus A. Ward, Natural History/Biology; Charles F. McKay, Civil Engineering.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* Class of 1837: James Jackson, Congressman and Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court; John G. Shorter, Governor of Alabama. Class of 1838: M.E. Bacon, President of LaGrange College; John LeConte, University of Georgia Physics Professor, founder and first president of University of California; Shelton P. Sanford, Mercer University Mathematics Professor. Class of 1839: Alexander M. Speer, Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court; R.P. Trippe, Congressman and Justice of the Georgia Supreme Court.

age of twenty gave a temperance lecture that a classmate would declare over fifty years later was still the finest he had ever heard.⁵¹ Palmer was also an active member and later president of the Phi Kappa Society, a debating society which met every Saturday for most of the day.⁵² At the meetings, a question was posed and debated by two or four members of the society, followed by a decision from the society. Is a nullification of an unconstitutional act of Congress by a state the rightful policy? Is it probable that our republic will last as long as did the Roman Empire? Ought slavery be abolished in the United States? Any speaker who lost three successive debates without an adequate excuse would be fined.⁵³ Daniel Joseph Pope, Palmer's senior year roommate, described his skills at the Saturday meetings:

He was himself wont to regard the training he derived in this society as of the first importance to his subsequent career. Palmer was never absent, and always took part in the debate. He was as fluent then as he ever became, as eloquent then as he ever became. I have never seen a youth of his age who could surpass him as a debater. I remember one occasion on which the question was, 'Is Napoleon Bonaparte entitled to be called great?' He took the affirmative, and brought tears to our eyes as he pictured that eagle caged on St. Helena.⁵⁴

While attending the University, Ben also developed a reputation for always being enamored with the girls from Athens. Over time, he fell in love with one of President Church's daughters. The fact that she was already engaged to be married did not deter him from pursuing her and ultimately asking her for her hand in marriage. After her refusal, Ben was broken-hearted, experiencing the typical feelings of self-doubt. One

⁵¹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 58.

⁵² Phi Kappa Hall, built in 1836, is located on the north campus of the University of Georgia. It remains as one of the few active literary societies in the United States.

⁵³ See Eubank, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer, A Southern Divine," 46-47.

⁵⁴ Hon. Daniel Joseph Pope, interview by Thomas Cary Johnson, July, 1904. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 59. For a detailed account of meetings and significance of the Phi Kappa Literary Society, see E. Merton Coulter, *College Life in the Old South: As Seen at the University of Georgia* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1928).

afternoon, strolling through the woods with Daniel Pope, he asked, “Do you think that that man is handsomer than I am?”

Amused, Pope replied, “The truth compels me to say that I do think he is handsomer than you, but he has not one tenth of your brains!”⁵⁵

Palmer in truth was not known for a particularly handsome appearance. He was always small for his age, and the prominence of his mouth was often noted, as a personal acquaintance once described:

It was prodigious. It overshadowed all else. The eye of the observer might wander for a little, & by enforced notice give attention to the figure or face or broad brow, but the attention would instantly settle back upon the mouth. It was not handsome. It was a most homely organ. It utterly lacked those graceful curves in the lip called “Cupid’s Bow.” The lips were thick, rolled, protruding, and without expression. To point out Dr. Palmer in a mixed crowd to a stranger, it would have been sufficient to say, ‘The man with the mouth.’ Anybody would have known.⁵⁶

The disfiguring injury to the face in his youth also may help explain this less-than-flattering description. The handful of pictures and portraits that exist today of Palmer show that he was not an ugly man, and descriptions from observers later in his life tended to be more constructive.⁵⁷ Some of his more positive features included good physical proportions, a deep chest, dark and piercing eyes, and a golden voice.⁵⁸ Whatever he lacked in appearance, he more than made up for in his abilities that were now beginning to be revealed.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ William Frost Bishop, “Recollections of Dr. B.M. Palmer,” letter and biographical sketch to Thomas Cary Johnson from Glasgow, MO, July 28, 1905, UTS.

⁵⁷ An oil on canvas c. 1845 by an unidentified artist is housed at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans. A photo of Palmer taken at Columbia dated 1854 faces p.124 in Johnson’s *Life and Letters*. These are the two earliest pictures the author has been able to locate.

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 45, 68, 170, 318, 362-363, 651.

Palmer worked hard to distinguish himself during his time at the institution, all the while working for his support as a private tutor. He first taught for the family of Oliver O. Prince of Athens. A prominent lawyer, Prince served on the Board of Trustees for the university, and was a United States Senator. While he was away on a business trip to New York with his wife in October of 1837, Palmer stayed in their home to keep their children. On their return voyage, the husband and wife died tragically in the shipwreck of the steamer *Home*, off Cape Hatteras in North Carolina. For a brief period, Palmer cared for the orphaned children as his own until they were able to relocate to Macon to live with relatives. The faithfulness he showed to the sorrow-stricken children, along with his credentials as a tutor, led to an invitation to instruct the three children of Thomas Wiley Baxter of Athens. He quickly won the love and affection of both the children and the parents, coming to view them as a kind of second family. He particularly admired Mrs. Baxter, her character as “pure and peaceful as ever blessed a home.”⁵⁹

While in Athens, Palmer continued in the disciplines of his Christian faith. Sally Catherine, the little girl he taught in the Baxter’s home, later testified to his diligence. “He had a Sunday school in the country, two miles from town, and in summer’s heat and winter’s cold was faithful in attendance, generally walking to and from the school. My father would often say, ‘Ben, order one of the horses, and drive or ride yourself to your school this afternoon.’ With loving thanks, he usually declined, saying the walk would do

⁵⁹ Quoted in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 60.

him good.”⁶⁰ Palmer was also regularly invited to write essays dealing with Christian themes for the *Lyceum*, a student paper formed by the young ladies of Athens.

With highest honors, Palmer graduated from the University of Georgia in August of 1838, delivering a memorable speech for the occasion.⁶¹ Unlike his last days at Amherst, his career at the University had been magnificent. He had earned the unqualified respect of his professors, his fellow students, and the university community. Perhaps more importantly to Ben, this time he would return home to the warm embrace and respect of a proud father. Though he had often resisted his stern discipline, Ben held his father in highest esteem, and with the wisdom that only comes with age and distance, would in time focus on his goodness:

When was there a time in all your long career, that men did not put the crown of their reverence upon your head? and a reverence, too, not stately and stiff, as being only rendered by the judgment and conscience – but reverence shading off into love, warm, deep and personal, making it as well the homage of the heart. Do you wonder then that your children rise up around you, in your old age, and ‘call you blessed?’⁶²

With his rigorous academic training, and the full support of his parents, the twenty-year-old South Carolinian was now prepared to face the world before him.

⁶⁰ Mrs. Sally Catherine Baxter Bird, handwritten letter to her grandson, Andrew R. Bird, from Baltimore, MD, January 7, 1905, UTS.

⁶¹ In 1901, the University of Georgia assembled the *Centennial Alumni Catalog*, containing biographical data on alumni. A four-page questionnaire was mailed to all known matriculates and their families. The multi-volume collection is housed in the Hargrett Rare Book & Manuscript Library at the University of Georgia. Palmer indicated in his questionnaire that in his class, he was “one of four dividing first honors.” Also, see *Catalogue of the Trustees, Officers, Alumni and Matriculates of the University of Georgia*, 37.

⁶² Benjamin Morgan Palmer, letter to Edward Palmer on the occasion of his ninety-first birthday from New Orleans, LA, December 25, 1878 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 508.

Chapter 2

The Boy is the Father of the Man¹

We may use or we may waste our opportunities, the process of development goes on just the same.

– B. M. Palmer, *Formation of Character*

In the hot South Carolina August of 1838, Ben Palmer had a career decision of tremendous importance to make. On the one hand, as a master debater and eloquent orator, before him was a promising future in the legal profession, possibly culminating in the pursuit of political office. Statesmen such as Charles Pinckney, George McDuffie, Robert Hayne, and John C. Calhoun were attractive role-models to the young man who was growing confident in his abilities. In addition, two of his prominent neighbors from McPhersonville, William F. Hutson and William M. Hutson, were studying law at Athens, and many of his most gifted classmates at the University were choosing the legal profession as well.

On the other hand, ever since he had professed his faith in Christ, Palmer experienced a growing desire to follow in the footsteps of his father. Though not as potentially lucrative, he felt an almost inexplicable draw to serve as an ordained minister of the gospel. That summer, with these rival courses pressing him for a decision, he traveled 115 miles to attend a widely publicized temperance society meeting at a public

¹ Benjamin M. Palmer, *Formation of Character. Twelve Lectures Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, La.* (New Orleans: E.S. Upton, 1889), 17.

hall in Columbia. A large assembly gathered for the event, but much to the crowd's disappointment, the distinguished lecturer who had been advertised for the occasion did not show. The situation was becoming painfully awkward, until finally an organizer of the event rose and made a desperate call for anyone present who would volunteer to address the restless audience and relieve the embarrassment.

The moment could not have been more dramatically scripted, for Palmer had been quite active in the local temperance movement during his days in Athens. As typical in many southern states, the temperance movement in both Georgia and South Carolina during the 1830s consisted of localized efforts working to limit the sale of alcohol for moral and economic reasons. Meetings were usually held in various churches, with picnics and prominent lecturers advertised in local papers to draw an audience.² By the 1840s local chapters began to coalesce into national temperance organizations, but as the movement became more associated with teetotalism and the abolitionist movement in the North, southern participation dwindled over time.³ Just a few months prior, in his last year at the University of Georgia, Palmer had given a temperance lecture that a classmate insisted over fifty years later was still the finest he had ever heard.⁴ On that night in Columbia, before a large audience of eager listeners, the call had been issued for an orator, and the young man came forward to answer it.

² Beginning in 1832, notices were placed in the Athens *Southern Banner* regarding meetings of the local temperance society.

³ Ira R. Tyrell, "Drink and Temperance in the Antebellum South: An Overview and Interpretation," *The Journal of Southern History* 48, no.4 (November 1982): 485-510.

⁴ "His mind was always clear and his use of language very remarkable. Almost as soon as I entered [University of Georgia] he persuaded me to join the College Temperance Society. He delivered about this time the finest temperance lecture it has ever been my privilege to hear, though he was at the time only about twenty years old." Hon. Daniel Joseph Pope, interview by Thomas Carey Johnson, Columbia, SC, July, 1904 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 58.

Taking the podium, Palmer delivered a stirring impromptu speech. When he finished, the audience was abuzz. “Who is this?” they echoed around the auditorium. Amidst the commotion, it came to the attention of two women in attendance that the mystery speaker was contemplating pursuing the Christian ministry. Wholly impressed by the young orator’s skill, they insisted that he immediately enroll in seminary, and that they would pay for his theological training.⁵ Though he greatly appreciated the generous offer, the young man considered himself independent. After all, he had worked his way through college in Athens. This fortuitous episode, however, was enough to convince him that he indeed had been called to the gospel ministry.

That summer, Palmer made arrangements to serve as headmaster of a school that offered a handsome salary, allowing him to save the necessary amount to take him through seminary. The verbal arrangement was made with one of the trustees, who assured him he would be elected to the position in the fall before the school term began. Palmer was comfortable with the terms of the agreement, but to the surprise of the trustee, autumn saw the school board choose another man. In the midst of his great disappointment, a close friend assured Palmer that the failure of his election was a clear providential indication that he should go to the seminary at once, without delaying a year to earn the money. And most generously, the friend offered to pay all of his expenses. It was too late in the year for Palmer to try to find another school, so putting pride aside, he accepted his friend’s offer.⁶

In January of 1839, Palmer began his formal preparation for the gospel ministry at Columbia Seminary. The Synod of South Carolina had originally founded the school at

⁵ Rev. Professor W.T. Hall, interview by Thomas Cary Johnson. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 63.

⁶ E.M. Green, “Life and Letters of Dr. Palmer,” *Presbyterian Standard* 47, no.13 (May 1907): 5.

Lexington, Georgia in 1828, with the Rev. Thomas Goulding appointed as Professor of Theology and Founder of the seminary. Goulding had been raised in the Congregational Church of Midway, Georgia, a congregation founded by New England Calvinists. He strongly subscribed to the system of doctrine summarized in the seventeenth-century Westminster Confession of Faith, and the seminary continued to maintain this traditional confession.⁷ Goulding taught in the seminary for five years, and in January of 1830 the institution was moved to Columbia.⁸

By the time of Palmer's enrollment, the faculty of Columbia Seminary included the Reverends George Howe and Aaron W. Leland. Howe was a New Englander who graduated from Middlebury College in Vermont in 1822, then received his theological training at Andover Seminary (as did Palmer's father). After teaching Sacred Theology at Dartmouth College for three years, he was called to Columbia in 1831 to teach Biblical Languages and Biblical Literature. Dr. John L. Girardeau, a colleague at Columbia, recalled in a eulogy delivered before the Seminary for Howe:

He deeply imbued himself with the precious doctrines of Grace, he impressed them with constancy and earnestness, in the lecture-room and in the chapel, upon the minds of his students, while, at the same time, his instructions received double force from the blameless sanctity of his character and the consistent godliness of his walk and conversation.⁹

⁷ An Assembly of Divines convened at Westminster Abbey by the Long Parliament (1643-1648) composed the Westminster Confession of Faith. It was adopted as the summary of the Reformed Christian faith by the General Assembly of the Church Scotland in 1647 and by both houses of the English Parliament in 1649. The confession provided the theological framework for most American colonial churches. Throughout the nineteenth century, the majority of Congregationalists, Baptists, and Presbyterians subscribed to the Westminster Confession of Faith with slight variations.

⁸ *Memorial Volume of the Semi-Centennial of the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina* (Columbia: Presbyterian Publishing Company, 1884), 205-208; Louis C. LaMotte, *Colored Light: The Study of the Influence of Columbia Theological Seminary 1828-1936* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1937), 32-40; Morton H. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962), 107-109; Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, John Knox Press, 1963), 1:283-284, 503-504.

⁹ *Memorial Volume*, 408. John Lafayette Girardeau (1825-1898), Presbyterian clergyman, was born on James Island, South Carolina. He graduated from Charleston College (1844) and Columbia Theological

Howe fully embraced Old School Presbyterianism – a term that described adherents to traditional Calvinist orthodoxy as outlined in the Westminster standards during the Old School-New School controversy in the Presbyterian Church during the 1830s-1860s.¹⁰ He was instrumental in establishing a regular seminary curricula modeled after similar courses used at Princeton and Andover. This classical three-year itinerary was firmly in place when Palmer began his studies there.¹¹

Aaron Leland was also an Old School Presbyterian and New Englander. After graduating from Williams College in Massachusetts in 1808, he briefly served as a teacher near Charleston. He then was ordained in 1812, and served as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Charleston, South Carolina from 1813 to the time he was called by the seminary to the Chair of Professor of Systematic Theology in 1833. In addition, Leland received a Master's degree in 1814 from Boston University and an

Seminary (1848), where he sat under the preaching of Benjamin Morgan Palmer at First Presbyterian of Columbia and often attended lectures by James Henley Thornwell at the College. In college he held regular evangelistic meetings with the slaves on his father's plantation. In seminary, he held meetings in a warehouse for the poor and disreputable. After serving briefly at Wappetaw Church and Wilton Presbyterian Church, he succeeded John B. Adger at Anson Street Mission Church for slaves in 1850, a ministry of Second Presbyterian Church of Charleston. The church grew from 36 black members to over 600 by the time of the Civil War. In 1858 the church was renamed Zion Presbyterian Church. He served as Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Columbia Seminary (1876-1895).

¹⁰ In 1801, Presbyterian and Congregationalist churches entered into a Plan of Union, agreeing to share pastors and recognize some congregations as joint members in both denominations. The purpose was to enable both Reformed denominations to keep up with the demand for new churches in the quickly developing areas west of the Appalachians. The plan resulted in rapid growth for the Presbyterian church, but concerns began to arise concerning the theological orthodoxy of many Congregationalist ministers. Old School and New School parties developed over the issue. The Old School party advocated a close adherence to the Westminster standards. The New School advocated theological latitude for the sake of interdenominational cooperation in missions. At the General Assembly of 1837, an Old School majority passed a resolution declaring the 1801 Plan of Union unconstitutional, and therefore null and void. The resolution split the Presbyterian Church into two denominations. The Old School had about 120,000 members, distributed evenly throughout the South and Northeast. The New School about 100,000, many in areas of frontier growth, but only about 10,000 in the South. See related articles in D.G. Hart and Mark A. Noll, eds., *Dictionary of the Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999). See also, Walter L. Lingle and John W. Kuykendall, *Presbyterians: Their History and Beliefs*, rev. ed. (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1988).

¹¹ *Memorial Volume*, 8-11, 387-418; Smith, *Studies*, 109-114; Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1:503-504.

honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity from the South Carolina College in 1815.¹² Rev.

Joseph Bardwell recalled Leland in his memorial address, delivered at the Seminary:

In manly beauty, dignity, and grace, he was the admiration, in his youth and early manhood, of all who knew him; and with a mind vigorous and strong, and well stored with knowledge, and an imagination vivid and powerful, coupled with a heart susceptible of the most intense emotion, he could attract and impress all who came within the charmed sphere of his influence.¹³

Leland and Howe were both committed to making the seminary experience not only a time to grow in intellectual scholarship, but also an opportunity to mature in personal piety.

When Palmer began his studies at Columbia, he joined about thirty-two students attending the seminary. Once again, he distinguished himself academically by rising to the top of his class, while continuing to advance his reputation as an eloquent orator. As he had done at the University of Georgia, Palmer sought out opportunities as a private tutor to help defray the costs associated with seminary. During the summer break of 1840, he also worked as an agent for the Columbia newspaper *Temperance Advocate*, traveling to solicit subscriptions and giving lectures on Christianity and the problems of excessive drinking. The Reverend R.H. Reid recalled the impression Palmer made that summer when he visited Good Hope Church in Anderson County, South Carolina: “He remained over Sabbath and conducted a service, the pastor, Rev. David Humphries, being absent. He made a deep impression on me. I remember his theme distinctly – Blind Bartimaeus, – although more than fifty years have passed since I heard his lecture.”¹⁴

¹² *Memorial Volume*, 206-209; Smith, *Studies*, 114-120; Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1:503-504.

¹³ *Memorial Volume*, 207.

¹⁴ R.H. Reid, letter to Thomas Cary Johnson from Reidville, SC, April 13, 1904 (Union Theological Seminary).

In addition to the formative influence of the seminary, Palmer came to know a pulpit supply preacher of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia. Describing his first impressions, he later wrote:

It was at this period that the writer's acquaintance with his friend began; though his own position as a divinity student did not warrant the intimacy which was enjoyed a little later, when brought into the relation of a co-presbyter. The impression will never be erased of the first discourse to which he listened, in the year 1839. A thin, spare form, with a slight stoop in the shoulders, stood in the desk, with soft black hair falling obliquely over the forehead, and a small eye, with a wonderful gleam when it was lighted by the inspiration of his theme. The devotional services offered nothing peculiar, beyond a quiet simplicity and reverence. The reading was, perhaps, a trifle monotonous, and the prayer was marked rather by correctness and method, than by fervor or fullness. But from the opening of the discourse, there was a strange fascination, such as had never been exercised by any other speaker. The subject was doctrinal, and Dr. Thornwell, who was born into the ministry at the height of a great controversy, had on, then, the wiry edge of his youth. The first impression made was that of being stunned by a peculiar dogmatism in the statement of what seemed weighty propositions; this was followed by a conscious resistance of the authority which was felt to be a little brow-beating with its positiveness; and then, as link after link was added to the chain of consistent argument, expressed with that agonistic fervor which belongs to the forum, the effect at the close was to overwhelm and subdue. 'Who is this preacher?' was asked of a neighbor in one of the pauses of the discourse. 'That is Mr. Thornwell; don't you know him?'¹⁵

This was the beginning of a lasting and influential relationship. While supplying the First Presbyterian Church pulpit in 1839, James Henley Thornwell held the position of Professor of Metaphysics in the College of South Carolina. In 1840, he was called to be the pastor of the church, but torn between a desire to serve as a pastor and teacher, he returned to the college one year later. "How little did the writer dream, in the wondering of that day, that nearly twenty years of bosom friendship would bind him to that stranger,

¹⁵ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL. D., Ex-President of the South Carolina College, Late Professor of Theology in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), 154. For a work on the religious and cultural influence of Thornwell, see James O. Farmer Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

as Jonathan was knit to David; or that, after five and thirty years, he would be penning these reminiscences in this biography.”¹⁶

It was also during his seminary days that Palmer met “Miss Augusta.” Mary Augusta McConnell was a Georgia native, the daughter of Robert C. McConnell and Sarah Ann Walthour of Walthourville. When she was only four years old her father died, leaving a twenty-one year old widow and a two-year-old son, Blakeley. Desiring to bring the children up in an atmosphere of culture and learning, the mother relocated the family to Hartford, Connecticut, but within a year her son drowned in the Connecticut River. The tragic event led the mother to return to the South, where she met Professor George Howe of Columbia Seminary. In December of 1836 she married Howe, and enrolled her daughter Augusta in a young ladies’ boarding school in Barhamville, about five miles from Columbia.

Though Augusta was away in Barhamville during the week, she returned home on Fridays and stayed through Monday morning with her parents in Columbia. Palmer learned of the educated, slender, blue-eyed girl with black hair through a letter he received from an out-of-town friend. His friend expressed his desire to woo her, and asked Palmer to keep an eye on her, letting him know if anyone else showed an interest in the girl of his choice. Perhaps the friend did not know that while at the university, Palmer had developed the reputation among his friends as being a lover of ladies. He replied to his friend that he could not play spy on any girl, and in light of the correspondence, desired to meet her himself. At the same time, Augusta had heard of Palmer, who had gained the reputation as a true intellect, as well as an eloquent and

¹⁶ Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 155.

powerful speaker. In addition, his friends often noted his scrupulously neat dress from head to toe, impeccable manners, and general courtly carriage. Both Augusta and Ben were preceded by their own reputations, and on one of her weekend visits, they were introduced. Palmer later described the sense of first impression upon meeting Augusta:

The attention of a stranger would be arrested by the air of repose diffused over her person. It was characteristic of her girlhood, so far removed from the giddiness of the young coquette. It was not the sedateness of the matron into which it may have later grown. Few enjoyed more than she the humorous side of life, or whose sensibilities responded more quickly to all that was gracious and tender. It was not inertness, nor could it be termed even sobriety, for there was a glow in her manner which won to her side the young as well as the old. The word “repose” alone describes it, and it made her so restful to others. Whatever cares might oppress, or passions disturb, to come into her presence was to come into the region of calm. It was like a breeze from the sea which took the fever from the brow.¹⁷

The mutual interest between the two, however, would not grow unhindered.¹⁸ On behalf of the seminary faculty, Professor Howe often earnestly and publicly exhorted his students not to allow their minds to be distracted from their studies by thoughts of marriage. Their primary calling was the focused preparation for the high calling of the gospel ministry, and this deserved all of their immediate time and energy. Just after such an address was made to the student body, Palmer boldly approached his professor to ask for his consent to his engagement with his stepdaughter. Not only did Howe refuse to give his permission, he also forbade Palmer to see Augusta again until he had completed his seminary course. Ultimately, however, there was no one to whom the Howes would more gladly have entrusted their daughter than Benjamin Palmer. Howe was well aware of Palmer’s abilities and potential, and Augusta’s mother had been a pupil of Benjamin’s father, Edward, and thought very highly of the Palmer family. In the meantime, the

¹⁷ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 97-98.

¹⁸ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 71.

young couple mostly respected the wishes of Augusta's parents. They continued to exchange notes and attend church together on Sundays, but waited until Palmer graduated from Columbia in the spring of 1841 to pursue the relationship officially.¹⁹

After graduation, Palmer returned to the church in Anderson County, South Carolina where he had conducted services the previous summer while traveling for the *Temperance Advocate*. After being licensed to preach by the Presbytery of Charleston, he spent the summer as a supply preacher at Good Hope Church. That October, he received his first call to serve as pastor from the First Presbyterian Church of Savannah, Georgia. Assured of a regular income, Benjamin and Augusta began making plans for an elegant fall wedding. Howe insisted that the ceremony take place in the family home and officiated the service himself on October 7, 1841.

With ten dollars in his pocket and all their belongings in one small trunk, the couple soon departed for Savannah in a buggy presented to them by Howe as a wedding gift. Parting was bitter-sweet, especially for Augusta, who cried all the first morning of their journey, distraught over the idea of saying good-bye to her mother and stepfather. Palmer, disturbed and concerned for his new bride's well-being, offered to return her home to Columbia and go to Savannah alone. So startled by the offer, Augusta immediately began to laugh, assuring him that his plan was more dreadful than leaving her mother!²⁰ Over the country roads, beneath the canopies of October foliage, the young

¹⁹ *Memorial Volume*, 424. Green, "Life and Letters of Dr. Palmer," 5. Johnson claims that Howe was opposed to the engagement because of the relative poverty associated with the vocation of a young Christian minister. Green, a personal friend of Benjamin and Augusta, suggests the more reliable account. Green later had a similar experience when he was a student of Howe and was interested in Howe's younger daughter. Howe reportedly said, "This is Palmer's case right over again, and you know I can't give my consent." Green married the younger daughter as soon as he finished at the seminary.

²⁰ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 74.

couple continued their trip. They were in love, the world was before them, and a position of honor and potential awaited them in Savannah.

The First Presbyterian Church of Savannah had been organized in 1827 by a group of thirteen members of Independent Presbyterian Church (founded by Scotsmen in 1755) desiring to form a congregation with direct ties to the Presbyterian church in the United States. Included in the group of thirteen was the famous American church music composer, Lowell Mason. The Rev. John Boggs served the church until 1829, followed by the Rev. Charles Colcock Jones of Liberty County, Georgia from 1831-1832, who resigned to pursue missionary labors with blacks in Georgia.²¹ Following a string of supply preachers, the Rev. Joseph L. Jones served the church from 1837 until his death in 1841.²² The relatively small congregation had experienced the instability of short pastorates interspersed with irregular pulpit supply, and it was with eager anticipation that they received the young minister upon his arrival that October.

For the first few months in Savannah, Benjamin and Augusta lived with the family of one of the elders in the church before setting up home in a modest rented cottage. A young slave named Caroline, who grew up with Augusta in her parents'

²¹ Charles Colcock Jones (1804-1863), Presbyterian clergyman, was a native of Liberty County, Georgia. He trained at Phillips Academy (1825-1827), Andover Theological Seminary (1827-1829), and Princeton Theological Seminary (1829-1830). In 1846, he received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania. He served as Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Savannah (1831-1832), and then devoted himself to evangelizing plantation slaves. He also served as Professor of Church History and Polity at Columbia Theological Seminary (1847-1850). For works on Charles C. Jones, see Robert M. Myers, *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972) and *A Georgian at Princeton* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976); Erskine Clarke, *Wrestlin' Jacob: A Portrait of Religion in the Old South* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979) and *Dwelling Place: A Plantation Epic* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Eduard N. Loring, "Charles C. Jones: Missionary to Plantation Slaves, 1831-1847" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1976).

²² Clarence and Dorothy Williams, *The History of the First Presbyterian Church of Savannah, Georgia, 1827-1977* (Savannah: Kennickell Printing Company, 1977). Johnson, *Life and Letters*, reports a core group of fourteen began the First Presbyterian Church.

home, came to live with the Palmers as their house servant. Augusta and Caroline were about the same age and for years had enjoyed a good relationship. Caroline would remain with the Palmer family until her death in 1894.

Palmer immediately took to the responsibilities of a preacher and pastor, while preparing for his ordination exams for the Presbytery of Georgia. Historically, Presbyterianism has taken seriously the biblical commands to “guard what has been entrusted” to the church’s teaching office by not being “hasty in the laying on of hands.”²³ Practically, this has meant demanding requirements of long periods of observation and education, followed by careful examination, before setting a man apart for the public ministry of the word and sacrament. Palmer had consistently proven himself both academically and morally in the eyes of the church courts, but the final process of ordination exams was no small matter. Topics for the rigorous Presbytery examination included ancient languages, natural sciences, mathematics, astronomy, geography, botany, philosophy, rhetoric, logic, Christian theology, experimental religion, sacraments, church government and discipline, church history, and pastoral care. In addition, candidates were required to submit a written exegesis of an Old Testament Hebrew text and a New Testament Greek text, a theological paper in Latin, and a theological paper in English. The exams would occur as the Presbytery met over the course of several days, and would also include the candidate preaching a trial sermon before the Presbytery. The entire process was designed to ensure that those ordained to public ministry were broadly educated and thoroughly grounded in classical reformed theology. They were to be exemplary models of biblical piety and morality, and their

²³ 1 Timothy 6:20, 5:22; 2 Timothy 1:14, 2:15, 3:14, 4:1-5, etc.

particular skills for the office were to be tested and confirmed by the guardians of the established order.²⁴

On the evening of Saturday, March 5, 1842 Palmer preached his trial sermon before his congregation and the Presbytery of Georgia from the text of John 3:3, “Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” After the service, the Presbytery approved Palmer for ordination, and the service was scheduled for the following morning.²⁵ Sunday was a proud day for the Palmer family. A special invitation was extended to Benjamin’s father, Edward, to preach his son’s ordination sermon on Ezekiel 33:7, “Therefore thou shalt hear the word at my mouth, and warn them from me.” The Rev. Robert Quarterman, pastor of the Midway Church in Georgia, presided over the solemn occasion, impressing upon the congregation the importance of the event. The Rev. Charles Colcock Jones, former pastor of the church, gave a solemn charge to Palmer. Palmer’s cousin and close friend, the Rev. Isaac S.K. Axson, who had been instrumental in his conversion, charged the congregation with their responsibilities to their newly installed shepherd. With Palmer kneeling, the presbyters placed their hands upon him in accordance with apostolic example, and he was set apart by prayer to the office of minister.

²⁴ Erskine Clarke, *Our Southern Zion: A History of Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1690-1990* (Tuscaloosa, AL : University of Alabama Press, 1996). Chapter 10, “An Intellectual Tradition: The Quest for a Middle Way,” is a helpful overview of the Presbyterian ritual of the ordination examination and the tensions that often accompanied the process.

²⁵ *Second Book of Minutes of the Presbytery of Georgia*, commenced November, 1840, 60-62, Presbyterian Historical Society, Montreat, NC. The Historical Society was closed by decision of the PCUSA in 2007, during the course of this project. The majority of the southern Presbyterian holdings were moved to the C. Benton Kline, Jr. Special Collections and Archives, John Burlew Campbell Library, Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA. Items researched at Montreat before the move are hereafter cited Montreat 2007.

Palmer worked zealously to fulfill the requirements of his new calling. Every aspect of ministerial work seemed to suit him, from preaching to administration to pastoral service. The young minister held himself to a high standard of excellence in all facets, but as was often typical for him, he soon felt overwhelmed, struggling to meet his own expectations. He later wrote:

There is an experience somewhat dark and painful, which these pastors around me will verify as occurring in the life of every young preacher. It is when he has fairly used up the elementary knowledge which prepared him for entrance upon the sacred office, and he sinks under the oppressive sense of mental exhaustion. He finds himself confronted with the responsibilities of which he cannot be divested, except at death, and which he feels wholly incapacitated to fulfill. He has spoken all he ever knew without hope of another fresh thought as long as he may live. There is for him, apparently, neither retreat nor progress.²⁶

It was during this trying time that Palmer turned to the Rev. Willard Preston of the Independent Presbyterian Church of Savannah for counsel. At age fifty-seven, the older minister was empathetic with his struggles, and came to Palmer as a father seeking to comfort and encourage.

Tearing a leaf from his own record, he exposed the secret of a like humiliation in his earlier years, and, pausing to lay his hand upon the Sacred Book, he pointed to the inexhaustible treasures hid therein, and, as answering to these, he alluded to the depths of Christian experience lying yet undeveloped in my own heart, which would be opened by the Divine Spirit to all the truth contained in the Scriptures themselves. It was another Elisha opening the eyes of the young man to behold the mountain full of horses and chariots of fire round about. From this time forth there lingered no fear of future bankruptcy in the ministry of the Word.²⁷

Through these early trials, Palmer was developing a growing, personal appreciation for the practical application of Scripture to the trials of life. This was a skill in which he

²⁶ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "A Memorial Address Delivered on the Night of the 14th of June, 1891, in the Independent Presbyterian Church, of Savannah, Ga.," in *In Memoriam. Rev. I.S.K. Axson, D.D., Oct. 3, 1813 – March 31, 1891* (Savannah: The Morning News Print, 1891), 6.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 7. See 2 Kings 6 for Palmer's allusion.

would continue to grow in proficiency – in his own life and in the lives of his parishioners.

While serving as minister of the First Presbyterian Church, Palmer spent much of his time continuing his education and improving the breadth of his study. His reading included leading theological reviews, as well as books on theology, travel, and history. He was particularly interested in the doctrines of justification, substitutionary atonement, the inspiration of Scripture, and church government.²⁸ From observing his father, he had learned the great importance of paying social calls, as well as being available for pastoral work when sickness or other emergencies called. He had also learned from his father the art of efficiency and the importance of a pastor guarding his time in his study. To this end, he began working to move away from the time-consuming task of writing out his sermons verbatim and preaching from a full manuscript. Instead, he typically would spend the week reading and preparing a sermon outline, from which he would then preach in a more spontaneous style. Robert Q. Mallard, lifelong friend and colleague of Palmer, described his developing technique for sermon preparation:

In later years, after the homiletic habit had been thoroughly acquired, he has told me, that he thought out his sermons, without reference to expression, save as to points and occasional metaphor, trusting to the occasion to suggest words. As to his prayer-meeting, in which he was especially happy, I remember to have heard him once say that he only settled two things – ‘the hole at which he was to go in, and the hole at which he was to go out.’²⁹

²⁸ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 81. Johnson lists *On the Covenants* by Wistus, Magee on the atonement and sacrifices, the works of John Owen and John Howe, *The Institutes* by John Calvin, Dwight’s and Dick’s Theologies, Kurtz’s “History of the Old Covenant,” and Boston’s “Fourfold State.”

²⁹ Mallard, “Personal Reminiscences,” 114. Mallard indicates that when Palmer was particularly pleased with a sermon, or if he received requests, it was his custom to write it down on Monday. Later in his ministry, his sermons were often transcribed while he preached by a stenographer for publication in newspapers, pamphlets, or printed collections. The title page for *A Weekly Publication, Containing Sermons*. 2 vols. (New Orleans: Clark & Hofeline, 1875-1876) indicates the sermons were reported by C.W. Colton, “Phonographer.” This very likely indicates some of Palmer’s later sermons were recorded by phonograph, then later transcribed. If found, such recordings would be the “holy grail” of Palmer studies.

This approach worked well for Palmer, and allowed him more time to study Scripture and other related works. A more extemporaneous style also gave Palmer a greater mental excitement in the pulpit, and his sermons a greater flexibility and exhilaration. “Dr. Palmer, in his readiness was an exceptional case,” Mallard added, “and not an example to be followed by lesser minds and less practiced preachers.”³⁰

In old age, reflecting on his first charge at Savannah, Palmer recalled the remarkable patience the church had with his “youthful rashness.” He often recalled a member of the Savannah church who was particularly skilled in leading public prayer. Though he was called frequently to lead the congregation, he began to develop a fear of speaking in public. Eventually, the man came to explain his phobia to his pastor, and asked him not to call on him again. Despite his best efforts, Palmer was unsuccessful in trying to persuade him otherwise, and finally declared to the man that he fully intended to continue calling on him to pray, regardless. At the next prayer meeting, Palmer did as he said, calling on the man to pray. An uncomfortable silence fell over the room as the man refused to respond. After a few moments, the pastor repeated his request. Again, there was no response. Finally, the determined pastor announced, “Brother, we shall just sit here till you lead us in prayer.” This proved to be too much for the man, who immediately led the group in an eloquent and uplifting prayer. Never again did he refuse to respond when called to lead the congregation. In old age, when asked if he would still use the same approach in a similar case, Palmer would respond with a smile, “No, I think that is a case of God’s overruling the rashness of my youth for good. Had the

³⁰ Ibid., 114.

circumstances of God's ordering been different my rashness might have been followed by much evil."³¹

Above all, the young pastor's chief concern was the spiritual condition of those with whom he had contact, and he was constantly looking for opportunities to share and advance the gospel message. During the winter of 1841-1842 in Savannah, both First Presbyterian and Independent Presbyterian were holding a regular series of "protracted meetings," seeking blessing and revival from God. A young friend of the Palmers happened to be traveling through town the same week and dropped in for a visit. Palmer urged him to stay in their home, inviting him to attend some of the church services. Having nothing better to do, the young man took him up on the offer, but after several days passed, Palmer noticed that he was becoming increasingly irritated. Years later, the pastor remembered the Monday afternoon when the young man came into his study, sat down beside his desk, and according to Palmer snapped, "You preachers are the most contradictory men in the world; you say, and you unsay, just as it pleases you, without the least pretention to consistency."

Palmer was not surprised at the outburst. He had certainly noticed the growing restlessness in his friend over the past several days, taking it as a positive indication that he was secretly wrestling with the content of his preaching. Not wanting to give his friend the opportunity "to coquette with the Gospel," the pastor thought it best to respond with seeming indifference. Without stopping his pen, he simply answered his friend, "Well, what now?"

³¹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 83.

“Why, yesterday you said in your sermon that sinners were perfectly helpless in themselves – utterly unable to repent or believe and then turned square round and said that they would all be damned if they did not!”

Without raising his eyes from his writing, Palmer calmly replied, “Well, there is no use in our quarrelling over this matter; either you can or you cannot. If you can, all I have to say is that I hope you will just go and do it.”

A moment of silence filled the pastor’s study. With a choking utterance, the young man replied, “I have been trying my best for three whole days and cannot.”

“Ah,” Palmer said, laying down his pen, “that puts a different face upon it; we will go then and tell the difficulty straight out to God.”

The two men knelt together, and the pastor earnestly prayed for the man’s soul. Palmer held firmly to the biblical doctrine of total inability – that all are dead in sin and completely unable to come to a saving knowledge of Christ. He fully affirmed that people are free moral agents, capable of making moral choices, but the true issue was that fallen humanity does not desire to seek after God. Palmer was convinced that turning to Christ in repentance, bringing about spiritual life from his own dead soul, was something the young man could not do. This was an act only God could accomplish, and to God the pastor turned, pleading for divine interposition on behalf of the troubled soul and for the fulfillment of divine promises. After earnestly interceding, the two men rose, and Palmer said no more. Left in his powerlessness in the hands of God, the young man came

through the struggle in a short time, rejoicing in the hope of eternal life.³² Later, Palmer would explain:

The fact simply is, that ‘the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God; neither indeed *can* be.’ The danger is not so much that the sinner will be crushed into despair by the clear apprehension of this truth, as that he will fail to realize it at all. They wrap themselves in the fatal delusion that they are competent to repent at will, and so they sport with the whole matter as being perfectly under their control. The issue becomes fearfully momentous, as soon as they practically discover that they are, in themselves, utterly without strength, and therefore wholly dependent on the sovereign mercy of God. It is unwise to strip the truth of its apparent sternness by any attempts at metaphysical explanation, or to blunt its edge by offering premature comfort. It is better to deal honestly with it as a tremendous fact, and then leave the awakened sinner face to face with his peril, thrown back in the solemn crisis upon the pledged mercy of God, in Christ. ‘Shall I bring to the birth, and not cause to bring forth? saith the Lord.’³³

Palmer’s belief in the helpless spiritual condition of humanity, with the only hope being the miraculous rebirth wrought by God alone through Jesus Christ, would remain at the heart and soul of his entire ministry.

While maturing in his ministerial abilities, Palmer was about to engage in the challenges of maturing as a father. On July 26, 1842, Benjamin Blakeley Palmer was born in the Palmer home, named for his father and Augusta’s late brother. In a time when childbirth was often accompanied with much suffering, debilitation, and high mortality rates, Palmer was overwhelmed with joy and thankfulness at the instant of his first cry and the news that Augusta was well.³⁴ “The long suspense was over; and the deep sympathy which had taken up into the soul the anguish that another felt in the body,

³² The encounter is recounted by Palmer in “Practical Uses of the Doctrine of Inability,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 1, no. 24 (August 5, 1869): 1. Biblical passages that Palmer would typically refer to in explaining his understanding of the fall and humanity’s inability and unwillingness to seek after God included John 3:19, 5:40; Ephesians 2:1-5; 2 Timothy 2:25; 2 Corinthians 4:4; Mark 4:11-29; Romans 3:10-18; Job 14:4

³³ *Ibid.*, 1. The two passages quoted by Palmer are Romans 8:7 and Isaiah 66:9.

³⁴ McMillen, *Motherhood in the Old South*, 79-110.

gave place to exultation when the great peril was passed. The young father bowed himself on the spot where he stood and poured out an over-charged heart in grateful praise.”³⁵

That same summer, he also shared his pastoral services with Independent Presbyterian Church while the Rev. Joseph C. Stiles was absent due to illness. This included visiting their sick, leading their weekly prayer meetings, and encouraging them in their Christian fellowship. By all indications, Palmer’s family life and career were going as well as possibly could be expected. The congregation of First Presbyterian was flourishing and growing.³⁶ Palmer had earned the respect of his church and the Savannah community, and his success did not go unnoticed outside of his Presbytery. Only one year into his first call, Palmer received a request to return to his home state and fill the pulpit of the prominent First Presbyterian Church of Columbia, South Carolina.

The church at Savannah abhorred the idea of giving up their pastor, but Palmer was convinced for several reasons to take advantage of the opportunity. Established in 1795, the church was located in capital city of South Carolina, also the home of South Carolina College and Columbia Seminary. Though not particularly large numerically, the church consisted of a congregation of wide and pervasive influence, including state legislators, judges, and the faculty and staff of both the college and seminary.³⁷ Many of the theological students from the seminary attended the church, which would give Palmer the opportunity to model for them an effective pulpit ministry. Moreover, Augusta

³⁵ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 13.

³⁶ “The church as a whole had been edified. Attention had been called to the church as a congregation where the people were really taught and delightfully taught.” Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 85.

³⁷ Johnson indicates 128 members (116 white, 12 “colored”) when Palmer arrived in 1843. Session minutes from April 9, 1851, the first record in which such numbers are given, indicate 199 members (167 white, 32 “colored”). Session minutes of the First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC, 1843-1856, South Caroliniana Library, University of South Carolina, Columbia [hereafter cited as SCL].

longed to be closer to her parents, a desire that had grown stronger since baby Benjamin arrived. After the call was approved and processed by the respective presbyteries, the Palmer family returned to Columbia in January of 1843.

Palmer set himself to his new work with the same zeal and determination that had marked his ministry in Savannah. His close friend, Thornwell, who had served briefly as the previous pastor of the church, had resigned two years prior and was now president of South Carolina College and a member of the church. Thornwell was loved by the congregation, and was coming generally to be regarded as the greatest mind of the American Presbyterian church.³⁸ No doubt, it would be difficult for the twenty-five year old minister to assume the responsibilities with such an esteemed colleague auditing, but Palmer believed that he was up for the task.

On January 29, 1843, he preached his inaugural sermon from the text of Numbers 22:38, “And Balaam said unto Balak, Lo, I am come unto thee: have I now any power at all to say any thing? the word that God putteth in my mouth, that shall I speak.” After setting the passage in its historical context, the preacher proceeded to develop the theme of the relationship between the preacher and his charge. First, the true minister of the gospel is specially called by God. Second, true ministerial ability and authority are derived from God. In Palmer’s view, the minister was “a messenger from God to speak only the word that is put into his mouth.” He may “not invent or add anything to his message. His sole care must be to inquire what God the Lord will say.”³⁹ Palmer expressed a classical Protestant understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture – that the

³⁸ James O. Farmer Jr. *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

³⁹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 88-89.

completed canon is adequate for every decision of faith or life, and the denial that there is alongside Scripture an unwritten revelatory source of equal or superior authority.⁴⁰

Palmer's understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture flowed naturally from his belief in its divine origin. He defined this doctrine of inspiration as "the actuating energy of the Holy Spirit, guided by which the human instruments, chosen by God, have officially and infallibly proclaimed his will, either orally or in the Sacred Scriptures."⁴¹ This too was the classic Reformed understanding of the origin of the Bible, as succinctly stated in the opening chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. In a sermon preached at the dedication of the new church edifice of the Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis in 1876, Palmer would proclaim:

Without probing the mystery, the grand result is enough – that "holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost;" [2 Peter 1:21] borne forward, as the term implies, under an influence which, whilst it did not restrain the mind's freedom, enabled it to hold in solution, as it were, the deep things of God; and to give those perfect utterances in which divine truth, according to the laws of human thought, chose at length permanently to crystallize.⁴²

Palmer's views of the Bible and theology were in no way innovative, and His entire ministry was marked by an unwavering commitment to the doctrinal system summarized in the Westminster Standards, which he believed to be synonymous with biblical Christianity:

Indeed, we utter a long cherished conviction, when we say that, next to the Bible, from which all that relates to God and the soul must be drawn, there are no books which we would sooner recommend for an experimental and devotional use than the Calvinistic Standards. Many a Christian will devour a whole library of books

⁴⁰ "The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit or traditions of men." Westminster Confession of Faith I.6.

⁴¹ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "Evidence of Christianity," unpublished manuscript, Benjamin Morgan Palmer Papers, Montreat 2007.

⁴² Palmer, *A Weekly Publication, Containing Sermons*, vol. 2, 13.

of devotion and pious biographies, trying to draw on a ready-made experience, as he would a glove, when a better manual of practical religion is almost thumbed out in the hands of his child. Let him put ninety-nine hundredths of these volumes into the fire, and thoroughly digest his Shorter Catechism, and he will soon come forth a stronger, brighter, happier Christian, and in sooner time, than if he had read the memoirs of all the saints and martyrs from Abel until now. The taste of the Church is so superficial that we should not wonder if the reader is smiling at this as a conceit, rather than a matured conviction of the writer. We would only plead with him for the experiment. Let him take the doctrine which he conceives most remote from practical life, and most hidden among the deep things of God – let him ponder it over till his mind has taken a deep and firm grasp of it – let him trace its relations to other doctrines, and to the whole scheme with which it harmonizes – above all, let him pray over it, until it is so revealed that he feels its power over his own spirit.⁴³

Regarding Palmer's lifelong commitment to Reformed theology, friend and colleague

Rev. James Hodge Nall later wrote:

As a theologian, Dr. Palmer was thoroughly evangelical, conservative, accepting the Word of God as the original and final source of authority, and the standards of the church in their obvious, historical import. Here he planted himself. Holding the great distinguishing principles of the Reformed and Calvinistic theology, he felt that he had beneath his feet an immovable rock, a foundation that could never be destroyed. He held to these doctrines, not only as distinct propositions, but as a whole, a complete system, derived and built upon the clear and undoubted teachings of scripture, as the mind of God. To the last he clung to the system in its integrity, as one not to be tampered with; he could not bear the thought of change in the long-established and accepted creed of the church.⁴⁴

Theologically, Palmer viewed himself as a defender of a system of biblical doctrine that had been faithfully entrusted to him. Earnestly contending for this traditional body of divinity against modernism and theological liberalism would, in many ways, sum up his life's work.

On May 7, 1843 Palmer was officially installed as the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia. His father-in-law, George Howe, was the Moderator

⁴³ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "A Plea for Doctrine as the Instrument of Sanctification," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (July 1849): 51.

⁴⁴ James Hodge Nall, "Benjamin Morgan Palmer, D.D., LL.D.," *Presbyterian Quarterly* 16, no. 1 (July 1902): 86.

of Presbytery and presided over the installation service, posing the constitutional questions to the new minister before the congregation. Palmer's father, Edward, preached the sermon for the occasion, as he had done for his son at his ordination in Savannah. James Thornwell charged the congregation.⁴⁵

Palmer poured himself into opening God's word, administering the sacraments, and praying for the people under his charge. Every Sunday, he preached three sermons – morning, afternoon, and evening – each between forty to ninety minutes in length. Only after several years did he come to admit that a third service was largely unprofitable, both to the congregation and the preacher! As typical in most southern Presbyterian churches, communion services were held quarterly, with preparatory services on Friday evening, Saturday afternoon, and Saturday evening. Infants of church members were usually baptized at communion services. Other special services were held on occasion, such as a national day of prayer and fasting for various occasions, or prayer services for missions, colleges, and seminaries.⁴⁶

During the winter of 1844, as the Palmers were settling into their new charge, the couple rejoiced to learn that Augusta was expecting a second child. This joyful news, however, was soon met with the heartbreaking realization that young Benjamin Blakely was gravely ill. For unknown reasons, the frail twenty-two month old child was slowly wasting away. Palmer had often proudly imagined his son's career, carrying on the family name, and continuing the successive generations of ministers in the Palmer line.

⁴⁵ Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, May 7, 1843, SCL.

⁴⁶ David B. Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It: First Presbyterian Church Columbia, South Carolina, 1795-1995* (Columbia: R.L. Bryan Company, 1994), 54. The first Sunday in July 1846 was set apart by the General Assembly, because of the Mexican-American War, as a day of "humiliation and confession of our national sins."

In the joys and responsibilities of fatherhood, Palmer had found “a divinity school with richer teachings than that which had trained and sent him forth to his lifework. A grand theology was forming itself out of these experiences, where every thought was turned into prayer, and knowledge glided into worship.”⁴⁷ Now, through the tragedy of losing a child, he was learning a profound lesson in dealing with sorrow. In the depths of sadness, Palmer prayed for strength to submit to God’s will. Remembering his son’s baptism, he was comforted “with the strong comfort of believing that the promise of the covenant was assured to his seed for ever.”⁴⁸ Again, he and his wife drew comfort from their faith and Scripture – practical comfort that Palmer would have many opportunities to share with others in times of great loss over the upcoming decades of ministry.

Overcome with grief, the parents spent the passing days holding their son closely. As the days turned into weeks, Palmer stared into his son’s brilliant eyes, offering prayers on his behalf, but the fever would not break. On Sunday, June 2, the child quietly passed away, and his father would carry the pain of the loss with him for the remainder of his life. “It is more than forty years since then, and the frost of winter has whitened the hairs upon the father’s head; but across the stretch of all those years two hazel eyes, bright as coals of Juniper, still burn before his vision; and the memory is fresh as yesterday of that oldish look, coming out of eternity and resting upon that dying infant.”⁴⁹ Three months after the tragic loss of life, Sarah Frances was born. During their time in Columbia, the Palmers would be graced with four additional girls: Mary Howe, Augusta Barnard, Kate Gordon, and Marion Louisa.

⁴⁷ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 15.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 22

⁴⁹ Ibid., 17. Benjamin Blakeley Palmer (July 26, 1842 – June 2, 1844) is buried in the Elmwood Cemetery on Elmwood Avenue by his older sister, Sarah Frances Palmer (September 19, 1844 – July 16, 1863).

Sadness befell Palmer again in the fall of 1847 when he received word that his mother was dying. Hurrying home, he was with her at her bedside during her last days, reading Scripture, singing hymns, and tending to her comfort.⁵⁰ Palmer held the highest respect for her grace, intelligence, generosity, love, and devotion, both as a mother and as a wife.⁵¹

In addition to diligently teaching the Columbia congregation from the Bible, Palmer was equally vigorous in guiding them in their daily living according to its principles. Dividing the congregation into wards, he systematically paid pastoral visits to each family, accompanied by the elder assigned to the ward. He particularly focused on the sick, the needy, and those seeking Christian guidance. The Session records from the church are also full of discipline cases involving both black and white members of the church for various public indiscretions, with censures ranging from admonition, to suspension from the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, to excommunication from the church. Drunkenness was a common transgression that required involvement by the session. On one such occasion, a member of the church, who was known for his fondness of drink, became intoxicated and passed out in the middle of a Columbia street during the town's Fourth of July celebration. Cited to appear before the church's elders, the man was suspended from the Lord's Table until he could demonstrate to their satisfaction that he was fully and sincerely repentant. The offender admitted that the sentence was just, and expressed his intention to humbly submit to the ruling. Palmer, however, was not satisfied with merely dealing with the problem in a private session. The episode had been public and flagrant, and at the recommendation of the Pastor, the

⁵⁰ Ibid., see Palmer's eulogy of his mother 85-93.

⁵¹ "Without such a mother Mr. Palmer had not been such a pastor." Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 105.

Session ordered that the sentence be announced publicly from the pulpit. Upon hearing the ruling, the man reportedly jumped to his feet and said, “You shall not do it: I will not submit to it.”

“The order will certainly be carried out on the next Sabbath,” Palmer calmly assured him.

“Then, sir, you will do it at your own peril,” the man replied. “I will arm myself and take my seat in the gallery over the pulpit, and if you attempt to read that paper, I shall fire upon you.”

“If you are there,” responded Palmer, “you will hear the paper read.” The following Sunday, the man did attend church, and Palmer did read the paper. No attempt was made to execute his threat.⁵²

Palmer’s concern for the practical holiness for those under his care was driven by a high and serious understanding of his biblical charge. He did not seek to be domineering, but demonstrated a genuine and sensitive personal witness.⁵³ On one occasion, he wrote of a broken man who confessed to him, “You do not know what sort of a drunkard I am; I carry my jug to bed with me every night – it takes the place of my wife – and I pull from it so often that it can scarcely be said to be corked at all. If I could only break the bonds of this cruel habit, there might be hope for me; but I have tried, a

⁵² Green, “Life and Letters of Dr. Palmer,” 5. Verbatim conversations recounted years later should be used and read with the recognition of the natural limits of human memory. The author has chosen to make limited use of these autobiographical accounts for a number of reasons. Not only do they provide a unique flavor and gist of events that are certainly based on true events, but they also show what contemporaries viewed as the ideal and essential components of spiritual conversation for the times. For other examples of cases involving drunkenness, see Session minutes from November 27, 1847; June 12 and 18, 1848; December 26, 1848; January 30, 1849; August 3, 1849.

⁵³ Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:2-4

thousand times, in vain. I am bound, hand and foot, with its accursed chains, and there is nothing left for me but to drink and be damned.”

To the self-accuser, Palmer replied, “You entirely mistake the matter. What you need is a Savior to save you from your drunkenness; he shall be called Jesus, because he shall save his people from their sins. The salvation from hell is the only result of this salvation from sin. You must come to Jesus as a drunkard, or not at all.” With the man sobbing uncontrollably, the two men fell to their knees, and the pastor covered him with words of prayer.⁵⁴

In addition to public drunkenness, the Columbia session also frequently dealt with issues of marriage, divorce, remarriage, fornication, gambling, raffling, and social dancing. A particularly interesting case occurred in the December of 1847, as the Mexican-American War was coming to an end. General James Shields visited Columbia to pay tribute before the state legislature to the famous Palmetto Regiment of South Carolina, which had served in his brigade under Zachary Taylor along the Rio Grande River. The Palmetto Regiment had trained at The Citadel in Charleston under Major Richard W. Colcock, and was the first to raise a U.S. flag over Mexico City. The town of seven thousand was wild with enthusiasm over the general’s visit, and a grand ball was given in his honor. On Wednesday, December 22, Palmer called a session meeting to address an issue that occurred at the ball, along with a recent episode of raffling, with members of the First Presbyterian Church.

It was brought to the notice of the session that at a public ball given recently in compliment to General Shields, four of the members were in attendance, besides the children of several other members; also at a fair recently held by the order of the Odd Fellows, raffling was countenanced and participated in by several

⁵⁴ B.M. Palmer, “Jesus Not a Half Saviour.” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 1 (April 8, 1869): 1.

members of the church. The object of this meeting of the session was to confer as to the best method of arresting this comparatively new tide of evil influence setting in upon the church.

It appeared in conversation that considerable diversity of opinion prevailed among the members as to the impropriety of dancing and the sin under certain circumstances, of attending public balls. In view of this fact, and the fact that some of these irregularities, as for instance raffling, have probably been committed thoughtlessly, perhaps ignorantly, it was deemed inexpedient by the session to enter upon any immediate and active course of discipline.⁵⁵

Palmer had prepared a position paper, building a biblical case against these particular transgressions, which he suggested should be read from the pulpit. The session requested some time to reflect on the views, and reconvene on Friday night.

At the Friday meeting, Palmer reported to the session that he had spoken with the four church members who had attended the ball. One couple “justified themselves, and were somewhat offended with him for the plainness of his remonstrance.” The other couple “acknowledged that they had attended thoughtlessly and regretted that they had done so.”⁵⁶ A conversation took place regarding Palmer’s position paper, and the church elders expressed their general agreement with the principles of the document. They could not, however, reach an agreement regarding whether it would be expedient to read the paper publicly.⁵⁷ A final decision on the matter was tabled for a third meeting the following day. On Saturday, Christmas Day, the session modified and adopted the paper to be read by the pastor from the pulpit the next morning, outlining the church’s formal warnings against the questionable practices.⁵⁸ First, raffling and gambling were clearly condemned as unbiblical practices. Second, a stern warning was issued against “worldly

⁵⁵ Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, December 22, 1847, SCL.

⁵⁶ Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, December 24, 1847, SCL.

⁵⁷ Johnson relates a tradition that Palmer promptly resigned when the Session would not acquiesce to the public reading, declaring that his conscience would not allow him to pastor a dancing church. This is doubtful since there is no mention of this action in the detailed minutes. See Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 94.

⁵⁸ Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, December 25, 1847, SCL.

amusements, such as dancing parties, balls, and theater, the race course and such like.”

The argument was not against the specific activities, but with the sensuous desires and vain connotations associated with them:

It may be difficult to draw accurately the line of demarcation between the lawful and unlawful pleasures of the Christian. We believe that this is wisely left in doubt, in order to test the piety and spiritual knowledge of the Lord’s people. Yet there is one obvious principle which covers this whole case. Christians are witnesses for God, and among other things they must testify concerning the vanity of this present evil world. But if they participate in the chosen pleasures of the world they do it at the expense of that testimony they must bear for God.⁵⁹

Finally, the session urged Christian parents to remember the vows they took at the baptism of their children, and to take special care not to allow their children to indulge in “worldliness and dissipation.”

In addition to the public pronouncement, the Session also asked Palmer to preach a sermon on dancing, which he did on June 17, 1849.⁶⁰ His primary text was from Job 21:11, “They send forth their little ones like a flock, and their children dance.” Going through the Bible, he systematically analyzed every mention of dancing, concluding that the dances mentioned were either religious acts (either worship of the God of the Bible or pagan deities), or infrequent individual expressions of spontaneous joy at the commemoration of a victory or national festival. The only two exceptions were from his text in Job and Herodias’s daughter in Matthew 14:6, both of which were clearly seen as acts of approbation. After carefully weighing arguments for and against dancing, he concluded that its use as a social amusement, particularly in the context of “promiscuous

⁵⁹ Ibid. The full text of the position paper is included in the December 25 minutes.

⁶⁰ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *Social Dancing Inconsistent With a Christian Profession and Baptismal Vows: A Sermon Preached in the Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C., June 17, 1849* (Columbia: Office of the South Carolinian, 1849).

dancing between the sexes,”⁶¹ was inconsistent with the profession of the Christian gospel. The sermon is a typical example of Palmer’s precise reasoning, and his ability to examine a theme exhaustively, carefully answer opposing viewpoints, and draw a powerful, logical conclusion.

It is difficult to measure the congregation’s response to Palmer’s firm standards of moral discipline. It is clear from the record of the three session meetings held during the week of the dancing incident that the elders of the church were concerned about the potential reaction to such a stringent pronouncement, but they stood firmly with the pastor in the final decision. During Palmer’s fourteen-year ministry in Columbia, the church grew from 128 communing members in 1843 to over 225 in 1856.⁶² This may be considered a modest rate of growth by popular modern standards, but Palmer was not nearly as concerned with building a large church as he was with building a strong church, characterized by biblical literacy and spiritual maturity.

At the age of thirty, Palmer had proven himself able to balance the pressure to meet the high expectations of hundreds of congregants, while not compromising his core convictions of truth and morality. He had personally weathered the trials and sorrows of deep pain and loss, and as a result, he was empathetic as a counselor and experienced in offering comfort to those in tears and distress. As an accomplished business administrator, he successfully managed the daily operations of the church’s organization. He was also a gifted and prolific writer in the process of launching a new publishing enterprise as editor of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. Above all, he was known as a

⁶¹ Ibid., 9.

⁶² Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SCL. The minutes from March 31, 1854 note 224 members (190 white, 34 “colored”).

powerful preacher and evangelist. Palmer wore all of these hats with great poise and self-confidence, and all indications pointed to a future filled with potential and opportunities for larger influence at a national level.

Chapter 3

A Presbyterian of the Presbyterians¹

The remainder of this life will be consecrated in the fear of God to the development, perpetuation and exposition of the principles of Presbyterianism as I understand them, as they are summarily expressed in our Standards; and I am unwilling to run any ventures by which this Presbyterianism, which I desire to be more perfect in this Church of ours, shall be strangled.

– B. M. Palmer, *Letter to the Members of the Southern Presbyterian Church*

A cigar tight in mouth, Palmer paced his study. His furniture was arranged to give him a clear diagonal path, allowing him to walk back and forth as he crafted the sermon in his mind. The carpet was threadbare, evidence of the ten-hour days the Columbia minister spent in his study hard at work.² After choosing his text for Sunday, exegeting it in its original language, and consulting a few standard commentaries, he peripatetically developed his discourse, rehearsing point by point. This was his method week after week.

Palmer covered a broad range of topics in the pulpit. His sermons averaged up to an hour in length as he gave his subject a thorough biblical treatment. Generally, he did not take the more standard verse-by-verse expository approach to preaching the Scriptures, historically common in the Reformed tradition. Instead, he preferred to use a select verse or brief passage as a spring board to expound on larger biblical topics and themes. Describing his style, a contemporary wrote, “His sermons, like Paul’s Epistle to

¹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 658.

² Ibid., 91, 126.

the Romans, were doctrino-practical.”³ Having announced his text, Palmer would explain its historical context and provide a running commentary on the passage. In his exposition, he was always careful to demonstrate that the idea he proclaimed was “a truth contained in or grounded on that text that the hearers may discern how God teacheth it from thence.”⁴ Taking doctrinal propositions from his text, he would logically develop them in an “orderly and proportionate manner, with clearness and precision of method, bringing truth and duty home to the conscience, with most fervid appeal under all the sanctions of eternal judgment, pleading with his hearers by the mercies of God in Jesus Christ. The pulpit was his throne.”⁵ Finally, he would relate the teaching to several points of practical application.

He was a real preacher of the Gospel. He had studied the evidences of its being the word of God; had deliberately made up his mind that they were valid, and that the Bible is the word of God; had set that down as a fixed fact in his creed. He gave himself to preaching that word. Whatever others might preach, science, sociology, politics, literature, he would preach the Gospel, and the Gospel only, from his pulpit. It was a thing the world needed worst of all, and that need he would fill. He preached the Westminster interpretation of the Bible, preached it all; the doctrines of the Trinity and the incarnation; the doctrines of sin and grace, the doctrine of atonement, the doctrines of regeneration and conversion, justification and sanctification. He even preached boldly and frequently on those points of Calvinism which have been so bitterly attacked in every generation, viz.: total depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption, efficacious grace and perseverance therein unto the end. He was a theological preacher from the very order of his mind.⁶

Palmer’s reputation as a gifted preacher and rising denominational leader was growing within the Presbytery and the region. During the mid-1840s, there was much

³ Mallard, “Personal Reminiscences,” 111.

⁴ Westminster *Directory for the Publick Worship of God* (1645)

⁵ Nall, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer,” 87.

⁶ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 660. For helpful analyses of Palmer’s preaching and specific sermons, see Douglas Kelly, *Preachers With Power: Four Stalwarts of the South* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 106-118; Hughes Oliphant Old, *The Reading and Preaching of the Scriptures in the Worship of the Christian Church*, vol. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2007), 322-338.

discussion in Columbia about establishing a southern periodical to promote knowledge and theological discussion within the Presbyterian Church. Princeton, the premier northern Presbyterian seminary, offered such a publication, and Columbia Seminary was the logical base to launch a similar organ in the South. In 1846, the Synod of South Carolina endorsed a proposed plan to launch the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, James Henley Thornwell, and George Howe were the founding editors, and the first issue was published in June of 1847. The early issues contained many articles published anonymously, but later volumes identified the contributors as they covered a broad range of theological, historical, philosophical, and political topics.⁷ Palmer poured himself into the project, deciding on the content of the subject matter, soliciting articles from various contributors, and writing articles himself. During his time in Columbia, he contributed eleven articles for the *Review* totaling over three hundred pages.⁸

The quarterly publication quickly became one of the major theological journals in the United States, with a large national circulation. The wide distribution did much to help advance Palmer's national reputation. Other than pieces for student papers in Athens, the only work he had published before 1847 was an oration delivered before the

⁷ James L. Martin, "Alphabetical Index to the Titles of Articles in the Southern Presbyterian Review, Volumes I.—XXXIV," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (January 1884): 1-58. Martin identifies the contributors of all previous volumes.

⁸ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "The Relation between the Work of Christ and the Condition of the Angelic World," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 1 (June 1847): 34-63. "The Intellectual and Moral Character of the Jews," 1 (December 1847): 30-56. "An Inquiry into the Doctrine of Imputed Sin," 1 (March 1848): 97-129. "A Plea for Doctrine as the Instrument of Sanctification," 3 (July 1849): 32-54. "Church and State, Part 1," 3 (October 1849): 210-233. "Church and State, Part 2," 3 (April 1850): 573-609. "Christianity Vindicated from the Charge of Fanaticism," 4 (October, 1850): 198-231. "Baconianism and the Bible," 6 (October 1852): 226-254. "The Claims of the English Language," 6 (January, 1853): 301-332. "Mormonism," 6 (April, 1853): 559-590. "Import of Hebrew History," 9 (April 1856): 582-610.

literary societies at the University of Georgia on August 7, 1845.⁹ Palmer continued as an editor of the publication for the duration of his pastorate in Columbia, almost ten years.¹⁰

In addition to a regular preaching schedule, editing and writing for the *Review*, and his general pastoral duties, Palmer was also in demand for frequent speaking engagements. He did not keep an exhaustive record of the addresses he delivered, but a handful of known occasions gives an idea of the proportion of time he devoted to public oration. Literary societies were a prominent and prestigious component of campus social life in the nineteenth century, and Palmer was often called upon to address various societies.¹¹ In August of 1845 he spoke before the literary societies of his Athens alma mater on the “Influence of Religious Belief upon National Character.” In August of 1852 he delivered an address on “Baconianism and the Bible” before the literary societies of Davidson College, North Carolina. On August 9, 1854 he addressed the topic of “The Love of Truth the Inspiration of the Scholar” before the literary societies of Erskine College, South Carolina. In addition to engagements before literary societies, Palmer was also frequently called upon for commencement exercises and funerals, both of which were occasions of particularly great significance in the nineteenth century.

⁹ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *Influence of Religious Belief upon National Character. An Oration, Delivered Before the Demosthenian and Phi Kappa Societies, of the University of Georgia, August 7, 1845* (Athens: Banner Office, 1845).

¹⁰ The journal was then edited by a governing board, reorganized on a wider geographical basis, and later under the direction of Dr. James Woodrow of Columbia Seminary. The *Southern Presbyterian Review* ran from June of 1847 to October of 1885, and then was succeeded by the *Presbyterian Quarterly* from July of 1887 through 1904.

¹¹ See Coulter, *College Life*, 103-133. Literary Societies were the forerunners of the 20th century social fraternities and sororities. In the nineteenth century, focus was placed on debate and parliamentary procedure as a way of preparing students for public life and politics.

Palmer meanwhile continued to rise in accreditation and prominence within the denomination. On November 10, 1852 he received the degree of Doctor of Divinity from Oglethorpe College in Georgia, delivering the commencement address on “The Claims of the English Language.”¹² In 1853, he was commissioned by Presbytery as a delegate to the General Assembly in Philadelphia, providing more opportunities to increase his network within the church. It is not surprising that during this period he also began receiving numerous calls to serve as pastor from other Presbyterian churches. In 1846, the Second Presbyterian Church of Baltimore approached him, and though he was open to the possibility, his church successfully appealed to the Charleston Presbytery to prevent him from going. In 1852, the Session of his church received a letter from Glebe Street Church of Charleston informing them of their intention to pursue Palmer. Absent from the meeting, Palmer was unaware of the letter, and the clerk was quickly directed to respond by letter urging the church to desist from any further proceedings.¹³ That same year he received a call from Cincinnati, which again was vetoed by the Presbytery. When Palmer attended the 1853 General Assembly in Philadelphia, in response to the repeated calls for his service in the North, the southern commissioners expressed their unanimous opinion to the Assembly that Palmer should not leave the South. The southern presbyteries were not willing to give up one of their best and brightest.

¹² Allen P. Tankersley, *College Life at Old Oglethorpe* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1951), 163. Also, Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 149. Palmer’s address was published in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* 6 (January, 1853): 301-332. Oglethorpe College was chartered in 1835 in Midway, just south of the state capital of Milledgeville. Governed by the Presbytery of Georgia, it was one of the South’s earliest denominational schools. The school relocated to the new state capital of Atlanta in 1870, was re-chartered as a non-denominational institution in 1913, and became Oglethorpe University in 1965.

¹³ Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, January 31, 1852, SCL.

Regardless of their request, he received a call from Philadelphia to serve as pastor soon after the Assembly.¹⁴

Churches were not his only suitors. In 1853, Palmer was offered the chair of Hebrew at Danville Theological Seminary in Kentucky, which he refused. In 1854, he received a second call from the Central Church of Cincinnati. This time, the church sent a commission to plead their case before the Presbytery, which met in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Palmer was personally inclined to accept the call, but his church in Columbia sent a special delegate to protest the proposed removal of their beloved pastor. A courteous, extended discussion was held over a two-day period, and ultimately the Presbytery again declined to process the call. Palmer later wrote to the delegates of the Cincinnati committee, "Even though my views should not finally accord with theirs, I could but feel that I am as likely to be mistaken as they; & that a Providential hindrance being thrown in the way, it is a call to exercise that 'submission to my brethren in the Lord,' which I promised in my ordination vow."¹⁵ Call after call was issued by various churches, but the Session, Presbytery, or Synod was repeatedly able to protect the church's pastor. While some calls were enticing to Palmer for various reasons, others held no appeal whatsoever. One call received from a New York church included a blank line for his salary, with a request for him to write in his number. Even this did not persuade him.¹⁶

In the meantime, Palmer devoted himself to his congregation. When he had first arrived in Columbia, the church was meeting in a small, barn-like structure, completed in

¹⁴ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 146-147.

¹⁵ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, letter to Edward Taylor and J. H. Burrowes from Columbia, SC, May 27, 1854, Benjamin Morgan Palmer papers, Duke University Library, Durham, NC [hereafter cited as DUL].

¹⁶ Green, "Life and Letters," 5.

1815 on the northeast corner of Lady and Marion streets.¹⁷ The building was not adequate for a growing congregation of over two hundred, and by 1850 the minister was leading them to embark on a new building project. The Rev. Charles Colcock Jones, now a professor at Columbia Seminary, wrote to his son on June 17, 1850:

The members of Mr. Palmer's congregation are proceeding with their subscription for the new church: something over \$12,000 subscribed; subscription binding when it reaches \$16,000. Hope they will succeed. They have not called on me yet. Suppose they may not, considering the fire and my present unsettled state. Can't give much anyhow. Dr. Howe gave \$400.¹⁸

Jones' house, along with most of their possessions, had been destroyed in a fire on April 23, explaining why he was not in a strong position to give. Regardless, by the summer of 1851 the funds had been pledged, and the church began advertising in the newspaper for closed bids from contractors to complete the project by October of 1852.¹⁹ The final cost of the new building was \$35,000, suggesting that the Session was comfortable to proceed with building when pledges reached approximately half of the estimated cost.²⁰

In the fall of 1851, a team of mules relocated the old church edifice to the middle of Lady Street. There, in the center of the dirt road, the congregation worshipped for two years as the new sanctuary was under construction. Upon completion of the new church, they sold the old building, which was moved again and renovated as a personal residence.²¹ Though typical project setbacks delayed the completion of the building by twelve months, the new church was finally dedicated on the morning of Sunday, October 9, 1853. The English Gothic Revival structure measured 58 by 78 feet, with a tower and

¹⁷ Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord*, 18.

¹⁸ Rev. C. C. Jones, letter to Mr. Charles C. Jones, Jr. from Columbia, SC, June 17, 1850 in Robert Manson Myers, *A Georgian at Princeton* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976), 44-45.

¹⁹ Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord*, 60-61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 62.

²¹ The building was relocated to the southeast corner of Marion and Lady, and ultimately torn down to make room for another building.

spire rising 180 feet high. A brick structure finished in rose stucco, the church boasted arched stained-glass windows, vaulted ribbed ceilings, and graceful tracery work. A center isle, gas-lighted with suspended chandeliers and lined with box pews, led to a plain communion table centered below a large white marble pulpit, imported from Italy. An often-repeated story claims that a wealthy elder, Robert Latta, offered to give the pulpit to the church during the course of the project. After the building committee received the imported pulpit, they presented Latta with a bill for \$3,000. The amount was said to have broken Latta's heart, and he died within a year. The pulpit was affectionately referred to later as "Latta's Tombstone."²²

The new church edifice quickly became a landmark in Columbia, its steeple providing a striking feature in the city's skyline. On the first Sunday of worship in the new sanctuary, Palmer preached the dedicatory sermon entitled "Warrant and Nature of Public Worship" from John 4:23-24. The church was overflowing, and not only with Presbyterians. Various Protestant groups, Roman Catholics, and Jews were present for the occasion. The minister laid out a classical Protestant theology of worship, passionately proclaiming that no "spiritual magic" or "priestly benedictions" could transform the new sanctuary into a place of worship. "Let the wizards peep and mutter as they may, the brick and marble confess themselves incapable of that holiness which is an attribute of sentient and rational beings only." He then proceeded to lay out three great principles from which the warrant for public worship flows. First, true worship is not fully attained in privacy and isolation. Second, public worship is necessary to the Church as the visible kingdom of Christ. Third, by the means of the worship and ordinances of

²² Ibid., 61-62. The pulpit is currently preserved in the Smith Memorial Chapel of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia.

the visible Church, the kingdom of Christ advances against the opposing powers of darkness.

Regarding the nature of public worship, Palmer again emphasized two classically Protestant principles. Public worship is to stress the “formal exposition of the truth,” and it should be marked by “pre-eminent simplicity.” Building to a commanding conclusion, Palmer declared from the marble pulpit:

As for this building, my brethren, beautiful as it may be in our eyes, let it please us to call it only a plain Presbyterian meeting house. The glory we see in it, let it not be the glory of its arches and its timbers, – not the glory of its lofty and graceful spire, pointing ever upwards to that home the pious shall find in the bosom of God; not the glory of this chaste pulpit, with its elegant tracery, and marble whiteness, not the glory found in the eloquence or learning of those who, through generations, shall here proclaim the gospel, – nor yet the glory traced in the wealth and fashion, refinement and social position of those who throng its courts. But let its glory be “the glory of the Lord risen upon it!” Let its glory be the promises of the covenant engraved upon its walls, which are yea and mean in Christ Jesus. Let its glory be found in the purity, soundness and unction, of its pastors, – in the fidelity and watchfulness of its elders, – in the piety and godliness of its members. Let its glory be as a birth-place of soul, where shall always be heard the sobs of awakened penitence, and the songs of new-born love. Let its glory be the spirituality of its worship, its fervent prayers, its adoring praise, and the simplicity and truth of its ordinances and sacraments. Let its glory be the communion of saints, who here have fellowship one with another, and also with the Father, and his Son Jesus Christ. Let its glory be as the resting-place of weary pilgrims, toiling on toward the heavenly city – the emblem of that Church above – “Where congregations ne’er break up, And Sabbaths never end.”

And now, “To the only wise God, the King, eternal, immortal, and invisible,” – to God, “glorious in holiness, fearful in praises, doing wonders,” – to God who “is a spirit, infinite, eternal and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, justice, goodness, holiness and truth,” – to God, the Father Almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, - to God the Son, the brightness of the Father’s glory, and express image of His person, – to God the Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, – to the service and glory of the adorable and incomprehensible Trinity, we solemnly dedicate this building, with all that appertains to it.²³

²³ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 124. Palmer preached the same sermon at the dedication of the new church edifice of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans on Sunday, November 1, 1857. It was later published in Palmer, *A Weekly Publication, Containing Sermons*, vol. 1, 361-380.

Palmer insisted that Reformed Protestants did not view buildings as sacred, stressing the spiritual nature of biblical worship. At the same time, the edifice was consecrated to the worship of God, and the Session was diligent to protect it as such. Requests to use the sanctuary for speaking engagements, “orations,” and other secular functions were regularly refused.²⁴

In the following months, the members were diligent to pay their pledges, and were also able to support various missionary efforts during the same period. Collections were received for work among the Chickasaws and various Jewish missions. Money was sent to support the Waldensian church in Italy, which after centuries of persecution had acquired legal freedom in 1848 and was spreading through the Italian peninsula. The church established a mission church in nearby Barhamville, where Palmer and students from the seminary took turns preaching. In 1854, the church also received collections for the purpose of building churches in Sand Hills and Barnwell, South Carolina.²⁵

Most nineteenth-century professions involved some type of apprenticeship as a major component of preparation, and Presbyterian ministry was certainly no exception. During Palmer’s time in Columbia, his home was constantly open to the young college students and seminarians during their time of training. In April of 1843, Palmer received a letter from a young man who had been converted under his preaching at a protracted meeting during the summer of 1841 at Good Hope Church in Anderson County, South Carolina. Reid expressed a strong desire to pursue ministerial training, asking Palmer for advice on what course to pursue. Palmer encouraged him to enroll in the college at

²⁴ Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord*, 63.

²⁵ Ibid., 64. Also, see Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, September 27, 1854, SCL.

Columbia, where he could live with the Palmers, thus supplying the young man with room and board. Reid later recounted:

The first of October, 1843, found me in Columbia, a member of Dr. Palmer's family. As I had never studied algebra, he advised me to wait till the first of December before I applied for matriculation in college. He taught me one hour a day for two months and I entered the Sophomore class, and for six years I was a member of Dr. Palmer's family. When I graduated from the college in 1846, I moved to the seminary but still remained a member of Dr. Palmer's family. Parents cannot treat a child with more kindness than I received from Dr. Palmer and his wife. I learned much from him in his table talk.²⁶

After his seminary training, Reid and Palmer continued to correspond for many years. From seminary, Reid went on briefly to pastor a church in Anderson before enjoying a long ministry in the Spartanburg district of South Carolina. He was instrumental in the establishment of the Reidville High Schools – Presbyterian schools for boys and girls.

Another Columbia student particularly close to Palmer was Basile Edward Lanneau, who lived with the Palmers during a portion of his seminary career. Even after he graduated from the seminary and accepted a position teaching Hebrew there, Lanneau continued to share meals with the family. Palmer's younger brother, Edward, also lived with the family during his time at Columbia Seminary.²⁷ Through their open home and over many meals, Palmer influenced and encouraged numerous young men training for Presbyterian ministry.

Considering Palmer's successful ministry in his church, and rising prominence within the Presbyterian Church, it was natural that the seminary at Columbia began to request Palmer's services as a lecturer. Apparently by 1851 he was informally lecturing at the seminary, though the school did not officially list him as a member of the faculty

²⁶ R.H. Reid, letter to Thomas Cary Johnson from Reidville, SC, April 13, 1904 (Union Theological Seminary).

²⁷ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 139.

until 1853.²⁸ During the 1851-1852 school year he taught Church History and Church Polity as a Provisional Instructor, and delivered the closing address in July on the importance of preaching.²⁹ He taught the same courses in 1853-1854, then was elected as the Professor of that chair in 1854. While teaching at the seminary, Palmer's pastoral duties at First Presbyterian, along with his various frequent speaking engagements, now resulted in workdays averaging thirteen hours.

When Palmer officially joined the faculty of Columbia Seminary in 1854, the faculty was comprised of George Howe (Palmer's father-in-law) and Aaron Leland. Though these professors were capable and highly respected, the seminary's Board of Directors was well aware of the advancements being made by other premier seminaries. Princeton in New Jersey, Union in Virginia, and Alleghany in Pennsylvania were all boasting the additions of big names to their faculties. Danville Seminary in Kentucky, only a year old, commanded an impressive intellectual force.³⁰ If Columbia was to hold its place in the company of such caliber, a full company of high-quality instructors was a necessity. Describing the situation, Thornwell, then President of South Carolina College, wrote:

Things had reached a crisis, and something vigorous was to be done, or the Seminary virtually abandoned. It was ascertained that, if things remained another year as they were, the next session would, in all likelihood, open with the merest handful of students, not more than six or eight. The Board determined to propose

²⁸ *Memorial Volume, Columbia*, 421. Also, see manuscript volume 1851-1852, lecture notes, Benjamin Morgan Palmer collection, SCL. The volume contains lecture and sermon notes from Leland, Howe, Thornwell, and Palmer taken by an unidentified student. The first clearly identified entry for Palmer's notes is dated Sunday, November 10, 1850, taken from a sermon preached on Isaiah 1:18. All Palmer notes appear to be complete transcriptions of Sunday sermons - perhaps a seminary assignment.

²⁹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 136.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

a measure which, it was thought, would remove these grounds of complaint. They nominated me for the chair of Theology, and Palmer for that of History.³¹

It proved to be more difficult for Thornwell to accept the new appointment than it was for Palmer. On November 29, 1854, Thornwell tendered his resignation of the presidency of the college, but was required by school policy to work a notice of one year before the resignation would take effect.³² The interim period gave the seminary time to engage in some necessary fundraising to support the new professorships.

The seminary had suffered from an insufficient endowment ever since its founding in 1828. In addition to requesting his services as a professor, they also called on the pastor of First Presbyterian to labor at fundraising. In January of 1855, Palmer left Columbia for a two-month journey on behalf of the seminary.³³ Accompanied by Dr. John Bailey Adger, the two men traveled to Savannah and Augusta, Georgia, then to Montgomery, Alabama.³⁴ While Palmer made contacts in Montgomery, Adger visited Selma to the South. From there, they traveled together to Mobile and New Orleans. The men were successful in their efforts, raising about \$12,000, despite many difficulties. In a letter to Lanneau, Palmer wrote:

³¹ James Henley Thornwell, letter to R. J. Breckinridge from South Carolina College, July 18, 1854 in Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 384.

³² *Ibid.*, 383.

³³ *Memorial Volume*, 150; John B. Adger, *My Life and Times, 1810-1899* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1899), 137.

³⁴ John Bailey Adger (1810-1899), Presbyterian clergyman, was a native of Charleston. He graduated from Union College in New York (1828) and Princeton Seminary (1833). He was a missionary in Constantinople and Smyrna (1834-1847), where he translated into Armenian and Turko-Armenian the New Testament, the Shorter Catechism, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and *A Catechism of Scripture Doctrine and Practice* by Charles Colcock Jones. He served as pastor of the black Anson Street Mission Church in Charleston (1847-1851), Palmer's successor as Professor of Church History and Polity at Columbia (1857-1874), and pastor of various South Carolina churches (1874-1894). See Adger, *My Life and Times*. Palmer would later write to Adger, "Outside the circle of my kindred, my heart is knit to no two men in South Carolina as to Thornwell and yourself, linked together as you both are in all my associations, *par noble fratrum*." B.M. Palmer, letter to J.B. Adger from Columbia, SC, June 1, 1856 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 160.

The cry of hard times has lost all its terror to Adger and myself; for we have heard it rung in our ears for two months, until we lost all mercy and pushed forward in the very face of bankruptcy and ruin everywhere, and we have both concluded that in spite of the European war and the storms and the pestilence, and more than all, unnavigable rivers, still the country will hold together long enough for us to endow the Seminary.³⁵

In addition to proving a successful fundraising venture, Palmer took the opportunity to visit with several cousins during his journey.

First of all was my meeting with Palmer Pillans, whom I supposed to be in Texas. At Mobile, standing in the church door, I saw a man eyeing me intently as I approached, and though his face was entirely in the bushes, after the fashion of the time, I penetrated the disguise at a glance and recognized Palmer, whom I had not seen since 1836. The pleasure, I believe, was mutual, and I found him the same old fellow that he was when we were boys together. I was greatly pleased, too, with his very pretty wife, whom I would have kissed, pretty cousin as she was, if I had not been afraid of Palmer.

In New Orleans, Palmer reunited with his cousin, Foster Axson, and his wife. He and Adger both preached at First Presbyterian Church and Prytania Street Church in New Orleans.

First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans had been without a pastor since November, and Palmer received rave reviews from the congregation on two consecutive Sundays.³⁶ From there, the men traveled up the Mississippi River, “merely to say that [they] had sailed on the Father of Waters.”³⁷ In Vicksburg Palmer visited with three families of Bunce cousins from his mother’s side of the family. Next, the two ministers traveled two hundred fifty miles by stagecoach back to Montgomery. Before finally

³⁵ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, letter to Basile E. Lanneau from Columbia, South Carolina, March 24, 1855 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 137.

³⁶ The Pastor of First Presbyterian in New Orleans was the Rev. Dr. W.A. Scott of Tuscaloosa, AL. Scott was called as Pastor Elect in the fall of 1842 and was officially installed as Pastor on March 19, 1843. His active labors ceased in November, 1854 when he moved to San Francisco, and the pulpit was currently vacant. Scott’s pastoral relation was formally dissolved in September, 1855. See B.M. Palmer, “An Historical Paper on the Origin and Growth of Presbyterianism in the City of New Orleans,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 5 (November 27, 1873): 1.

³⁷ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 137.

returning home, they spent three days at a religious meeting “at Liberty.” This was probably the Midway Church in Liberty County, Georgia, where Rev. David Buttolph was serving as Pastor and Rev. John F. Baker as Assistant Pastor.³⁸ Palmer’s close friend, Rev. R.Q. Mallard, also served as temporary supply sometime during the same year.³⁹

After a year of successful fundraising efforts, the seminary was in a strong financial position by the fall of 1855, and Thornwell began his duties that December. With the new staff additions, the seminary immediately became recognized as a leading center of theological training in the United States, attracting numbers of students from as far as Massachusetts and New York.⁴⁰ At the same time, over the course of the busy year, Palmer reluctantly came to the conclusion that it was time to resign his pastorate at First Presbyterian. The thirteen to fifteen-hour days required to fulfill the role of both pastor and professor were proving too much, especially with a house full of four

³⁸ David Lyman Buttolph (1822-1905) was born in Norwich, New York. His mother was a cousin of Palmer’s old classmate at Amherst College, Henry Ward Beecher. Buttolph graduated from Williams College (1845) and Columbia Theological Seminary (1852). He received an honorary doctor of divinity degree from the University of Georgia in 1879. He served as an assistant pastor with Rev. Thomas Smyth at Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston (1852-1854) before serving as pastor of Midway Church until its dissolution in November 1867. He served as pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Marietta, GA (1867-1887).

³⁹ Stacy James, *History of the Midway Congregational Church, Liberty County, Georgia* (Newnan, GA: S.W. Murray, 1899), 324-325. Robert Quarterman Mallard (1830-1904), Presbyterian clergyman, was born in Liberty County, GA, graduated from the University of Georgia (1850) and Columbia Theological Seminary (1855). He received an honorary doctor of divinity degree from Southwestern Presbyterian University in Clarksville, TN in 1875. He served as pastor of Walthourville Presbyterian Church (1856-1863), Central Presbyterian Church in Atlanta (1863-1866), Prytania Street Presbyterian in New Orleans (1866-1877), and Napoleon Avenue Presbyterian Church in New Orleans (1879-1904). Mallard served as editor of the *Southwestern Presbyterian* (1891-1904). He was also the son-in-law of Charles C. Jones.

⁴⁰ LaMotte, *Colored Light*, 111, 304-306.

daughters and a fifth due in January.⁴¹ In October of 1854, he confided in his friend

Adger:

You do not know how hard I work, ten hours a day, and that scarcely keeps me up with a daily exercise with my classes. I have undertaken a Herculean task of lecturing systematically upon the whole course of Church History in connection with the text-book, in order to give the philosophical and real connections. To one ignorant as myself it is a task scarcely inferior to taking the Alps on my shoulders – Church History in its totality is bigger than the Alps.⁴²

His work was taking a physical toll, to the point of threatening his health.

To further complicate matters, the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans extended a call to Palmer to serve as their pastor in September of 1854. Palmer had greatly impressed the congregation when he preached there earlier that year, and the request was issued unanimously by the church. For a variety of reasons, the call to New Orleans was attractive. Before him were wonderful opportunities to serve either at the seminary or in New Orleans. After almost thirteen years of service to First Presbyterian Church, Palmer determined it was time to resign.

That fall, the Presbytery as usual refused to place the call from New Orleans in his hands, convinced that Palmer's work in the seminary was "indispensable to the prosperity of the that institution."⁴³ In a final attempt to entice him to continue preaching in the church, the Session of First Presbyterian offered to call Thornwell to fill the pulpit jointly with Palmer while teaching at the seminary, but he had made up his mind that it was time

⁴¹ Sarah Frances (Frances/Fanny) (b. September 19, 1844); Mary Howe (Molly) (b. September 1, 1847); Augusta Barnard (Gussie) (b. July 23, 1849); Kate Gordon (Katy) (b. August 23, 1853); Marion Louisa (b. January 10, 1856). As the author's wife suggested, perhaps that is why he worked fifteen hour days!

⁴² Benjamin Morgan Palmer, letter to Rev. J.B. Adger from Columbia, South Carolina, October 13, 1854 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 154.

⁴³ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 157. See also Palmer, "An Historical Paper," 2. The date of September 21, 1854 should be corrected to 1855.

to leave.⁴⁴ His wife, however, had no doubt that his heart was in the pastoral ministry, and said to those who advocated the transition to the seminary, “You will soon lose both pastor and professor. Your new made professor must be a pastor; you have, in taking him out of this church, made it inevitable that he shall soon accept a call to another church.”⁴⁵

During the 1855-1856 term, Palmer poured himself into the service of teaching for the seminary. A student of Palmer’s that year later recounted his impressions of the professor:

One session hardly affords the opportunity for estimating the capacity of a teacher; and a class of juniors may not be the best of judges. Dr. Palmer’s own opinion was that his proper sphere was the pulpit: and none of us was disposed to call his opinion in question. Not that he was by any means a failure in the class room; but for the reason that he was a prince in the pulpit. In fact he was easily the best teacher we had until Dr. Thornwell came in, about the middle of the session. We understand that he was offered a chair in Princeton Seminary about the time he left Columbia. There can be no doubt that he would have made a great reputation, and have been a pillar in the Seminary, if he had chosen to devote his life to teaching. In one respect he certainly had no superior. I refer to his personal influence on the students. His Christian character was one of his strong points. I never knew a Christian whose “walk” was more worthy of the “vocation.” Students were impressed by the strong, healthy type of his piety; and consulted him in their spiritual conflicts. He was also a model of industry. Report credited him with fifteen hours given to study out of the twenty-four. He was then laying the foundation for his long and successful ministry.⁴⁶

Many of his students described Palmer as a particularly gifted teacher, passionate about imparting knowledge, and even more concerned about the hearts of his students.⁴⁷

Ultimately, Mrs. Palmer’s prediction regarding her husband’s future to minister in the church would prove to be true. Almost immediately, the professor found himself

⁴⁴ Thornwell regularly filled the pulpit from 1856 until 1861.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 149.

⁴⁶ Rev. Prof. W.T. Hall, letter to Thomas Cary Johnson in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 155.

⁴⁷ One of Palmer’s Church History lectures was later published in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, “Import of Hebrew History,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 9 (April 1856): 582-610.

yearning for the pastorate with a burning desire to preach. In early 1856 he eagerly accepted a request to serve as the regular pulpit supply for the First Presbyterian Church at Orangeburg, about forty-five miles to the south.⁴⁸ For most of the year he travelled there every weekend to preach.

The First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans meanwhile had not given up in the pursuit to secure Palmer as their pastor. Since Presbyterianism had been planted in the city in 1817, it had been marked with instability and setbacks, and the church was convinced that Palmer would provide the capable leadership so desperately needed.⁴⁹ In January of 1817, the New England Congregationalist Rev. Elias Cornelius was appointed by the Connecticut Missionary Society to visit the city of New Orleans with a view toward establishing a Congregational/Presbyterian church, and securing an able pastor. At the time, the population of New Orleans was around thirty thousand, and it was served by only one Protestant minister, the Episcopalian Rev. Dr. James Hull of Belfast, Ireland at Christ Church. Cornelius soon made arrangements to call Sylvester Larned, a new Princeton Seminary graduate to serve the city.⁵⁰

In July of 1817, Larned was ordained by the Presbytery of New York and appointed to the work of an evangelist in the Southwest. After several delays, he finally

⁴⁸ Founded May 2, 1835, the First Presbyterian Church of Orangeburg fronted Russell Street and extended back toward Amelia Street, where the old church cemetery remains. The building was destroyed by fire in 1857, then rebuilt. The congregation voted to sell the church property in January of 1948, and relocated to Summers Ave.

⁴⁹ The historical sketch of Presbyterianism in New Orleans is taken from Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "An Historical Paper on the Origin and Growth of Presbyterianism in the City of New Orleans," *Southwestern Presbyterian* 5, no.41 (November 1873): 2. The article was from a speech delivered by Palmer at the semi-century anniversary of Presbyterianism in New Orleans on Sunday, November 23, 1873. See also Elma Kolman, "The History of the Presbyterian Church in New Orleans 1817-1860," (Master's thesis, Tulane University, 1939).

⁵⁰ Ralph Randolph Gurley, *Life and Eloquence of the Rev. Sylvester Larned: First Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans* (New York: Wiley & Putnam, 1844).

reached New Orleans in January of 1818, where Cornelius was making preparations by securing subscriptions for a new church building.⁵¹ On January 8, 1819, the cornerstone was laid on St. Charles Street, between Gravier and Union, and the edifice was solemnly dedicated on the following 4th of July with a sermon by Larned. His labors were cut short the following year, however, when he succumbed to yellow fever on his twenty-fourth birthday.⁵²

After an eighteen-month search, the young church located a potential successor, the Rev. Theodore Clapp of Massachusetts. Clapp, a graduate of Yale College and Andover Theological Seminary, declined the church's first invitation, then later reconsidered. The church was largely in debt, and Clapp made its retirement a condition of his call.⁵³ Clapp was installed as pastor of the church in February of 1822, and on November 23, 1823, the church was officially organized as the First Presbyterian Church in the city and parish of New Orleans.⁵⁴ To that date, the work had been considered a missionary evangelistic effort. The church had experienced a rough start, and its official organization did not prove to be a sign of future stability.

Clapp's ministry was marked with trouble, beginning with questions about his theological integrity. As early as 1824, he began questioning the doctrine of the eternity

⁵¹ Palmer indicates the church seated 2,000, which must be a typographical error. Measuring sixty feet by ninety feet, it would have seated up to 200.

⁵² Larned was buried in Girod Cemetery, and services were conducted by Rev. Hull. The cemetery was established in 1822 for Protestant residents of the predominantly Roman Catholic city. After falling into disrepair, the cemetery was deconsecrated in 1957. In 1970, it was excavated and is the current site of the New Orleans Superdome.

⁵³ The ironic decision was made by the trustees of the church to apply to the Legislature of Louisiana for a lottery to help liquidate the debt. The Legislature granted the request, and the lottery was sold to a New York company for \$25,000. The remainder of the debt was paid by selling the church's building to a local merchant, who allowed the church to continue to use the facility for their meetings.

⁵⁴ Twenty-four members "were formed into a church, by the adoption of the Presbyterian Standards in doctrine, government, discipline, and worship, and by a petition to the Presbytery of Mississippi, to be enrolled among the churches under its care." Palmer, "An Historical Paper," 2.

of future punishment. This soon led to outright hostility to the entire system of Calvinistic theology, which he often expressed from the pulpit. After an elder in the church filed a formal complaint to the Session against the minister, the elder was deposed from his office, increasing the tension in an already fragile situation. Finally, in March of 1830, Clapp expressed his doctrinally inconsistent views to the Presbytery, and requested to be dismissed to the association of Congregational churches in Massachusetts. The Presbytery refused the dismissal on the ground that Clapp could not be recommended to another body as a member in good standing, and declared him to be no longer a member of the Presbytery, or minister in the Presbyterian Church. After a lengthy appeal process regarding the Presbytery's action, the case was retried by the Presbytery and Clapp was eventually deposed from office in 1833. The process took almost three years, and wreaked havoc on the congregation. During the course, a faction led by two elders left the First Presbyterian Church to worship at another location.

By 1835, the two groups agreed to reunite and call the Rev. Dr. Joel Parker as their Pastor, who was then serving with the American Home Mission Society.⁵⁵ Parker served for five years, but spent his summers in the North raising funds for new churches. His reputation in the city was poor due to disparaging comments he supposedly made to northern newspapers about the religious condition of the city. Once or twice he was burned in effigy by angry mobs, yet the church stood by him. Under his leadership, the church built a large sanctuary on Lafayette Square, and grew to 142 communicant members.

⁵⁵ The American Home Missionary Society was formed in 1826 by Congregational, Presbyterian, Dutch Reformed, and Associate Reformed Churches with the purpose of financially assisting congregations on the American frontier until they could become self-sufficient.

Parker's successor was the Rev. Dr. John Breckenridge, who was serving as the Secretary of the Assembly's Board of Foreign Missions. Breckenridge sporadically supplied the pulpit from 1839-1842, but unexpectedly died as the pastor-elect in August of 1841 before being officially installed. In great disappointment, the church next sought the services of the Rev. Dr. William A. Scott of Tuscaloosa, AL, who was installed in March of 1843.⁵⁶ Scott labored for the church for twelve years, and during his time the body grew to 600 communicant members. The congregation was dealt a double blow, however, when the church edifice burned to the ground on October 29, 1854, and Scott resigned a few weeks later to accept a call at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, California.

These two dark providences left the congregation greatly discouraged and scattered. The number of communicant members immediately dwindled from 600 to 350. What might have been a death-blow to many congregations, however, only renewed their determination to succeed.⁵⁷ Despite a history of controversy, volatility, and hardship, the congregation resolved itself to rebuild and to call a sound Presbyterian minister of unquestionable orthodoxy who could provide the steady leadership needed at such a crucial time in the history of the church. The congregation was unanimously determined that Palmer was such a pastor, and though their first attempt to call him had been denied, those remaining were not the sort of people to give up easily.

⁵⁶ A good biography of Scott is Clifford M. Drury, *William Anderson Scott: "No Ordinary Man"* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1967).

⁵⁷ Palmer later wrote, "It is to the last degree creditable to the congregation that among all the discouragements of a vacant Bishopric and a congregation scattered, it should have proceeded at once to build another of larger proportions and more finished in style." Palmer, "An Historical Paper," 2.

Immediately after the Presbytery of Charleston refused to place the first call from New Orleans in the hands of Palmer in the fall of 1855, the commissioners from the church appealed to the higher court Synod of South Carolina. Their petition listed twelve grounds of complaint against the Presbytery's action. Among other reasons, they stated that the congregation was unanimous in its decision to call Palmer, that New Orleans was a most important field of labor requiring Palmer's skilled service, and that Palmer himself was willing to accept the call and held a strong conviction that he was better adapted to a pulpit than to a professor's chair.⁵⁸ In early November, the Synod heard and refused the appeal after lengthy discussion.⁵⁹

After unsuccessfully pursuing another potential candidate, the New Orleans church renewed its quest for Palmer in early 1856. Not only did the representatives of the congregation remember Palmer's expressed desire to serve in the church, but word had gotten back to them that other churches were diligently continuing to try to secure him from the seminary, adding to the sense of urgency. On March 16, 1856 the church formally repeated their call to the Presbytery of Charleston. That May, Palmer was invited to preach at the Independent Presbyterian Church in Savannah. Laura Maxwell, engaged to marry Rev. David Buttolph of Midway Church the following month, wrote in a letter to her aunt:

Dr. Palmer's sermons on Sabbath were very fine; he preached three times in the Independent Church . . . He told me he had accepted the call to the church in New Orleans, and was going to be there in the fall. I fear the climate may shorten his days of usefulness. While on this subject, I have just heard that the Independent Church here are going to send a delegation to Dr. Palmer to call him to this church: Mr. John Anderson, Mr. George Anderson, Mr. Duncan, and two others. "He says he has calls from five churches now in his hands, and is not yet

⁵⁸ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 157-158.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

committed to any of them, and is open to a call from this church.” So they say. They are going to offer him five thousand dollars and a parsonage. Mrs. Porter has just come from the meeting and told us all this. And Mr. Alexander thinks they ought to have a talk with *Mrs. Palmer*, and then they might hope to secure *Mr. Palmer*.⁶⁰

In June, Palmer explained in a letter to John Adger:

It is clear the Church at large does not acquiesce in my withdrawal from the pulpit. Since November I have been engaged in a laborious and annoying correspondence to frustrate and prevent calls from five churches in as many different cities, and without success in two of the five. What am I to make of these signs of acceptance as a preacher, just at the moment when I am ceasing to be one?⁶¹

At age thirty-eight, it had become apparent that Benjamin Morgan Palmer was perhaps the most sought-after pastor in the southern Presbyterian Church, and South Carolina was not going to give him up without a fight. In response to earnest protests from his friend and colleague John Adger, Palmer responded:

The die is however now cast, and has therefore got beyond the reach of discussion. . . . I have weighed every step thoughtfully and prayerfully; and my conviction is strong and clear that I ought to be a pastor and not a professor. I have desired and labored to act in the whole case with a good conscience before God and my brethren, and I must bide the judgment of both.⁶²

Palmer had firmly decided that it was time to return to the full-time pastorate in New Orleans.

On June 25, the seminary’s Board of Directors met to consider a letter from Palmer resigning his professorship. The Board unanimously refused his resignation, arguing that, “Many of the prominent churches of the South are either vacant or inadequately supplied, and the very pressure upon Dr. Palmer from all quarters for his

⁶⁰ Miss Laura E. Maxwell, letter to Mrs. Mary Jones from Savannah, GA, May 14, 1856 in Robert Manson Myers, *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 218.

⁶¹ B.M. Palmer, letter to J.B. Adger from Columbia, SC, June 1, 1856 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 161.

⁶² B.M. Palmer, letter to J.B. Adger from Columbia, SC, June 10, 1856 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 163.

services, shows the urgency of the call for a thoroughly educated ministry.”⁶³ The Board argued that his services were indispensable to the seminary, and the Presbytery of Charleston referred the question to the Synod of South Carolina. When the Synod met in November, two afternoon sessions were spent debating the request from New Orleans. Arguments were heard for and against, and Palmer himself stood before his friends and peers to plead his case. Late that evening a resolution passed, sixty-seven to thirty-two, instructing the Presbytery to place the call from New Orleans into his hands. In the long tribute to Palmer that was recorded in the Synod’s minutes, the Presbyters noted, “Deploing, as we must continue to do, the lamented removal of this bright and shining light in which we have so greatly rejoiced, our grief is assuaged by the anticipation of the radiance it will diffuse in that wide and interesting region to which his labors are to be transferred.”⁶⁴

That summer, Palmer returned to Beaufort District, South Carolina, where he had spent two of his teenage years tutoring plantation families after his unpleasant experience at Amherst. This time, he returned eagerly anticipating the privilege to preach the installation sermon for his father at the Stony Creek Church. His father, Edward, had previously served as the pastor of Stony Creek Church from 1831-1844, then returned to serve at Bethel Church in Walterboro from 1844-1855. After the death of Benjamin’s mother in 1847, Edward remarried to Frances Perry in 1849, and later accepted a call to return to the Stony Creek Church in 1856. Describing his father’s new charge, and how the church had changed in the interim, Benjamin Palmer wrote:

⁶³ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 164.

⁶⁴ Minutes Synod of South Carolina, November, 1856, PCA Historical Center, St. Louis, Missouri [hereafter cited as PCAHC].

In consequence of the loss by immigration the congregation of whites is not as large at Stony Creek Church as in former years. There has been, however, a corresponding increase in the number of blacks; and among these the pastor finds a wide field for labor. He loves to preach the blessed Gospel of Christ to these precious souls, who claim and receive a large measure of his time and strength. May his labors for the spiritual welfare of both classes be abundantly successful.

The installation meeting was a four-day event held at McPhersonville, the summer quarters for the congregation of mostly planters. Rev. J.L. Kirkpatrick charged the pastor, and Rev. John Girardeau charged the congregation on Sunday. In addition, there was preaching on Friday, Saturday, and Monday.⁶⁵

Until December of 1856, Palmer continued to teach in the seminary and supply the pulpit in Orangeburg. On Sunday morning, November 23, he returned to his old church in Columbia to preach a farewell sermon at the request of the church's Session. A week later, Palmer, Augusta, their five daughters, and Caroline left Columbia for their new home in New Orleans.

⁶⁵ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 167.

Chapter 4

In Furnace Heated Seven Times Hot¹

Suffering is not appointed for the sake of suffering, but as the path to a ready obedience.

– B. M. Palmer, “I Have Done Giving Him Up”

After a week-long journey from Columbia, the Palmer family arrived in New Orleans on Friday, December 5, 1856. The city was the commercial heart of the rapidly developing Southwest, and with a population around 170,000 was among the top five most populous urban areas in the nation.² As a natural port for the Mississippi Valley, the city served as a gateway between the United States and Europe. The completion of the Erie Canal in 1825 and invention of the steam locomotive had downgraded the importance of waterways for commercial distribution, directing a significant amount of commerce away from the influential city. Nevertheless, New Orleans was booming in the 1850s, and was enjoying an unprecedented decade of prosperity, development, and optimism.

The backbone of New Orleans’ commercial success during the antebellum period was the slave trade. Every year in the decades preceding the Civil War, thousands of slaves from all parts of the country arrived by boat to be sold in the urban markets just

¹ Mallard, “Personal Reminiscences,” 118.

² New York, Baltimore, Boston, Philadelphia

blocks away from First Presbyterian Church.³ From Texas to Mississippi, planters from across the Southwest would come in droves to the largest slave market in the nation between September and May to purchase people to harvest their crops, provide skilled labor, or perform other domestic duties. In addition, antebellum travelers made the market a popular tourist destination where curious on-lookers could go to see hundreds of slaves in blue suits and calico dresses displayed for sale along the streets.⁴ The slave trade and port placed New Orleans at the center of a commercial regional network, and the metropolitan crossroads would give Palmer the opportunity to preach to planters, merchants, and travelers from across the Southwest and beyond.

Along with the lure of wealth and human trafficking, New Orleans was also renowned as a place of decadence. Light-skinned “fancy girls” were notoriously sold at the slave market, and everyone knew why. From gambling to cock fighting, drinking to prostitution, people went to New Orleans to indulge. Though Palmer seldom mentioned the darker side of New Orleans in his writings, these were known characteristic elements of the great “Southern Babylon.”⁵ There was no place like it in the South (perhaps in the world), and the pastor from South Carolina was now in the center of the devil’s playground.

The Palmers first week in the new city was a whirlwind of activity. Palmer wasted no time in devoting himself to the duties of his new charge, calling the day after

³ “Slave pens” were grouped around Esplanade and Moreau (now Chartres), and around Baronne, Common, and Gravier Streets above the French Quarter. Walter Johnson, *Soul by Soul: Life Inside the Antebellum Slave Market* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 2; Robert C. Reinders, *End of an Era, New Orleans, 1850-1860* (New Orleans: Penguin Publishing, 1964), 27.

⁴ See Johnson, *Soul by Soul*; Thomas N. Ingersoll, *Mammon and Manon in Early New Orleans: The First Slave Society in the Deep South, 1718-1819* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1999).

⁵ Alecia P. Long, *The Great Southern Babylon: Sex, Race, and Respectability in New Orleans, 1865-1920* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004).

his arrival on a dying church member, a Mrs. Wheeler.⁶ That Sunday, the pastor-elect preached his first sermon, from Galatians 6:14, to a congregation of more than 1,500 people. The new church building was under construction, and Sunday services were being conducted at Odd Fellows' Hall on Camp Street, facing Lafayette Square.⁷ On Monday, Palmer led his first prayer meeting with about one hundred people in attendance, speaking on the reciprocal duties between a pastor and congregation. On Wednesday evening, he delivered his first weekly lecture on Luke 10:12 at the Methodist Episcopal Church on Carondelet Street.⁸ The church kindly extended the use of their facilities for weekly lectures until the new Presbyterian Church was completed. Thursday he called again on Mrs. Wheeler, who was more comfortable and able to engage in a conversation with the new pastor.

During their first week in the new city, the Palmers stayed with Mr. W.P. Campbell while preparations were being made on a residence that the church had previously rented for them. In addition to the flurry of preaching and pastoral duties, Palmer spent much of the week purchasing furniture and other articles necessary for housekeeping. On Friday, the Palmers moved into their new home on the corner of St. Charles and St. Joseph Streets.⁹ Saturday he spent the day in his study. On his second Sunday in New Orleans, he preached from 1 Timothy 3:15 to a large audience at Odd Fellows' Hall that morning. That evening, he addressed the Southwestern Bible Society

⁶ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, diary, December 5, 1856 to November 1, 1857, Montreat 2007.

⁷ Odd Fellows societies were fraternal organizations, particularly popular in larger cities during the nineteenth century.

⁸ Built in 1850, the building is located at 619 Carondelet Street. A Masonic organization purchased the edifice from the Methodists on May 1, 1905, and it remains today as a Cathedral of the Scottish Rite.

⁹ St. Charles between Lee Circle and Canal Street is usually called a street, not an avenue.

on the occasion of their seventh anniversary on subject of why the Bible should be called “the book,” calling for its universal translation and distribution.

Palmer immediately began to forge relationships with other Protestants and Presbyterians in New Orleans. On December 21 he preached the dedication sermon in the newly built First Street Presbyterian Church.¹⁰ Louis Voss, Pastor of the mostly German congregation, would become one of Palmer’s closest associates in the years to come. Palmer later organized the Presbyterian Ministers’ Association for the purpose of promoting and encouraging one another in their common work, and Voss was Palmer’s successor as dean of the Association.

Soon after settling into their new residence, Palmer was called to visit a woman deeply mourning the recent loss of her father. After bowing together in prayer, she broke down crying and revealed that it was not just the death of her father that was causing her sadness. Hers was a much deeper problem of depression, which she had been experiencing for years. She confessed that eleven years earlier she had joined a Christian church “in obedience to the dictates of conscience and the instructions of her religious guides,” but had never enjoyed the least bit of Christian comfort or peace. She was living in a state of profound darkness, and showed no signs of finding personal consolation in the Christian faith.

The minister was perplexed, having never dealt with an experience quite like this one. Not wanting to crush an already broken heart, he later wrote that he proceeded with

¹⁰ Louis Voss, *The Beginnings of Presbyterianism in the Southwest* (New Orleans: Presbyterian Board of Publications of the Synod of Louisiana, 1923), 42. Voss wrote of Palmer, “Personally, I looked upon Dr. Palmer as a fatherly friend and when he died I felt that I had lost a dear personal friend. During my entire ministry, from the day on which he preached my ordination sermon until his death, he was to me a kind helper, counselor and friend.” The First Street Presbyterian Church is now the Irish Channel Christian Fellowship, located at 819 First Street.

great caution and tenderness. “Has it ever occurred to you,” he remembered suggesting, “to throw away a hope which brings you so little peace, and to view yourself as a stranger to God?”

A visible shiver passed over her body. “A thousand times, but just as often I have felt that I should die, outright, if I ever let go my hold upon the Savior.”

“You have, then, all these years been trusting in Christ, in the dark, without one smile of his love to cheer you?”

“Yes,” she responded, “there has never been a moment in all these gloomy years when I could bear to part with even this feeble, comfortless hope. It is all that has kept me from despair.”

From the tone of gloom in the woman’s voice, it was obvious to the minister that she was extremely fragile and distressed. Here was a soul, desperately clinging to an easily broken faith, living for years in spiritual darkness and despair. It was difficult for Palmer to categorize such an experience. How could true Christian faith be exercised for so many years without the peace and joy that he believed was its certain accompaniment? Even if there were a chronic physical disorder throwing her into a constant depression, it was inexplicable to him that there would not even be an occasional flash of “pious enjoyment.” After considering the case at length, Palmer came to the conclusion that there must be some spiritual cause for such a peculiar history. As he continued to question, she confessed that feelings of guilt and hypocrisy had destroyed her ability to pray.

The pastor finally concluded this was a case of morbid introspection, so persistently indulged that it had become chronic. He believed that her soul had come to

habitually turn upon itself, scrutinizing its own exercises, resulting in an “inextricable tangle.” Now the question was what to suggest as a remedy. Rising to leave, the pastor indicated that he needed time to think. After a week of reflection on their conversation, the pastor was confident in his analysis and his solution. He returned to the house of his friend and said, “The counsel I am about to give will appear to you so heretical that your first impulse will be to reject it at once. But if you have any confidence in your religious advisor, I ask that you will defer to my judgment so far as to try, fairly, the experiment which I shall propose.”

“I confide fully in your wisdom,” she replied, “and will follow your counsel to the letter.”

“Well, madam, you are about leaving for the North, to be gone for five months. Understand, then, that I forbid all self-examination until you return. You are not to ask yourself one single question, whether this or that feeling is right or wrong, while you are away. Abandon all reading which describes the experiences of others. Select, on the contrary, those books which hold up Christ in the beauty of his person, and in the glory of his work, and force yourself to meditate upon his essential excellence, rather than to review your own emotions in regard to him. And when you return, in the autumn, we will talk further of these matters.”

“You surprise me, beyond measure,” she replied. “Is not self-examination distinctly enjoined in the sacred Scriptures as one of the most important and sacred of all our duties?”

“True enough,” he replied, “but you have been doing nothing else these eleven years, and it is necessary now to break up this habit from its foundations, that you may

begin your religious history over again. You have been burrowing, like a mole, in your own experience, until, like a mole, you have scarcely any eyes with which to see Christ. Let me reverse this order, entirely, for five months, and we will see how the experiment works.”

“I have given my promise,” she replied, “and will throw myself blindly upon your guidance.”

The two friends parted, and the months passed by. Upon her return, the pastor called upon her again. There was a sparkle in her eye, as she said, “I owe you a boundless gratitude for untying the knot of my past experience. At first it was almost infinitely hard to follow your counsel. It positively blocked every thought, and brought me up every moment against a dead wall. I feared that I should be forced to abandon the effort as hopeless. But then, I saw that my whole life had been a sad mistake; that I had been doing nothing else but walking around ‘the chambers of imagery,’ in my own heart. Nothing short of the effort to break up the habit, altogether, could have given me so clear a sense of its power, or could have revealed to me the extent of my spiritual bondage.”

For years to come, the woman would continue to struggle with the old habit, drifting into seasons of temptation and darkness. Palmer was satisfied, however, that “she had learned the great secret of Christian joy and strength; and how to come out from herself to lean upon the Savior’s bosom.”¹¹ The pastor was always eager to offer his

¹¹ B.M. Palmer, “A Morbid Experience,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 1, no.14 (May 1869): 1. In 1869, Palmer wrote a series of twelve autobiographical accounts under the title “From a Pastor’s Portfolio” (*Southwestern Presbyterian* 1, nos. 6-10, 12-14, 19, 21, 23-24). Each account is obviously crafted to some degree to serve as an archetype of what Palmer believed to be an ideal method of ministry in various given situations. Since the encounters were presented as true events, a few are included to represent what Palmer believed to be important elements of spiritual life and conversation at the time. See chapter 2, footnote 52.

support through counsel and prayer, and the incident serves as a mere glimpse into the typical daily encounters that began immediately upon his arrival in the new city.

Palmer was received into the Presbytery of New Orleans on December 19, 1856, and his installation service was scheduled for Sunday, December 28 at 3:00 p.m. On the day of the installation, Palmer preached from 1 Corinthians 1:26 “on being appropriate subjects, and I afterwards found, there being an unusual attendance of lawyers & literary men.”¹² That afternoon, the Rev. J.R. Hutchison, Moderator of the Presbytery, preached from Romans 11:13 on “the responsibility of the ministerial office & the honor put upon it by God.”¹³ The charge to the Pastor was delivered by Rev. Dr. Woodbridge, and Rev. Dr. Chamberlain charged the congregation. After the service, Palmer received “a cordial greeting from two officers and members of the church.” That night, Palmer returned to the church a third time to preach from 2 Corinthians 1:20 “upon Xt [Christ] as the trustee of the promises, but was too fatigued to speak with ease or satisfaction to myself.”¹⁴

The following day, Palmer “called upon Mrs. Wheeler who is still alive, prayed and read the SS [Psalms] – still in a calm and trustful frame, quietly waiting her change, but with no rapture of soul, & no physical ability to express it, if she had.”¹⁵ He called on the ailing woman several more times during the course of the week before leaving New Orleans on January 6 for a meeting of the Synod of Mississippi. Palmer took an

¹² Diary, December 28, 1856. “For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called.” 1 Corinthians 2:26

¹³ John Russell Hutchison (1807-1878), Presbyterian clergyman, was a native of Columbia County, Pennsylvania. He graduated from Jefferson College in Cannonsburg, PA (1826) and Princeton Theological Seminary (1829). He was Professor of Ancient Languages at Oakland College in Mississippi (1842-1854). He served as pastor of the Carrollton and the Prytania Street Presbyterian Churches in New Orleans (1857-1860), as well as Moderator of the Presbytery of New Orleans. See J.R. Hutchison, ed., *Reminiscences, Sketches and Addresses Selected from My Papers During a Ministry of Forty-Five Years in Mississippi, Louisiana and Texas*. (Houston: E.H. Cushing, 1874).

¹⁴ Diary, December 28, 1856.

¹⁵ Ibid., December 29, 1856.

overnight trip on the steamer *Princess* to Natchez, where the Synod met for five days.¹⁶

There he preached a Sunday morning communion service in a Presbyterian Church and a Sunday evening service in a Methodist church. After a relatively uneventful Synod meeting, he departed for home aboard the steamer *Alexander Scott*. Upon his return, he again went to visit Mrs. Wheeler, only to learn that she had passed away during his absence. His diary is full of similar accounts, and demonstrates that he was diligent in applying himself to the routine duties of pastoral ministry – visiting the sick and frail, preparing sermons, preaching, writing, baptizing, marrying, and burying.

The Palmer home was always open to those in need, and as in Columbia, they often took others in who needed help. Palmer later remembered one Friday-evening encounter, while enjoying the company of his family and a few friends around the fire place in the parlor. The doorbell rang, and without waiting for a servant Palmer answered the door himself, and was greeted by a stranger, “I presume you are the Rev. Palmer. If so I would be glad to speak to you alone, in your study.”

Leading the man to his study, Palmer could not help but notice his blood-shot eyes and his haggard, flushed countenance. Sinking into a chair, the stranger began weeping uncontrollably for what seemed like ten minutes. By his dress and carriage, Palmer discerned he was a gentleman, familiar with good society. Patiently and quietly, he waited until the guest pulled himself together. Amidst choking tears, the stranger explained that he was a man who had fallen from the highest social position to the lowest degradation. He was an educated lawyer with a most promising future. He had a lovely wife whom he did not deserve. To top it all off, he was an esteemed member and teacher

¹⁶ The *Princess* was a first-class steamer, first launched in 1855. On Sunday, February 27, 1859, 70 of 200 passengers were killed when a tragic boiler explosion completely destroyed the ship.

in a prominent church. Yet, he tearfully confessed, “In the midst of all this earthly prosperity, whilst life was blooming around me like the ancient paradise, I was seized, two years ago, with the insane desire of becoming suddenly rich, and yielded to the temptation of abandoning my profession, in order to speculate in whiskey!”

With hands trembling, the stranger pulled out two letters from his side pocket. For two weeks had indulged in all the debauchery New Orleans had to offer, too inebriated to open the letters and read them until that day. One was from his mother, and the other from his wife – both eloquent and passionate pleas for the son and husband to come home and return to the paths of honor and virtue. The broken stranger had read them both over and over again that afternoon and was visibly broken, begging for prayer.

The two men knelt in the study, and the Pastor offered a fervent prayer that it would please God to change the remorse into penitence, that the blood of Christ would cleanse his conscience, and that the Holy Spirit would renew and save the poor sinner. As they began to rise, the stranger cried, “Oh! Sir, pray for me again!”

They knelt a second time, then a third, fourth, and fifth time. When the sixth request came, Palmer paused, then said, “This scene is becoming oppressive; I am afraid that we are in danger of those vain repetitions which the Savior condemns. It is right that we should go to God in prayer, for he is the only source of grace and strength to you in this hard battle with your vices. But we have told it all to God, and now he waits to hear from your own lips what you mean to do.”

“Do! What can I do?”

“My friend,” Palmer replied, “something else is required of you besides prayer; and by the very solemnity of the petitions we have offered here together, I summon you to decide what course you intend to pursue in the future.”

“Tell me, sir, what I ought to do.”

“Well, then, in the first place, you must extricate yourself from the accursed business which has been your ruin. Were I you, I would take the hogsheads of liquor you came here to sell, to the levee, and empty them all into the waters of the Mississippi. In the next place, go back, at once, to your neglected home, and there, under the sanctity of your widowed mother’s prayer, and beneath the softening influences of your wife and babes, foster the purpose of reform. Resume the practice of your noble profession; and throw around yourself all the restraints and obligations of society. Will you do this?”

“I will, sir,” he earnestly responded.

“Once more: I am bound in faithfulness to say to you that I have little confidence in the unaided strength of the human will to break the fetters of such a vice as holds you in its grasp; and none at all in the sinner’s ability, without Divine grace, to repent, truly before God. Go, then, in your guilt and helplessness, to him whose promise is, ‘though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow,’ and throw yourself upon his mercy, in Christ, for pardon and eternal life.”

“I can only promise, my dear sir,” the stranger answered, “to make an honest effort to obey your counsel in respect to this.”

Palmer replied, “What I wish to impress upon you, my friend, is that remorse is not repentance, and reformation is not religion. Renew the covenant which you have

broken, with your God, and do not rest until you have a sense of your ‘acceptance in your beloved.’”

The following Sunday, before a congregation including the remorseful visitor, Palmer preached from James 1:13, “Let no man say, when he is tempted, I am tempted of God; but every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed.” Tracing the genealogy of sin, Palmer argued that outward temptations derive their power from the inclinations of the human heart, and that in every transgression the sinner must assume the blame of his own misconduct. “Unless you distinctly recognize your own guilt, you will never deal honestly with God in your repentance. Take your whole burden to him, with perfect assurance that he will never turn the true penitent away, who pleads for mercy in the name of Christ, the Redeemer.”

The next day, the man called on Palmer again to say good-bye before leaving for his home in the West, and said, “You preached that sermon for me, on yesterday.”

“Yes,” Palmer answered, “for once in my life I was intensely personal in the pulpit; I had no one in my thoughts but you; I meant every word to be appreciated by you.”

“I thank you for it. It was exactly what I needed. I clearly see, now, that I have been the author of my own ruin, and have no one to blame but myself.”

Some years later, Palmer received a letter from the man stating that he had gone back home and regained the practice of his legal profession. He explained that had found peace through the blood of Christ, and was now serving as a ruling elder and as the superintendant of the Sabbath-school in his church.¹⁷ This type of encounter typified the

¹⁷ B.M. Palmer, “The Reformed Inebriate,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 1, no.10 (April 29, 1869): 1.

pastoral care and tact that Palmer was known to show individuals in need. Sincere and straightforward, he was passionate in his belief that the gospel alone had power to change lives.

During his first year in New Orleans, Palmer was quickly establishing a commanding influence in the city. In addition to preaching to audiences numbering up to 2,000 every Sunday, the major newspapers of New Orleans regularly printed full transcripts of his sermons.¹⁸ Protestants from all over the city would regularly come to hear Palmer preach or teach. As in Columbia, he also had frequent invitations to deliver orations for various occasions, such as a discourse entitled “The Historic Position of the United States” before the Young Men’s Christian Association in March.¹⁹

In addition to preaching regularly twice on Sundays, he lectured to a Wednesday evening prayer meeting, a Monday evening Bible study class, and a Friday afternoon Bible study class.²⁰ He also devoted himself to instructing and examining the children of the church in the catechism during morning Sunday school classes. Sunday afternoons were often reserved for preaching to the black members of the congregation.²¹ This in particular was so well received that by April 1858, black members were ready for their own Sunday worship service. The Session passed a resolution to petition the Mayor of New Orleans to license the regular meeting of a black congregation in the lecture room of

¹⁸ See *Daily Crescent*, *Daily Delta*, *Daily Picayune*, and *New Orleans Times*.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, March 7, 1857. On July 7, 1859 Palmer delivered the address “Our Historic Mission” before the Eunomian and Phi-Mu societies of LaGrange Synodical College in Tennessee. On July 28, 1859 he spoke on “Female Excellence” before the Fayette Female Academy. Johnson notes that Palmer continued to be in high demand for occasional sermons and addresses during this period.

²⁰ Sunday services were regularly held at 11:00 a.m. and 7:30 p.m. Sunday school classes met at 9:30 a.m. See listing in “Stranger’s Guide and Business Directory” in Edwin L. Jewell, ed., *Jewell’s Crescent City Illustrated. The Commercial, Social, Political and General History of New Orleans, Including Biographical Sketches of its Distinguished Citizens, Together with a Map and a General Stranger’s Guide* (New Orleans: 1873).

²¹ Diary, February 1, 8, 15, 1857.

the church.²² The Rev. B. Wayne was called by the First Presbyterian Church “to preach to the blacks,” beginning in early 1859.²³ Modeled after John Girardeau’s church in Charleston, the mission received full financial support from the church, and black members were placed in positions of leadership under the authority of the Session.²⁴ In December of 1859, Elder Joseph A. Maybin took over the services of Rev. Wayne.²⁵ The group met regularly in the Lecture Room of First Presbyterian until early 1862 when attendance had become small and irregular.²⁶

Over the course of his first year, thirty new members were added to the roll, following a careful examination process by the Session.²⁷ Some years later, Mrs. Anna H. Carter wrote of her examination before Palmer’s Session:

At 16 years of age, he received me into the Church, and never shall I forget the help he was to me when I hesitated in answering certain questions propounded to me by the Members of his Session, elderly gentlemen. Seeing my timidity, the Dr. turned quickly to me, and fixing his clear, penetrating eye upon me, he said: “Daughter, do you like to pray?” What tenderness was ever combined with his spiritual strength! This was enough to loosen my tongue, and I instantly confessed that this was my meat and drink, my joy that I could commune with Christ my Saviour. The Dr. then turned to the Session, and said, “Brethren, I move that Anna Jennings be accepted into the Church Fellowship!”²⁸

Session records from 1857 also show the Session appropriating money to support two Columbia Seminary students, purchase new music books for the choir, and purchase

²² Either Charles W. Waterman (June 17, 1856 – June 8, 1858) or Gerald Stith (June 21, 1858 – June 18, 1860). Johnson states the Session passed the resolution in spring of 1859, but Session records state 1858. See Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, April 20, 1858, Montreat 2007.

²³ Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, March 4, 1859, Montreat 2007.

²⁴ See footnote 7 in Chapter 2

²⁵ Joseph A. Maybin was a prominent New Orleans lawyer and ruling elder in First Presbyterian Church for over forty years. See his biographical sketch in Jewell, *Jewell’s Crescent City Illustrated*, 120-121.

²⁶ Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, February 7, 1862, Montreat 2007.

²⁷ Palmer reported 350 members in 1855 after the departure of Rev. William A. Scott in “An Historical Record.” Session minutes from April 10, 1859 indicate 451 members (430 white, 21 “colored”). Session minutes of the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, LA, Montreat 2007.

²⁸ Anna H. Carter, letter to Thomas Cary Johnson from Hammond, LA, April 11, 1904 (Union Theological Seminary).

educational tracts. Meanwhile, the church continued to meet at Odd Fellow's Hall while the impressive new edifice was being completed on Lafayette Square.

On November 1, 1857, Palmer enjoyed the privilege of preaching at the dedication of the new church building of First Presbyterian Church. The minister used the same basic sermon that he had preached four years earlier at the dedication of the Columbia church, setting forth a high view of Protestant worship.²⁹ Facing Lafayette Square on South Street, the brick Gothic structure measured 75 by 90 feet, with a tower and spire rising 219 feet high, the highest in the city.³⁰ It was built to be the Protestant and English counterpart to the Roman Catholic St. Louis Cathedral on Jackson Square. For decades, the two spires were the prominent features of the city when viewed from the river. The congregation was especially proud of the new "imposing and grand mechanical organ."³¹ A popular New Orleans travel guide published in 1873 described the building:

Attached to the church is a lecture room, 25 feet by 75 in length, and 18 feet in height, which has 218 sittings; also a school-room with the same number of sittings, and two session rooms and a library. The architect of this fine edifice was Henry Howard; the builder, G. Purvis; and the artist, P. Gualdi, Esquires.

The rostrum or pulpit, slightly elevated (in modern style) above the pews, is tastefully designed and elegantly finished. The church, throughout, is richly, though not generously, equipped. The orchestra, opposite the pulpit, accommodates a large choir, whose music, whether in hymns, psalms or anthems, always of a high order, is of the grave and noble style adapted to Protestant worship in the Presbyterian churches in America. Lofty and commodious galleries, on a level with the orchestra, and to the right and left of the minister,

²⁹ Palmer, *A Weekly Publication, Containing Sermons*, vol. 1, 361-380.

³⁰ Today, the street is S. Maestri Pl. On September 29, 1915 a hurricane destroyed most of the church, which was rebuilt. In April of 1838 the property was sold to the federal government to be torn down and replaced with a new federal office building. The congregation relocated to 5401 S. Claiborne Ave.

³¹ Louis Voss, *Presbyterianism in New Orleans and Adjacent Points: Its Semi-Centennial Held in 1873 Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Organization of New Orleans Presbytery, 1930. Sketches of Individual Churches, Ministers, and Ruling Elders* (New Orleans: Presbyterian Board of Publications of the Synod of Louisiana, 1931), 142-143.

are, especially at the morning service, and in the Winter season, crowded with attentive listeners of all classes and colors.³²

The sanctuary of the church was built to accommodate 1,311 people, but regularly held up to two thousand.

Palmer showed a real interest in the spread of Presbyterianism within the city and region, and eagerly offered his services to aid the larger church in various ways. He regularly organized joint meetings of the various Presbyterian Church Sessions in New Orleans to plan and pray for the spread of Presbyterianism within the city. In March of 1857 he was made the examiner of the Presbytery in ecclesiastical history and polity, and the sacraments. Later that same year he was invited to preach the opening sermon at the meeting of the Synod of South Carolina.³³ He was also appointed to serve as Chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Synodical Depository.³⁴

In 1858 the Synod of Mississippi appointed him to its committee working to secure the establishment in New Orleans of a Southwestern Advisory Committee, which would serve as a branch of the denomination's Board of Domestic Missions. At the time, a disproportionate amount of resources and money for missionary work was being allocated by the denomination to the West and Northwest.³⁵ Although some pointed to

³² Jewell, *Jewell's Crescent City Illustrated*.

³³ Frank D. Jones and William H. Mills, eds., *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina since 1850* (Columbia, SC: R.L. Bryan Co., 1926), 47.

³⁴ "He took quickly and easily the very first place not only in his city and Presbytery, but in his Synod and in the vast section of the Southwest." Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 191.

³⁵ The four southwestern states (Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, and Texas) had an approximate population of 2,108,602 in an area measuring 376,637 square miles. They had 30 Presbyterian missionaries, received \$8,255 from the Board, and contributed toward its own cause \$5,390.50. The four northwestern states (Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, and Wisconsin) had an approximate population of 2,337,491 in an area measuring 192,052 square miles. They had 198 missionaries, received \$33,192 from the Board, and contributed toward its own cause \$2,812.15. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 189.

sectional antagonism to explain the discrepancy, Palmer recognized more practical reasons:

The West and Northwest are covered with a network of railroads, by which they are easily traversed, bringing their wants under the public eye; while the remoteness and inaccessibility of our territory screen its destitution alike from observation and from Christian sympathy. The poverty of our young ministers, together with the uncertainty of an immediate settlement, operates as a bar to them coming to so distant a region, and leads them to prefer a field lying nearer t hand. The debilitating nature of our climate, added to the perils of acclimation, so prodigiously exaggerated abroad, is an ever-present argument against these tropical regions. Insomuch, too, as the great body of our candidates for the ministry come from the Northern and Middle States, it is, perhaps, natural they should prefer to labor in those parts of the country where all the institutions and usages of society are familiar and congenial. They are also attracted by the promise of larger congregations afforded where the population is more dense; and can, with difficulty, be impressed with the representative character of our small assemblages at the South. It is, moreover, undeniable, and for a lamentation let it be written, that the purely missionary aspect of this field, as embracing a very large number of untutored blacks, is so much overlooked.³⁶

Palmer was made commissioner to the General Assemblies (Old School) of 1858 and 1859, where he worked to secure more funds and attention to the missionary cause in the growing Southwest. At both meetings he strongly advocated the creation of a branch of the Board of Domestic Missions in New Orleans. Those opposed to the measure argued that it was motivated by sectional antagonism, that it actually worked against efforts to evangelize the entire country, and that it was based on the false assumption that the Board was insufficient to accomplish the work as a central agency. Palmer carefully and persuasively made his case before the assembly both years, summarizing his position before the body in 1859 in Indianapolis:

We should be recreant to the Church, and to our divine Lord and Master, if, under these circumstances, the question were not raised, What shall we do? Under the pressure of this great necessity, the proposition of a District Committee, with its own Secretary, has been submitted to the Assembly; and should nothing more be

³⁶ B.M. Palmer, "The General Assembly of 1859," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 3 (October 1859): 513.

achieved by their future labors than to arouse the churches of the Southwest to a more anxious and prayerful contemplation of their duty, and to draw the attention of our rising ministry more largely to this neglected territory, even these results will justify the action of the Assembly in their appointment.³⁷

His efforts were successful, and the Assembly of 1859 ordered the establishment of the committee. At First Presbyterian in New Orleans, the third Monday evening of every month was scheduled as a time to pray and collect contributions for southwestern missions, under the oversight of the Advisory Committee of the Southwest.

Perhaps the most difficult pastoral challenge for Palmer during his years in New Orleans was the yearly cycle of death when yellow fever descended upon the city. Death was a familiar enemy to Reverend Palmer. Less than two years after the birth of his first child, he had watched helplessly as the toddler began to waste away: “The hunger of disease could find nothing for its insatiate voracity, but the juices of the body on which it fed; and the breathing skeleton lay at length upon a pillow on the mother’s lap.” Undecided physicians offered little help for the boy, and over a period of two months all traces of beauty and innocence were erased.³⁸ When Palmer made the decision to move his expecting wife and four young daughters to New Orleans in late 1856, thoughts of death and disease no doubt returned to his mind.³⁹

For fifty years prior to his new call, the dreaded yellow fever had swept across the Crescent City nearly every summer. Good seasons saw an acceptable few hundred

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 17.

³⁹ An undated page in his 1856-1857 diary on the page before the first dated entry reads, “Inscription upon a stone in the French Cemetery, New Orleans,” followed by an inscription in French, translated:

To My Daughter
Sleep my angel, death did not count your age,
You greeted life and you said goodbye to it!
Bow down, young flower that worried the storm,
You will be picked up by the breath of God.

deaths. Then, there were seasons like the summer of 1847 when the scourge took over 2,000 lives. Just three years before the Palmers arrived, a record 8,000 fell victim to Yellow Jack.⁴⁰ Typical of the times, conflicting explanations for the cause of the disease were abundant, and an incredible range of ineffective treatments were prescribed, often more deadly than the disease itself.

Because of economic consequences, newspapers were reluctant to report the appearance of the pestilence until it reached epidemic proportions. By that point a feeling of helplessness and impending doom, compounded by profound ignorance, had engulfed the city. Everything would practically shut down as the entire city was transformed into a giant hospital. For a three-month period, the rank stench of rotting flesh filled the streets as swollen, discolored corpses, piled by the hundreds, waited for gravediggers to catch up with the incredible workload. As Palmer once described the scene, “The Angel of Pestilence flapped his black wing over one of our Southern cities, in whose silent streets the living walked only in melancholy processions, behind the dead.”⁴¹ Adding to the fear of the disease was its indiscriminate nature. Within hours the healthiest young man could be stricken with the characteristic swollen yellow to orange skin, black vomit, and hemorrhaging everywhere from eyelids to toenails before experiencing the mercy of death.⁴² Palmer was quickly learning that it was not easy being a minister or father in New Orleans.

⁴⁰ George Augustin, *History of Yellow Fever* (New Orleans: Searcy & Pfaff, 1909), 871. Augustin reports 200 deaths in 1857 and 4,845 in 1858.

⁴¹ B.M. Palmer, “I Have Done Giving Him Up,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 1, no. 12 (May 1869): 1.

⁴² Jo Ann Carrigan, “Yellow Fever in New Orleans, 1853: Abstractions and Realities,” *The Journal of Southern History* 25, no.3 (August 1959): 339-355; Margaret Humphreys, *Yellow Fever and the South* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992).

By June of each year, the citizens of New Orleans knew whether or not the “black vomit” would reach epidemic proportions for the season. As the city entered into a state of panic, people began fleeing in droves. Those who could afford to leave headed for better climates where the disease was not to be found. When it appeared the scourge would hit with particular ferocity, Palmer would make arrangements to send his wife and children back to South Carolina to weather the storm with family. The minister considered himself, however, a member of the locally-dubbed “Can’t Get Away Club,” which included the people who chose to remain in the city despite the danger. His friends in South Carolina had used the terror of the fever in attempts to change his mind against moving to New Orleans, but he was determined, and downplayed the dangerous scourge as a mere “humbug.”⁴³ Remaining in New Orleans, he would spend his summer making rounds, stopping in every house that showed signs of the fever, whether members of his congregation or not. His visits included offering a brief prayer and the consolation of the Gospel. In particularly bad years, Palmer would pay thirty to fifty visits a day, “praying at the bedside of the sick, comforting the bereaved, and burying the dead; and that, too, without intermitting the worship meeting of the Sabbath or even the prayer meeting in the week.”⁴⁴ Palmer stayed when other many ministers did not. Over time, more than anything else, his pastoral work during times of deadly pestilence endeared him to the citizens of New Orleans and the leaders of the broader religious community of the city, including Roman Catholic Priests and Jewish Rabbis.⁴⁵

⁴³ Mary S. Mallard, letter to Laura E. Butolph from Atlanta, GA, July 28, 1866 in Myers, *Children of Pride*, 1349.

⁴⁴ B.M. Palmer, letter to Edgeworth Bird from New Orleans, LA, October 8, 1879 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 431.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 188.

Later in life, the pastor remembered one particularly bad year when leaving his study to attend the funeral of one who had fallen victim to the fever a stranger pressed a crumpled paper into his hand. Scribbled on the page was a hurried request to come immediately to the couch of another dying man. As soon as Palmer finished the funeral service, uttering the solemn words, “dust to dust,” he sadly pressed on to face death again. Entering the dying stranger’s bedroom, he found an athletic young man who was obviously ravished by the pestilence and without long to live. Taking the sufferer’s hand, the preacher remembered asking, “Do you know how ill you are?”

“Yes,” he quickly responded, “I shall soon pass the bourne whence no traveler returns.”

“Are you, then, prepared to die?”

“No sir!”

“Will you, then, let me pray for you?” the pastor pressed. He then bowed at his bedside, in an all-too-familiar scene. Wrought with emotion, the pastor offered a few terse sentences, pleading for mercy for the dying sinner. It was becoming quite obvious that death was quickly drawing near, and he continued, “I am told you are the son of pious parents, and have been reared in the bosom of the Church; you do not need, therefore, that I should explain to you the way of salvation – for which, indeed, there is now no time. But you know that the Bible says, ‘God so loved the world that He gave His only-begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.’ Only believe *now* in this Savior, and you are saved.”

“Oh! Sir,” he rasped, “if God will only spare me this once I promise that I will live very differently than I have in the past.”

“My dear friend, this is the last device of Satan to destroy your soul. I tell you faithfully, there is no future for you in this world; you are now passing, whilst I speak, through the gateway of Death, and what you do, you must do at once, or be lost forever.”

The only response from the dying stranger was a deep groan. Soaked with sweat and veins bulging, it was almost his time.

“Do you remember the story of the penitent thief upon the cross? His time was short, just as yours is; but one brief prayer, not longer than a line, expressed his faith, and was enough. So you see that it is never too late.”

Hearing the pastor’s words, the young man opened his eyes, and weakly repeated, “No, it is not too late. Thank God, it is not too late.”

“Do you trust now in the Lord Jesus Christ?” the minister asked.

“Yes, I do. He is my Savior, and I am not afraid to die!” the young man suddenly exclaimed, startling the others in the room. After a few moments of silence, he turned and whispered to Palmer, “Will you write to my father?”

“Yes, certainly; but what shall I tell him?”

“Tell him I have found Jesus, who has pardoned my sins, and I am not afraid to die. He will meet me in heaven.” Within a moment, the young man was gone. Palmer made his way home through the streets of the silent city, saddened by the all-too-familiar deathbed scene. At the same time, he was consoled as his thoughts turned to the love that provided comfort and salvation.⁴⁶

When Palmer’s family retreated to Columbia to escape the fever in the summer of 1857, Frances was twelve, Mary was nine, Gussie was eight, and Kate was three. Baby

⁴⁶ B.M. Palmer, “Never Too Late,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 1, no.6 (April 1869): 1.

Marion was under two. Over the course of the summer, Palmer faithfully wrote letters to his wife and each of his four oldest daughters on a weekly basis.⁴⁷ The letters to each child are strikingly affectionate, full of assurances of his love and delight in the girls and their mother. In them one catches glimpses of a man who found great joy in his wife and children. He described his “bachelor quarters” in New Orleans as being “as gloomy as a ship at quarantine,” pining for the day he would see his wife and children again, who always made the house “sunny and glad.” He used loving pet names for his daughters, and repeatedly he sent “kisses” and “hugs,” humorously warning “Mamy” not to steal them. The correspondences were full of compliments, on everything from physical traits to penmanship, often reminding the girls how much they are cherished by both parents. For the younger girls, he asked Mother to read his writings to them, which contained tall-tales about animals and other humorous stories. Every letter expressed deep concern about the girls’ physical health, along with their status with the Lord, their salvation, and eternal well-being.

Palmer also displayed a passion for educating his daughters. To the oldest, Sarah Frances, he wrote about all four girls, “I would like them to be as learned as I would have striven to make Blakely, if it had pleased God to spare him to us.” And in describing their education he wrote, “I will spare no expense and no labor to secure you the best advantages the country can afford.” He repeatedly encouraged them in the study of French, art, and music, longing for the day that Sarah Frances would return and could practice her French with him. In one letter, he asked Sarah Frances if she would prefer to continue at the academy where she could “meet with other girls,” or have a private

⁴⁷ Several of the letters were collected and published by Palmer’s biographer posthumously. See Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 225-233.

teacher in the home. "Write and tell me what you think about this, for I would like to please you." Earlier he wrote to her, "I am only anxious that you should rapidly improve your mind, and get that knowledge which as a woman you will need, in order to be happy and useful yourself, and that you may be honored and loved by others." Palmer was a father who delighted in and was truly proud of his daughters, wanting to see them healthy, happy, and successful. He encouraged them to cultivate the features of elegance and grace, a highly trained mind, sincere piety, and hard work.⁴⁸ The letters display all the signs of a close, supportive, loving relationship between a father and his children.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Palmer expounded on these themes in a discourse before the Fayette Female Academy on July 28, 1859. B.M. Palmer, *A Discourse Upon Female Excellence, Delivered before the Fayette Female Academy, at its First Commencement, July 28, 1859* (New Orleans: True Witness Book and Job Printing Office, 1859).

⁴⁹ This picture of the antebellum father is different from the cold, austere, domineering patriarch painted as the typical American Victorian father by many historians of previous decades. For examples, see Catherine Clinton, *The Plantation Mistress: Woman's World in the Old South* (New York: Pantheon, 1982), 162, 176; Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 252; Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics & Behavior on the Old South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 14-15, 34, 45-48; Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1966): 151; Jean E. Friedman, *The Enclosed Garden: Women and Community in the Evangelical South, 1830-1900* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1985), xi; Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, Chicago History of American Religion, ed. Martin E. Marty (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 120; Phillip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Child-Rearing, Religious Experience, and the Self in Early America* (New York: Knopf, 1977), 359; Philip Greven, *Spare the Child: The Religious Roots of Punishment and the Psychological Impact of Physical Abuse* (New York: Knopf, 1991); Edward Shorter, *The Making of the Modern Family* (London: William Collins, 1976); Talcott Parsons et al., *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process* (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1955); Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, *Disorderly Conduct: Visions of Gender in Victorian America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Mary P. Ryan, *The Empire of the Mother: American Writing About Domesticity 1830-1860* (New York: Haworth Press, 1982), 232, 99-102. For more on separate-spheres in Victorian families and declining fatherhood, see also Carl N. Degler, *At Odds: Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) 66-72, 88-94; Robert L. Griswold, *Fatherhood in America: A History* (New York: Basic Books, 1993), 13-17; E. Anthony Rontundo, *American Manhood: Transformations in Masculinity from the Revolution to the Modern Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1993); Peter N. Stearns and Timothy Haggerty, "The Role of Fear: Transitions in American Emotional Standards for Children, 1850-1950," *The American Historical Review* 96, no.1 (February 1991): 68; Tamara K. Hareven, "The History of the Family and the Complexity of Social Change," *The American Historical Review* 96 (February 1991): 118; Carol Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual: Relations Between Women in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs* 1 (1975): 1-29; Linda K. Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75, no.1 (June 1988): 9-39. In more recent years, historians have begun to challenge and nuanced such a view. For examples, see Steven Mintz, *A Prison of Expectations: The Family in Victorian Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 1983); Joan E. Cashin, "The Structure of Antebellum

In 1859, the congregation of First Presbyterian was in a position to purchase a manse for their minister's family, and the Palmers moved from their rented home on St. Charles to a three-story dwelling on Prytania Street.⁵⁰ The new house had large rooms, high-pitched ceilings, ample office and storage space, and quarters in the back to accommodate several servants, including Caroline. A beautiful side yard contained several large trees, which Palmer often referred to in sermon illustrations. The spacious parlors and solid mahogany staircase evoked a sense of dignity from visitors. Until they moved again in 1891, the house provided for many years of happiness, as well as sorrow.⁵¹

Many were the opportunities for ministry at the Prytania Street manse, and as typical in pastoral ministry, they did not always occur at the most desirable times. One rainy Sunday evening, after just dozing off to sleep, Palmer later remembered being awakened by the noise of a carriage rolling over the stony street and stopping in front of the house. Putting on his robe, he opened the casement and stepped out onto the balcony. The cold, wintery wind was stinging, and Palmer was admittedly impatient at a summons from the driver to come and attend a dying man. Under a heavy conscience, he hurried to

Planter Families: "The Ties that Bound us was Strong," *The Journal of Southern History* 56, no.1 (February 1990): 70; Mathews, *Religion in the Old South*, 110; Loretta M. Long, *The Life of Selina Campbell: A Fellow Soldier in the Cause of Restoration* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2001), 5-6; Linda A. Pollock, *Forgotten Children: Parent-Child Relations from 1500-1900* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1983), viii; Sally G. McMillen, "Antebellum Southern Fathers and the Health Care of Children," *Journal of Southern History* 60, no. 3 (August 1994): 514, 516; James Marten, "Fatherhood in the Confederacy: Southern Soldiers and Their Children," *The Journal of Southern History* 63, no.2 (May 1997): 270; Christie Anne Farnham, *The Education of the Southern Belle: Higher Education and Student Socialization in the Antebellum South* (New York: New York University Press, 1994); Anya Jabour, "'Grown Girls, Highly Cultivated': Female Education in the Antebellum Southern Family," *The Journal of Southern History* 64, no. 1 (February 1998): 24, 64.

⁵⁰ The house and servant quarters are still located on 1415 Prytania Street (63 old Prytania) in New Orleans. In 1866, the Palmers added a study for the pastor to the side of the house.

⁵¹ One of Palmer's daughters was married in the house, and all of his grandchildren were born there. In the same house, the Palmers also lost three of their daughters.

the toilet, as his wife called from the warm bed, “This is too bad. The night is stormy, and you are fatigued – take the address and offer to come early in the morning.”

“No,” the minister replied, “death waits upon no man’s convenience, and an immortal soul may be at stake.”

Palmer took his seat on the damp cushion, and was escorted in a steady rain through the dreary city streets. After a lengthy ride, the carriage stopped before a house, and Palmer made his way up a staircase into the sick man’s bedroom. To his amazement, the man stretched out both hands toward the pastor and exclaimed, “I am so glad you have come; I have sent for you to pray with me, but chiefly to tell you that I die in the comfortable hope of salvation, to which I have been led through your instrumentality.”

At the man’s greeting, Palmer’s conscience was especially pricked. He later recounted that he could have cried, had he been alone, for the half-resentment with which he had greeted the request to call on the dying man.

“I have led a reckless and wicked life,” the sick man continued, “free from all restraints of religion or virtue. In a disreputable calling, which associated me with the vicious and profane, I had long since forgotten all the pious instruction of my childhood; indulging every appetite, and gratifying every passion of a depraved nature. But six months ago I stumbled, by what then seemed to me only an accident, into your church. It was night, and I was attracted by the brilliant lights, and sat down in the gallery at your left hand. Your text was, ‘Come, and let us reason together, saith the Lord; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red, like crimson, they shall be as wool.’ Do you remember, Sir, preaching from those words?”

“Perfectly well,” Palmer answered, “and could give you, now, the outlines of the discourse, if necessary.”

“Well, Sir, those precious words of Scripture shot through and through me, as you repeated them. I thought I had never heard anything so beautiful; and they seemed so exactly suited to me, whose sins were just the scarlet and the crimson there described. As you went on expounding and enforcing them, I drank up every word with a strange wonder and delight, that there was such a Gospel and such a Savior for a sinner as myself. Ever since that night I have been a new man, and have never lost a single sermon you have preached, until about two weeks ago, when I was taken with this pneumonia, which is carrying me to the grave.”

“How was it,” Palmer asked, “you never told me all this before? I would have been so happy to have taught you the way of the Lord, more perfectly.”

“I can hardly tell you why I did not, except that I had always lived in such a different world from you, and could never get the courage to break over the barrier which separated us. Besides, everything was dark and confused to me, but this, that God, through Christ, could make my sins as snow. But, now that I am dying, I could not rest till I had told you how I have been hanging on those precious words, and how happy I feel now in the hope that they are fulfilled in me.”

Overtaken with joy, Palmer knelt beside the bed and fervently prayed, expressing gratitude for the mercy shown to the poor sufferer and to himself. For hours, the two men discussed their faith and religion. Sometime after midnight, the man gently passed into his final sleep. In the gray dawn, Palmer pensively walked the dripping streets

home, rejoicing in his belief that it takes so little truth to save a soul, when it is applied by the Holy Spirit, and received in the simplicity of faith.⁵²

Palmer had been met with many difficulties during first years in the Crescent City, but he had successfully met the challenges. He had transitioned to a new calling, overseen the completion of a major construction project, and brought stability and growth to struggling church. Through his powerful preaching and sacrificial pastoral service, he had endeared himself to the people of New Orleans during times of unspeakable suffering. The minister had worked hard to secure funding and resources for the spread of Presbyterianism in the Southwest, kept pace with a demanding writing and public speaking schedule, and had risen to a place of national prominence within the Presbyterian Church. Palmer had many reasons for an optimistic view of his future ministry, yet some of the most challenging and influential days of his life were just on the horizon.

⁵² B.M. Palmer, "It Shall Not Return Unto Me, Void," *Southwestern Presbyterian* 1, no. 23 (July 1869): 1.

Chapter 5

The Big Villain of the Play¹

At a juncture so solemn as the present, with the destiny of a great people waiting upon the decision of an hour, it is not lawful to be still.

– B. M. Palmer, “Thanksgiving Day Sermon”

During the heated presidential campaign of 1860, the nation was abuzz of a foreboding sectional conflict. Gripped with anger and fear after John Brown’s raid at Harper’s Ferry, the South was engaged in an active process of militarization. At the April Democratic convention in Charleston, southern delegates walked out when an agreement could not be reached regarding the party’s candidate or whether to adopt a Federal Slave Code to the national platform, as strongly advocated by much of the South. The rhetoric of northern abolitionists and southern fire-eaters had reached a new extreme, and southern states were having open secession discussions.

As many were questioning the ability of the states to remain united, many were also questioning the ability of the Presbyterian Church (Old School) to remain united. The assemblies of 1859 and 1860, however, were remarkably conciliatory. In a speech before the 1858 assembly in New Orleans, the forty-year-old Palmer had declared, “I believe the Church is panting for union, in spite of all the forebodings and the warnings

¹ This was a common descriptor of Palmer used by postbellum northern visitors to New Orleans. Mallard, “Personal Reminiscences,” 111.

which our fathers have given in this Assembly.”² His description of the tone of the 1859 assembly in Indianapolis seemed equally hopeful:

To see such a body drawn from all parts of the country, mostly strangers to one another, yet sitting for days together, and exhibiting in the midst of great individual diversity and personal independence, wonderful harmony of views and unity of feeling; and, above all, to estimate the immense moral power which their well-considered judgments must carry – all this may seem to be well worth the inconvenience at which so sublime a spectacle is purchased.³

In May of 1860, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (Old School) met in Rochester, New York. In a tremendous recognition of Palmer’s influence and reputation as a scholar within the Presbyterian Church, as well as a practical effort to demonstrate sectional unity within the church, the Rev. Gardiner Spring of New York City presented a resolution nominating him to the Chair of Pastoral Theology and Sacred Rhetoric at Princeton Theological Seminary.⁴ The assembly unanimously elected Palmer to the position, and men from North and South closed in singing “Blest Be the Tie That Binds.” Palmer respectfully declined the honor of Princeton, and in June of the same year also declined a call from a church in New York City.⁵ His heart was firmly fixed upon the pastoral ministry and the city of New Orleans.

² Reported by George W. Howe, “The Religious Awakening of 1858,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 11 (July 1858): 278.

³ Palmer, “*The General Assembly of 1859*,” 516.

⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1860), 47-49. Gardiner Spring (1785-1873), Presbyterian clergyman, was a native of Newburyport, Massachusetts. He graduated from Yale University (1805), taught school in Bermuda for two years, then was admitted to the bar in Connecticut (1808). After graduating Andover Seminary (1810) he served as pastor of the Brick Church (old First Presbyterian) in New York City. He remained there as the pastor for sixty-three years. See Gardiner Spring, *Personal Reminiscences of the Life and Times of Gardiner Spring, Pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in the City of New York*, 2 vols. (New York: C. Scribner & Co., 1866).

⁵ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 235. See B.M. Palmer, letter to Charles Hodge from New Orleans, LA, June 13, 1860, Charles Hodge Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University. Palmer wrote to Hodge, “I have moreover a growing conviction that frequent changes in the pastoral relation are severely injurious to the church, & far from being local in their affects.”

Despite growing sectional animosities and debates over slavery, the Old School Church would remain as the only mainline Protestant denomination to maintain fellowship and a national unity across sectional lines until mid-1861.⁶ The leading faculty and associates of Columbia Seminary were known for their strong support of the Union. Until the election of Lincoln, Thornwell, Adger, Smyth, and Palmer advocated a strong Unionist spirit, and a desire to avoid ecclesiastical pronouncements on what they believed to be sectional, political issues.⁷ This was primarily because the Old School maintained the historic understanding of the spiritual nature of the church maintained in the Westminster Confession of Faith, and developed by sixteenth-century Reformer John Calvin, whose *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was used as a primary textbook at all the major Presbyterian seminaries. Historically, American Presbyterians had resisted taking a firm stance on the question of slavery in particular, and since the Old School-New School division in 1837, the more theologically conservative Old School Presbyterians in both the North and South had generally avoided the issue by agreeing to what they believed to be the biblical principle that political pronouncements were outside of the church's call.

Palmer's friend and mentor, James H. Thornwell, was well acquainted with Calvin's *Institutes*, and used it as the text for his course in Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary. He also acknowledged the Westminster standards as "the only

⁶ C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985). Both Methodists and Baptists went through large denominational schisms over the issue of slavery in 1845. Goen convincingly demonstrates that these antebellum denominational splits served as a catalyst for later political divisions by providing a peaceful model for secession. He does not demonstrate that the 1837 Old School/New School Presbyterian division was over the question of slavery, nor does he offer an explanation for the unity in the Old School division until after the beginning of the war. The New School split in 1857.

⁷ Erskine Clarke, "Southern Nationalism and Columbia Theological Seminary," *American Presbyterian* 66 (Summer 1988): 128.

complete system which a thorough and candid exposition could extract from the Bible.”⁸

Following in this tradition, Thornwell became known as a premier defender of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. This principle taught that the church had the spiritual power to gather and protect the saints through the ministry of the Word and sacraments, building them up in faith, but was not authorized by God to make official political pronouncements on topics not directly addressed in Scripture. The state alone was God’s authorized agent for ensuring the civil rights of mankind through legislation and the use of the sword. In a letter written to a colleague in 1840 Thornwell wrote:

And if I am singular, at the present day, in maintaining that the Bible is our *only* rule, and that where it is silent we have no right to speak, I have the consolation of knowing, that I stand on the same ground which was occupied by Calvin . . . and the venerable Assembly of Divines at Westminster. I would particularly direct your attention to “Calvin’s Institutes,” Book IV, chapters 8th, 9th, 10th, and 11th.⁹

At the General Assembly of May 1848 in Baltimore, Thornwell presented a resolution that described the spiritual functions of the church and opposed any connections between the church and secular institutions, specifically in relationship to the temperance movement.¹⁰ The General Assembly unanimously voted with Thornwell to prevent relationships between the church and secular social movements. They agreed that the decision for individual Christians to work with such organizations was a matter of their own conscience, which could not be bound one way or the other by the church without the authority of Scripture. The Assembly affirmed that the divinely-ordained role of the church was to convert and edify saints – not to promote or attack secular societies unaddressed in Scripture.

⁸ Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 36.

⁹ Ibid., 225.

¹⁰ Ibid., 303.

At the General Assembly of May 1859 in Indianapolis, Dr. R. R. Read presented a paper on the topic of slavery, commending to the church an African colonization plan by the American Colonization Society. In response, Thornwell delivered an impromptu speech, arguing “the Church is exclusively a *spiritual* organization, and possesses only a *spiritual* power. Her business [is] the salvation of men; and she [has] no mission to care for the things, or to become entangled with the kingdoms and policy, of this world.”¹¹ Thornwell was determined to keep the church focused on what he believed to be her God-ordained spiritual mission, and not to become sidetracked in affairs he believed clearly left to the state. Though generally credited as the primary defender and proponent of the doctrine during the period, this was the common view held by Old School Presbyters, North and South, including Palmer.

Some have argued that the doctrine of the spirituality of the church was merely convenient protective posturing during the slavery controversy, but that fails to consider fully the rich heritage the doctrine enjoyed within the Reformed tradition.¹² It also falls short in accounting for the consistency with which the doctrine was applied by its defenders to a variety of political and social issues. On this ground the assembly had also previously refused to take under its charge other secular societies, such as historical or temperance organizations.¹³ In his speech before the 1859 General Assembly Thornwell

¹¹ Ibid., 436.

¹² E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795-1860* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 154; Erskine Clarke, “Southern Nationalism and Columbia Theological Seminary,” *American Presbyterian* 66 (Summer 1988): 132. Clarke states that Thornwell “forged a powerful weapon to keep the South white.” Also, Jack P. Maddox, “From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State,” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (1976): 438-457.

¹³ “Old-School General Assembly – Closing Scenes,” *New York Times*, June 3, 1859; James M. Albritton, “Slavery, Secession, and The Old School Presbyterians: James Henley Thornwell and Charles Hodge on the Relationship Between Church and State,” *Southern Historian* 21 (Spring 2000): 25-39.

declared, “The salt that is to save this country is the Church of Christ, a Church that does not mix with any political party, or any issue aside from her direct mission.” Palmer, who was present at the meeting, described the speech:

The generous patriotism that breathed in these closing sentences, a patriotism which gloried in the American name, sent an electric thrill through the house; and it is the only occasion on which the writer has ever known the gravity and decorum of an ecclesiastical court disturbed by an involuntary, though subdued, applause, which was instantly repressed by the Moderator’s gavel.¹⁴

In light of the developing crisis in 1860-1861, however, Old School preachers began to deviate with greater frequency from their previous courses, turning their attention to politics.

Following Lincoln’s election, South Carolina moved most quickly among the southern states toward secession. In anticipation of Lincoln’s election, Governor William Gist had already called a legislative session to consider summoning a December state convention for the purpose of voting on secession. The reaction of the other fourteen slave states was not so certain. Georgia, a state that would be essential to any attempted southern confederacy for a number of reasons, was deeply divided over the issue of secession in its populace and state legislature.¹⁵ In mid-November of 1860, after confirmation of Lincoln’s election, the South looked to the small Georgia capital of Milledgeville, where politicians and various leading Georgians engaged in a passionate, week-long debate on secession.

¹⁴ Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 437.

¹⁵ Anthony Gene Carey, *Parties, Slavery, and the Union in Antebellum Georgia* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1997).

One prominently featured orator at the Milledgeville debates was United States Senator Robert Toombs.¹⁶ Widely regarded as a skilled lawyer and a great orator, Toombs was Georgia's most popular politician. After serving several years in the Georgia House of Representatives, he represented Georgia in the U.S. House (1844—1853) and had served in the U.S. Senate since 1853. During the 1850 crisis over admitting California to the Union, he campaigned to preserve the Union, defending Henry Clay's Compromise of 1850 against southerners advocating secession. Toombs helped to frame the Georgia Platform in response to the Compromise of 1850, affirming the acceptance of the Compromise as a final resolution of the sectional slavery issues while declaring that no further assaults by the North on southern rights would be acceptable. Times had changed ten years later, and on Tuesday, November 13, Toombs delivered a fiery pro-secession speech before the assembly at Milledgeville, shouting in the face of unionist caution, "Give me the sword! but if you do not place it in my hands, before God! *I will take it.*"¹⁷ He concluded his speech by announcing his resignation from the U.S. Senate at the end of his current term, "As for me, I will take any place in the great conflict for rights which you may assign. I will take none in the Federal Government during Mr. Lincoln's administration."¹⁸

¹⁶ Robert Augustus Toombs (1810-1885) was a native of Wilkes County, Georgia. He studied at the University of Georgia, was dismissed for misconduct in a card playing incident, then graduated from Union College in New York (1829). After completing one year at the University of Virginia law school he was admitted to the Georgia bar (1830). He served in the U.S. House (1844-1853) and the U.S. Senate (1853-1861). He served briefly as Secretary of State under Jefferson Davis, then as a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army. See Pleasant A. Stovall, *Robert Toombs: Statesman, Speaker, Soldier, Sage* (New York: Cassell Publishing, 1892); Ulrich B. Phillips, *The Life of Robert Toombs* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913); William Y. Thompson, *Robert Toombs of Georgia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1966).

¹⁷ William W. Freehling and Craig M. Simpson, eds., *Secession Debated: Georgia's Showdown in 1860* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), xv, 75.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

The week of debates at Milledgeville resulted in House and Senate committees both unanimously recommending a bill to schedule a Georgia convention of elected state delegates to consider secession in January. Approved by the state legislature on November 20, the bill was a compromise position between an extreme Unionist position that opposed any form of resistance to Lincoln and an extreme secessionist position that advocated immediate secession by declaration of the state legislature.¹⁹ If anything, setting a definite date for an upcoming election and convention only increased the efforts and desire by parties on both sides of the debate to make a compelling public case for their position. A flurry of campaign speeches and publications marked the following days and weeks in Georgia, and across the South, as secessionists in particular fought to fan the flames of their cause.²⁰

Toombs' network of influence included many prominent politicians and powerful men across the South, and in the winter of 1860-1861 he was quite busy behind the scenes promoting the cause at a regional level.²¹ The day after his heated discourse before the Georgia legislature in Milledgeville, Toombs confidently telegraphed South

¹⁹ Ibid., xviii.

²⁰ Just a few weeks after his impassioned pro-secessionist speech at Milledgeville, Toombs advocated one final attempt to work out a compromise at the Federal level. In December of 1860 he was appointed as one of five southern delegates to the Senate Committee of Thirteen, charged with the task of negotiating a deal that would prevent the South from leaving the Union. Senator John J. Crittenden of Kentucky presented the best hope for a peaceful resolution in a package of six resolutions designed as a permanent solution to the issue of slavery. After Senate Republicans rejected the Crittenden Compromise, Toombs returned to Georgia, advocating immediate secession as strongly as ever.

²¹ Though generally considered to be a zealous secessionist, Toombs seemed to vacillate between the roles of an extremist and a compromiser, generally determined by whatever was the most useful tack for the given situation. His rhetoric carried the sincere emotional fury of a secessionist when the occasion called, but he was just as quick to employ the art of compromise and distance himself from fiery absolutes for sake of political expediency. In fact, during the last months of 1860, many Georgia fire-eaters were labeling Toombs as a traitor, accusing him of growing milder in his advocacy of secession (see Ulrich B. Phillips, *The Life of Robert Toombs* [New York: The Macmillan Company, 1913], 203-204). While many perceived his inconsistency to be a great weakness, it may very well have been a larger calculated approach that ultimately did lead to the desired end of secession.

Carolina's leading secessionist, Congressman Laurence M. Keitt, "I will sustain South Carolina in secession. I have announced to the legislature that I will not serve under Lincoln. If you have the power to act, act at once. We have bright prospects here."²² Between the last week of November and his arrival in Washington on December 19 for the lame-duck session of the thirty-sixth session of Congress, Toombs embarked on a tour of the South to rally growing support for the secessionist cause. It was this deep-south expedition that brought him to the strategic city of New Orleans.²³

Louisiana was one major southern state that did not seem to show the same level of sectional zeal as South Carolina, or even the greatly divided Georgia.²⁴ Although John C. Breckenridge (the southern sympathizer and nominee of the southern Democrats) carried the state, it was by a plurality – not a majority. In Orleans Parish, Breckenridge lost to both Stephen Douglas (the northern Democratic candidate) and John Bell of the Constitutional Union Party.²⁵ To southerners calling for immediate secession after the election of Abraham Lincoln, these numbers could only be interpreted as disheartening. Surely the cause of secession would be doomed to failure without all of the clear

²² Freehling, *Secession Debated*, 203. Laurence M. Keitt (1824-1864) was a native of Orangeburg District, South Carolina. He graduated from South Carolina College and was elected to the South Carolina House of Representatives in 1848. As a representative of South Carolina at the Nashville Convention in 1850, he strongly urged the secession of the South. He served in the U.S. House (1853-1860), with a brief disciplinary interruption in 1856 for trying to prevent anyone from rescuing Senator Charles Sumner from being caned by South Carolina Congressman Preston Brooks. He served as a delegate from South Carolina to the Provisional Confederate Congress (1861), then as a Colonel in the Confederate Army. See John Holt Merchant, "Laurence M. Keitt: South Carolina Fire-Eater" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, 1976).

²³ *Ibid.*, 205

²⁴ Charles B. Dew, "Who Won the Secession Election in Louisiana?" *The Journal of Politics* 36 (February 1970): 18-32; Robert C. Reinders, *End of an Era: New Orleans, 1850-1860* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 1964), 36-44; William W. Chenault and Robert C. Reinders, "The Northern Born Community of New Orleans in the 1850s," *Journal of American History* 51 (September 1964): 232-247; Peyton McCrary, Clark Miller, and Dale Baum, "Class and Party in the Secession Crisis: Voting Behavior in the Deep South, 1856-1861," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 8 (Winter 1978): 429-457.

²⁵ The state totals were Breckenridge 22,681; Bell 20,204; Douglas 7,625. In Orleans Parish the totals were Bell 5,215; Douglas 2,998; Breckenridge 2,645. Walter Dean Burnham, *Presidential Ballots, 1836-1892* (Baltimore: Ayer Company, 1976), 492.

advantages of the port of New Orleans at the mouth of the Mississippi. But while many New Orleans newspapers reported the election results with a measure of cautious optimism, Louisiana militia units were beginning to muster.²⁶ Gov. Thomas O. Moore, a supporter of Breckenridge during the campaign, declared that Thursday, November 29, should be observed throughout the state as a day of thanksgiving and prayer in a response to such tense times.

Accompanied by a group of distinguished gentlemen, Senator Toombs arrived in New Orleans the week before Gov. Moore's day of thanksgiving. Determined to help turn the tide against strong Union sentiment, and hence the state, the politician's mission was to energize popular backing for secession. After several days of unsuccessful meetings with various leading citizens, however, he soon began to despair. Just when he was about to abandon his efforts, someone suggested to him that the already-supportive religious leadership in the city might hold the key to the popular backing so desperately needed.

For a number of reasons, Rev. Benjamin Palmer's church was a highly strategic location to energize a secessionist campaign. When Palmer first arrived in New Orleans in late 1856, the congregation of First Presbyterian Church numbered around 350 adult members. By 1860, the church's roll included over 500 members, making it the third largest Presbyterian Church in the South.²⁷ Palmer's fame as a capable preacher was well known in the Mississippi Valley, and across the South, and he regularly attracted an audience of up to two thousand, including prominent New Orleans politicians and other

²⁶ Daniel W. Fisher, *A Human Life: An Autobiography with Excurses* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1909), 117.

²⁷ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America* (Colombia, SC: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1863), 202.

elite. In addition to a large congregation of locals, he also had an audience with countless travelers, vacationers, and traders passing through the metropolis, as well as a ready apparatus for printing and distribution.²⁸

The details of a meeting between the minister and the politician are unknown, but Palmer was by no means a pawn of Toombs.²⁹ Palmer had always maintained the doctrine of the spirituality and independence of the church on earth, refusing to make political utterances from the pulpit. At the same time, his views regarding secession and the issues involved were well developed. Privately, he was a strong advocate of slavery with no desire to compromise with abolitionists or their allies, and was most favorable toward secession after Lincoln's election.³⁰ Not once, however, during the heated escalation of 1860 had he expressed such sentiments from the pulpit. The minister believed such topics were outside of the bounds of gospel preaching. The degree to

²⁸ Samuel Langhorne Clemens (Mark Twain), though generally known as a critic of organized religion, enjoyed attending Palmer's church when in town. On a visit to New Orleans in 1882, Clemens told a reporter that he planned to "hear Dr. Palmer as I used to do in the old days." New Orleans, *Times-Democrat*, April 29, 1882. See Mark Twain, *Mark Twain's Notebooks and Journals Volume II (1877-1883)*, ed. Frederick Anderson, Lin Salamo, and Bernard L. Stein (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1975), 485.

²⁹ Robert L. Stanton, *The Church and the Rebellion: A Consideration of the Rebellion Against the Government of the United States; and the Agency of the Church, North and South, in Relation thereto* (New York: Derby & Miller, 1864), 164-165. Also, Lewis G. Vander Velde, *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union 1861-1869* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 31. Stanton served as a city missionary and pulpit supply for First Presbyterian in New Orleans (1843-1844), then served as pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in New Orleans (1844-1852). He was an abolitionist, a friend and personal advisor to Abraham Lincoln, and no fan of Palmer. Regarding the meeting between Toombs and Palmer, Stanton cites as his source the testimony of U.S. Congressman Miles Taylor of Louisiana. See Timothy F. Reilly, "Robert L. Stanton, Abolitionist of the Old South," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 53 (1975): 33-49.

³⁰ See Richard T. Hughes, "A Civic Theology for the South: The Case of Benjamin M. Palmer," *Journal of Church and State* 25 (1983): 447-467; Stephen R. Haynes, "Noah's Sons in New Orleans: Genesis 9-11 and Benjamin Morgan Palmer," in *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 125-145; Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders' Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

which Toombs may have helped change Palmer's policy is unclear, but in late November of 1860, Palmer was prepared to make a case for southern secession from the pulpit.³¹

The day of thanksgiving and prayer in New Orleans was crisp and clear – “a perfectly delicious day.”³² Most businesses were closed for the special occasion, and rumors were circulating that Palmer was going to speak to the question on everyone's mind at the special 11:00 service that Thursday morning.³³ When the hour arrived, Palmer stepped to the pulpit with a rare fully prepared manuscript in hand and faced an eager audience of standing room only. In his mind, this was not an occasion for his usual rhetorical flare. Instead, the minister firmly grasped the pulpit and read slowly and carefully, for approximately forty-five minutes. Without a single gesture, without elevating his voice, the calmness of deep emotion impressed an unusual solemnity upon the congregation.³⁴

³¹ For works dealing with the influential role of southern churches in the growing sectional crisis, and the complex relationship between sectional crisis and religious crisis, see James B. Silver, *Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda* (Tuscaloosa, AL: Confederate Publishing, 1957); Wayne C. Eubank, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer's Thanksgiving Sermon, 1860,” in J. Jeffery Auer, ed., *Antislavery and Disunion, 1858-1861: Studies in the Rhetoric of Compromise and Conflict* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 291-309; C.C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1985); Mitchell Snay, *The Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Jon L. Wakelyn, ed., *Southern Pamphlets on Secession: November 1860-April 1861* (Chapel Hill, NC: UNC Press, 1996); J. Cutler Andrews, “The Confederate Press and Public Morale,” *The Journal of Southern History* 34, no. 4 (November 1966): 445-465; Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War* (New York: Viking, 2006); Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

³² *Daily Crescent*, November 30, 1860.

³³ Daniel W. Fisher, *A Human Life: An Autobiography with Excuse* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1909), 122. Fisher recounts a conversation with a friend on Camp Street the night prior to the sermon who knew that the *Daily Delta* already had the sermon in print and ready to run after its delivery. This seems probable, considering the paper printed the sermon in its entirety the next day, and considering Palmer delivered the sermon from a fully prepared manuscript, which was not his usual custom.

³⁴ William O. Rogers, letter to Thomas C. Johnson from Madison, NJ, June 9, 1904 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 219. In his introductory remarks, Palmer stated, “I shall aim to speak with a moderation of tone and feeling almost judicial, well befitting the sanctities of the place and the solemnities of the judgment day.” Several accounts describe the sermon as lasting close to two hours.

The minister opened by reading passages from Psalm 94:20 and Obadiah 7.³⁵ He then began to lament that in contrast to a day historically marked with joy and thanksgiving, “that which all men dreaded, but against which all men hoped, has been realized; and in the triumph of a sectional majority we are compelled to read the probable doom of our once happy and united Confederacy. It is not to be concealed that we are in the most fearful and perilous crisis which has occurred in our history as a nation.”³⁶ Before proceeding to link religious principles to southern politics, Palmer issued a careful explanation of his deviation from past practice:

You, my hearers, who have waited upon my public ministry and have known me in the intimacies of pastoral intercourse, will do me the justice to testify that I have never intermeddled with political questions. Interested as I might be in the progress of events, I have never obtruded, either publicly or privately, my opinions upon any of you; nor can a single man arise and say that, by word or sign, have I ever sought to warp his sentiments or control his judgment upon any political subject whatsoever. The party questions which have hitherto divided the political world have seemed to me to involve no issue sufficiently momentous to warrant my turning aside, even for a moment, from my chosen calling. In this day of intelligence, I have felt there were thousands around me more competent to instruct in statesmanship; and thus, from a considerations of modesty no less than prudence, I have preferred to move among you as a preacher of righteousness belonging to a kingdom not of this world. . . . I sincerely pray God that I may be forgiven if I have misapprehended the duty incumbent upon me to-day; for I have ascended this pulpit under the agitation of feeling natural to one who is about to deviate from the settled policy of his public life.³⁷

The bulk of Palmer’s discourse was a defense of slavery as part of the South’s social fabric and as a matter of self-preservation. Rather than primarily a political issue, he was convinced that the sectional conflict was rooted in “morals and religion,” and that the

³⁵ “Shall the throne of iniquity have fellowship with thee, which frameth mischief by a law?” Psalm 94:20; “All the men of thy confederacy have brought thee even to the border; the men that were at peace with thee have deceived thee, and prevailed against thee; they that ate thy bread have laid a snare under thee; there is none understanding in him,” Obadiah 7.

³⁶ B.M. Palmer, *The South: Her Peril and Her Duty. A Discourse delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, November 29, 1860* (New Orleans: Office of True Witness & Sentinel, 1860), 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

South had a “providential trust” to “*conserve and to perpetuate the institution of domestic slavery as now existing.*”³⁸

Like many southern clergy, Palmer was convinced that the institution of slavery was sanctioned and defended by Holy Scripture. The institution was essential to the southern economy and way of life, and Palmer reasoned that any legislative attempt to interfere with its “natural development and extension” was not only a threat to the South, but to the slaves themselves, to the civilized world, and to religion. After carefully expounding each of these points, the minister peered at his audience and concluded with steely conviction:

It only remains to say, that whatever be the fortunes of the South, I accept them for my own. Born upon her soil, of a father thus born before me – from an ancestry that occupied it while it was a part of England’s possessions – she is in every sense my mother. I shall die upon her bosom – she shall know no peril, but it is my peril – no conflict, but it is my conflict – and no abyss of ruin, into which I shall not share her fall. May the Lord God cover her head in this her day of battle!³⁹

The congregation solemnly filed out of the sanctuary in hushed silence. William O.

Rogers, an elder in Palmer’s church, described the event:

It has been my good fortune to hear some of the great pulpit and political orators of my generation, but I cannot recall an occasion when the effect upon the audience was so profound. After the benediction, in solemn silence, no man speaking to his neighbor, the great congregation of serious and thoughtful men

³⁸ A survey of his voluminous extant sermons verifies Johnson’s testimony, “Whatever others might preach, science, sociology, politics, literature, he would preach the Gospel, and the Gospel only, from his pulpit.” Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 660. It is inaccurate to characterize Palmer’s preaching as typically full of proslavery or southern nationalistic rhetoric. Palmer’s thanksgiving day sermon was truly a glaring, atypical example, and Johnson indicates that later in life he may have regretted this decision. “The time came when the wisdom of his course in preaching that sermon seemed less apparent; indeed, he is said to have repented preaching the discourse, though the day never came when he took an essentially different view of the great subject discussed.” Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 223.

³⁹ Palmer “The South,” 16.

and women dispersed; but afterwards the drums beat and the bugles sounded; for New Orleans was shouting secession.⁴⁰

Many were surprised by Palmer's boldness, and the fallout was immediate and overwhelming. Some expressed disapproval with the political theme and broke their relationship with the church, but most were energized in their support of secession.⁴¹ As another contemporary described, "It was found, after the delivery of his sermon, that the secession mania spread like fire in a prairie."⁴²

Almost immediately, Palmer's thanksgiving day sermon began to roll off the press. Every major local newspaper reprinted and commented on the discourse.⁴³ The *Daily Delta* printed the sermon in its entirety three times over the course of the following week, and printed 30,000 copies in pamphlet form for distribution throughout the city.⁴⁴ In no time, the sermon appeared in newspapers from Virginia to Texas, and was printed in pamphlet form in New Orleans, Mobile, Milledgeville, and even New York. An estimate of individual pamphlet distribution alone would include 50,000 copies in New Orleans and 60,000 copies across the South, making the sermon by far the most

⁴⁰ William O. Rogers, letter to Thomas C. Johnson from Madison, NJ June 9, 1904 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 220.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

⁴² Stanton, *The Church and Rebellion*, 164. In his book, Stanton argues that the war could not have been started without the southern Presbyterians, and that about a half-dozen could have stopped the secession movement altogether (see page 202). Early in the war, Stanton reportedly declared before a northern Synod "that he expected to meet such men as Thornwell and Palmer in heaven; but first expected to see them hung upon earth, and he would rejoice in their hanging." Quoted in "The Last Resort of an Editor," *True Presbyterian*, August 28, 1862.

⁴³ *Daily Picayune*, November 30, 1860. *Daily Crescent*, November 30, 1860; December 3, 1860 (notes numerous Mississippi papers had printed the sermon). *Bee*, December 5, 1860. Outside of New Orleans, the sermon was printed in papers from Virginia to Texas, including: Jackson, MS, *Weekly Mississippian*, December 19, 1860; Augusta, GA, *Southern Field and Fireside*, December 29, 1860; Atlanta, *Weekly Atlanta Intelligencer*, January 2, 1861; Mobile, AL, *Daily Advertiser*, December 2, 1860.

⁴⁴ *Daily Delta*, November 30; December 2, 4, 1860.

disseminated of southern clergy discourses during the period.⁴⁵ The staggering impact resulted in Palmer being branded as an “arch rebel” in the North and a hero in the South.⁴⁶ One contemporary later asserted that Palmer had done more than “any other non-combatant in the South to promote rebellion.”⁴⁷

When the Old School General Assembly met in Philadelphia in May of 1861, the national division already was well on its way. Beginning with South Carolina in December, nine southern states had already formally seceded, and North Carolina would withdraw on May 20 during the General Assembly’s meeting. South Carolina had fired on Fort Sumter on April 12, and three days later Lincoln had issued a proclamation to form the largest military force in American history at 75,000. Southern Presbyterians, however, were still not prepared to secede from the national Presbyterian Church. In November 1860, in the state where secession sentiment was strongest, the Synod of South Carolina had defeated a motion to “sever all connection with the Northern portion of the General Assembly.” On December 1, the same assembly passed a resolution by

⁴⁵ Haskell Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” *Louisiana History* 4 (1963): 115-117. Five different printings of the sermon in pamphlet form have been found: *Thanksgiving Sermon, delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, December [November] 29, 1860, by Rev. B.M. Palmer, D.D.* (New York: George F. Nesbitt, 1861); *Slavery and Divine Trust – The Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate the Institution as it now exists* (New York: George F. Nesbitt & Co., 1861); *The Rights of the South defended in the pulpit: by B.M. Palmer, D.D., and W.T. Leacock, D.D., of New Orleans* (Mobile: J.Y. Thompson Printing Company, 1860); *Thanksgiving Sermon delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, Nov. 29th, 1860* (Milledgeville, GA: Boughton, Nisbet & Barnes, State Printers, 1860); *The South: Her Peril and Her Duty. A Discourse delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, November 29, 1860* (New Orleans: Office of True Witness & Sentinel, 1860). The sermon was also reprinted in Palmer’s old Amherst classmate’s Henry Ward Beecher, ed., *Fast Day Sermons or The Pulpit on the State of the Country* (New York: Rudd & Carelton, 1861), 57-80.

⁴⁶ Stanton, *The Church and Rebellion*, 164. Many other influential sermons expressing secession sentiments were preached across the South during this period, defending slavery and denouncing the atheistic spirit of abolitionism, but none compare to Palmer’s in measure of influence. James H. Thornwell preached a sermon on National Sins at First Presbyterian, Columbia on Wednesday, November 21. He also explained that the momentous occasion called for him to introduce politics to the pulpit for the first time in twenty-five years. James H. Thornwell, “National Sins: A Fast-Day Sermon,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 13 (January 1861): 649-689.

⁴⁷ Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1:558.

Palmer's old friend, Rev. John Adger, affirming the desire to remain as one church, stating, "From our brethren of the whole Church annually assembled we have received nothing but justice and courtesy."⁴⁸ This unity, however, would continue to be strained as Old School preachers, both North and South, more frequently commented on the sectional crisis.

In 1861, the sentiments expressed in Palmer's thanksgiving day sermon were published in a much more detailed article for the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. As the voice of the most influential theological institution in the South, the premiere southern scholarly journal enjoyed widespread circulation in the North and South. The article, entitled "A Vindication of Secession and the South," provided a sweeping political history of the United States, making a moral and legal case for secession.⁴⁹ In particular, the piece was written in response to a sermon preached by Old School Presbyterian Rev. Robert J. Breckinridge on January 4, 1861, calling for loyalty to the Union, which was circulating in the North and South in pamphlet form.⁵⁰ Summarizing his position, Palmer wrote:

He affirms the people to be one, divided into many: we, that they are many, united into one. He ascribes sovereignty to the Union: we, to the States. He regards the Constitution as creating a government which is *over* the States: we regard it as a common law established *between* the States. In his view, "any attempt to throw off this national allegiance, in any legal, in any constitutional, in any historical light, is pure madness:" in our view, in every legal, constitutional, or historical light, there is no allegiance to be thrown off, and consequently there is no madness in the case.⁵¹

⁴⁸ F.D. Jones and W.H. Mills, eds. *History of the Presbyterian Church in South Carolina Since 1850* (Columbia: The Synod of South Carolina, 1926), 74-75.

⁴⁹ Benjamin M. Palmer, "A Vindication of Secession and the South," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 14 (April 1861): 134-177.

⁵⁰ The article was first published as "Our Country: its Peril, and its Deliverance," *Danville Quarterly Review* (March 1861).

⁵¹ Palmer, "A Vindication of Secession and the South," 175.

In May of 1861, Palmer gave more stirring addresses promoting the southern cause to New Orleans troops preparing to leave for the battlefield. On Sunday morning, May 26, the New Orleans Crescent Rifles marched to Lafayette Square to attend the morning service and hear a farewell sermon at First Presbyterian Church. Choosing Psalm 144:1 as his text, Palmer defended the South's participation in the war, declaring a position of simple self-defense.⁵² According to Palmer, the South was fighting to defend their national trust and the great American principle of self-government. At stake was "an issue between religion and atheism," and the soldiers were going to fight enemies who cried for "a new Constitution, a new Bible, and a new God."⁵³

The next day, Palmer addressed an audience of over five thousand people from the steps of the classic portico of City Hall.⁵⁴ There, the Washington Artillery was mustered into Confederate service before boarding the railroad for Virginia. Before a cheering crowd, the preacher declared the type of battle the troops were engaging:

It is a war of defense against wicked and cruel aggression – a war of civilization against ruthless barbarism which would dishonor the dark ages – a war of religion against blind and bloody fanaticism. It is a war for your homes and your firesides – for your wives and children – for the land which the Lord has given us for a heritage. It is a war for the maintenance of the broadest principle for which a free people can contend – the right of self-government.

Palmer compared the struggle to the American War for Independence, contending for the same principle that a just government must derive its powers from the will of the

⁵² James B. Roden, "Trip from New Orleans to Louisville in 1861," *Confederate Veteran* 18 (1910): 236-237. The headquarters of the Crescent Rifles was on the corner of St. Charles and Gravier Streets. "Blessed be the Lord, my strength, which teacheth my hands to war and my fingers to fight." Psalm 144:1

⁵³ New Orleans *Sunday Delta*, June 2, 1861.

⁵⁴ Built between 1845-1853, the impressive Greek Revival building was designed by renowned architect James Gallier, Sr., and housed New Orleans City Hall for over a century. Gallier Hall is still located at 545 St. Charles Ave, facing Lafayette Square.

governed.⁵⁵ After invoking God's blessing upon their flag, the minister concluded, "Soldiers, farewell! and may the Lord of Hosts be around about you as a wall of fire, and shield your head in the day of battle."⁵⁶

With tensions escalating, southern states seceding, and a nation at war, not many southern commissioners attended the General Assembly of May 1861 in Philadelphia. Of the few southern delegates who did attend, no major southern leader of influence was present, including Palmer.⁵⁷ At the Assembly, a series of resolutions were passed by a vote of 156 to 66, denouncing secession as an act of treason, and stating:

That the General Assembly, in the spirit of that Christian patriotism which the Scriptures enjoin and which has always characterized this church do hereby acknowledge and declare our obligation to promote and perpetuate, so far as in us lies, the integrity of these United States and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage the Federal Government in the exercise of all its functions under our noble Constitution; and to this Constitution, in all its provisions, requirements and principles, we profess our unabated loyalty.

In response, Dr. Charles Hodge of Princeton, along with fifty-seven other commissioners, formally protested the Assembly's action for the basic reason that "we deny the right of the General Assembly to decide the political question, to what government the allegiance of Presbyterians as citizens is due, and its right to make that decision a condition of membership in our Church."⁵⁸ During the debates surrounding the resolutions, which

⁵⁵ A soldier later recalled Palmer "as he appeared that day on the steps of City Hall – so impassioned, so grandly aflamed with eloquence and patriotism, that he seemed to the departing troops to be a veritable incarnation of the spirit of war." "Whole South Mourns Death of Dr. Palmer," *Times-Democrat*, May 29, 1902.

⁵⁶ "Parting Sermon to the Washington Artillery," New Orleans *Daily Delta*, May 29, 1861. The full discourse is also printed in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 238-239. Important works on the influence of religious rhetoric include Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Atlanta: University of Georgia Press, 1990); Richard T. Hughes, "A Civic Theology for the South: The Case of Benjamin M. Palmer," *Journal of Church and State* 25 (1983): 447-467.

⁵⁷ Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 1:564.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 564.

lasted over a week, the Assembly recognized that the action would force the withdrawal of the southern Presbyteries. Ironically, Dr. Gardiner Spring of New York, who just the previous year had nominated Benjamin Palmer to a prominent chair at Princeton, proposed the resolutions.

After the war, Palmer later lamented, “It would have been a superb triumph of Christianity, if the Church could have stretched her arm across the chasm of a great war, preserving the integrity of her ranks unbroken. The golden vision was not to be realized.”⁵⁹ In response to the Gardiner Spring Resolutions, the southern Presbyterian churches were forced to withdraw from the denomination. On August 15, 1861, Presbyterian leaders met in Atlanta to begin the process of reorganization. Delegates representing twenty southern presbyteries urged all of them to renounce ties with the old Assembly and make plans to send commissioners to a southern General Assembly in Augusta, Georgia on December 4. Palmer later described the unanimous action:

This separation was based, in every case, upon the unconstitutional character of the Assembly’s legislation. We give the language employed by a single Presbytery, as showing the common ground upon which they all stood: “*Resolved*, That in view of the unconstitutional, Erastian, tyrannical, and *virtually excising* act of the late General Assembly, sitting at Philadelphia, in May last, we do hereby, and with a solemn protest against this act, declare, in the fear of God, our connection with the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States to be dissolved.”⁶⁰

The organizing meeting of the southern churches convened on December 4, 1861, at the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta, Georgia. Following an opening prayer, the reading of Psalm 45 and Isaiah 62, and an anthem by the choir, Benjamin Palmer

⁵⁹ Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 501.

⁶⁰ Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 502-503. The sample resolution is the one adopted unanimously by Palmer’s own New Orleans Presbytery on July 9, 1861. The complete resolution is found in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 240-44.

preached the opening sermon on the theme of Christ as the Head of the Church from Ephesians 1:22.⁶¹ Though it was customary for the last moderator present to preach the opening sermon, a number of presbyteries had requested to hear the preacher from New Orleans.⁶² Palmer was elected as moderator of the Assembly, and forty-seven presbyteries formed the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA).⁶³ After settling the church's name and title, James Thornwell immediately introduced a resolution to adopt formally the Calvinist Westminster standards of the Old School Presbyterian Church as its constitution.⁶⁴ Over the course of eleven days, the body carefully deliberated over various matters, mostly pertaining to the organization of the new denomination.⁶⁵ Describing the general tone of the Assembly, the Rev. R.Q. Mallard wrote, "Convened in times the most exciting, even the few allusions to the war then raging were signalized by the absence of all bitterness and railing accusations."⁶⁶

⁶¹ The full text of the sermon is found in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 247-262.

⁶² Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 2:15.

⁶³ The original church structure is still located at 642 Telfair Street in Augusta. Among other items of interest is the 1861 moderator's chair used by Palmer. Rev. Joseph R. Wilson, D.D., father of future U.S. President Woodrow Wilson (then age 4), was elected as the Permanent Clerk of the Assembly. The Wilson home is across the street from the church at 419 7th Street.

⁶⁴ The motion also included the adoption of the Form of Government, the Book of Discipline, and the Directory of Worship, only substituting the term "Confederate States" for "United States."

⁶⁵ During the course of the week, the visiting Presbyterian ministers filled various pulpits in town. Palmer preached at First Presbyterian on Sunday, December 8, and a young Methodist woman who was present wrote, "I never saw the Presbyterian church so crowded as it was. Dr. Palmer dispensed with his notes altogether and preached a very eloquent soul-stirring and gospel sermon. A real Methodist revival sermon!" David B. Calhoun, *Cloud of Witnesses: The Story of First Presbyterian Church Augusta Georgia, 1804-2004* (Greenville, SC: Word Association, 2004), 69.

⁶⁶ R.Q. Mallard, "Personal Recollections of the First General Assembly," *Presbyterian Quarterly*, 27, no. 64 (October 1903): 257.

For the most part, Palmer continued with his regular preaching and pastoral duties in New Orleans during the first year of the war.⁶⁷ In early April 1862 he departed to attend the second General Assembly scheduled to meet in Memphis, Tennessee, in May. Along the way, he visited the army of General Albert Sidney Johnston and delivered a stirring address from horseback to a portion of Johnston's men shortly before the Battle of Shiloh.⁶⁸ Before reaching Memphis, Palmer learned that the location for the meeting had been changed to Montgomery, Alabama, due to the proximity of Union troops. After a meeting with Gov. John J. Pettus of Mississippi, Palmer was convinced to spend some time in Mississippi stumping to encourage support for the Government of the Confederacy in Richmond, rather than trying to make the Assembly in Montgomery. At various locations across the state he delivered patriotic addresses seeking to justify and bolster the position of the seceded states.⁶⁹ In April, he spent time ministering to troops under Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard before the siege of Corinth.⁷⁰

In late April 1862, the bells of First Presbyterian Church ominously tolled the warning to all New Orleans that Federal gunboats were rounding the bend of the Mississippi River. Flag Officer David F. Farragut's fleet had successfully penetrated the Confederate batteries at Fort Jackson and Fort St. Phillip, ninety miles downstream.⁷¹ On May 1, Farragut transferred command of New Orleans to Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler,

⁶⁷ Palmer published a piece on the philosophy and art of social intercourse. Benjamin M. Palmer, "The Art of Conversation," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 14 (January 1862): 550-568.

⁶⁸ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 262.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 262-263; *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America* (Augusta, GA: Steam Power Press Chronicle & Sentinel, 1862), 6.

⁷⁰ Biographical sketch in New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, August 21, 1887, p.10. Also, E.T. Baird, letter to A.A. Porter, May 22, 1862 (A.A. Porter Collection, Columbia Theological Seminary).

⁷¹ For a full account of the capture of New Orleans, see Chester H. Hearn, *The Capture of New Orleans, 1862* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 2005); Charles L. Dufour, *The Night the War Was Lost* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

nicknamed “the Beast.”⁷² With 15,000 Federal troops, Butler exercised an iron-fisted control of the city that became infamous, and many citizens attempted to flee.⁷³ So wide had Palmer’s fame spread as a result of the thanksgiving sermon, it was reported that Butler fixed a “price” on Palmer’s head.⁷⁴ Knowing that Union troops had branded Palmer as an arch rebel for instigating treason, some close friends sent word to him not to return, and helped his family escape from the city. After Palmer was reunited with his wife and five daughters, the family stayed for a brief period in Hazelhurst, Mississippi, while Palmer served two months as a volunteer minister with the Army of Mississippi, under General Braxton Bragg. For at least a portion of this time he was attached to the 5th Battery, Washington Artillery of New Orleans.⁷⁵

The Palmer family made their way back to Columbia by late August, where Augusta and the children could stay with her mother and stepfather until they found a permanent home. Palmer found himself in high demand as a pastor, preacher, orator, chaplain, and seminary professor. He was greatly saddened to learn that his intimate friend and mentor, James Thornwell, had passed away on August 1 after a long illness.

⁷² On this same day, the second General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America was convening in Montgomery, AL.

⁷³ Howard P. Johnson, “New Orleans Under General Butler,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 24 (April 1941): 434-536; Chester G. Hearn, *When the Devil Came Down to Dixie: Ben Butler in New Orleans* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997).

⁷⁴ Dr. J.W. Caldwell, interview by Wayne Carter Eubank, Montreat, NC, January 22, 1942 in Eubank, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer, A Southern Divine,” 130. See also Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 264. When Butler learned of local clergy refusing to include the U.S. President in their weekly blessings, he sent staff into the churches to gather the names of offenders. Churches that refused to include the President’s prayer were closed. When Episcopalian Reverends W.T. Leacock, William Fulton, and Charles Goodrich claimed religious immunity from Butler’s orders, he sent them to the Federal military prison Ft. Lafayette in New York. See Hearn, *When the Devil Came Down*, 172-175; Myrta Lockett Avery and Clemant A. Evans, *Dixie After the War: An Exposition of the Social Conditions Existing in the South, During the Twelve Years Succeeding the Fall of Richmond* (New York: Doubleday, 1906), 134-135; Benjamin F. Butler and Jessie A. Marshall, *Private and Official Correspondence of Gen. Benjamin F. Butler*, vol. 2 (Boston, MA: Plimpton Press, 1917), 407-409; John Smith Kendall, “Christ Church and General Butler,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly*, XXIII (October, 1940): 124-157.

⁷⁵ Maj. Guy G. McLean, letter to Capt. E.A. Deslinde from Headquarters Western Department, May 21, 1862 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 264. The request is for a saddle and bridle for the Rev. Dr. Palmer.

Naturally, Palmer was called upon to officiate the memorial service, and he delivered a moving eulogy on September 17 at the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia.⁷⁶ On December 20, 1862 he delivered a funeral address in the same church for Confederate General Maxcy Gregg, who was mortally wounded at Fredericksburg.⁷⁷ That fall and winter, Palmer preached in a small mission church two miles outside of Columbia, and after Rev. Francis P. Mullally resigned his pastorate at First Presbyterian of Columbia, Palmer agreed to fill the pulpit of his former church whenever he was in town.⁷⁸

During the course of 1862, there was growing concern over the large numbers of former Confederates taking the oath of allegiance to the United States. Union pressure to take the oath was proving especially successful in larger cities like New Orleans, Nashville, and Memphis. Well aware that large-scale taking of the oath could potentially have a devastating effect on southern morale, Palmer found time in February to publish a pamphlet on the oath of allegiance. The piece expressed support for and expounded upon resolutions made by the Confederate Congress encouraging Confederate men and women in occupied territories who refused to take an oath of allegiance to the United States, especially in New Orleans. Passionately pleading to their sense of honor and integrity, Palmer sternly warned that even those who took the oath under duress were guilty of the

⁷⁶ Benjamin M. Palmer, *A Discourse Commemorative of the Life, Character, and Genius of the Late Rev. J.H. Thornwell, D.D., LL. D., Professor of Didactic and Polemic Theology in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, S.C.* (Columbia: Southern Guardian Steam-Power Press, 1862). Johnson declared Palmer's eulogy to be "one of the most brilliant pieces of literary portraiture in the modern tongues." Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 266.

⁷⁷ Benjamin M. Palmer, *Address Delivered at the Funeral of General Maxcy Gregg, in the Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S.C., December 20, 1862.* Columbia: Southern Guardian Steam-Power Press, 1863.

⁷⁸ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 265; Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord*, 110.

sin of perjury. The minister called all southerners, “Choose the dungeon and scaffold a thousand times, rather than transmit the taint of this leprosy to your offspring.”⁷⁹

President Jefferson Davis declared March 27, 1863, as a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer in the Confederate States. In honor of the occasion, Palmer was invited to Milledgeville to deliver a discourse before the Georgia State Legislature. Using Revelation 4:2-3 as his text, Palmer pleaded a logical case justifying the cause of secession and the war. In conclusion, he reasoned, “our cause is preeminently the cause of God himself, and every blow struck by us is in defense of His supremacy.”⁸⁰ The sermon was enthusiastically received, and Palmer was again called to expound on similar themes in an oration before the General Assembly of South Carolina later that same year.⁸¹

The third General Assembly of the PCCSA opened in Columbia on May 7, 1863. Heavy on the agenda was addressing the spiritual needs of Confederate troops. George Howe, chairman of the Standing Committee on Domestic Missions, announced a plan to establish the office of Commissioner from the Assembly to each of the major armies of the Confederacy. The duties of the Commissioners would include laboring as chaplains, recruiting additional chaplains, procuring commissions for new chaplains, employing

⁷⁹ Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Oath of Allegiance to the United States, Discussed in its Moral and Political Bearings* (Richmond, VA: MacFarlane & Fergusson, 1863), 22.

⁸⁰ Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Rainbow Round the Throne; or Judgment Tempered with Mercy. A Discourse Before the Legislature of Georgia, Delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Appointed by the President of the Confederate States of America, March 27th, 1863* (Milledgeville, GA: Boughton, Nisbet & Barnes, State Printers, 1863), 39; also found in Benjamin M. Palmer and George Foster Pierce. *Sermons of Bishop Pierce and Rev. B.M. Palmer, D.D. Delivered Before the General Assembly at Milledgeville, Ga., on Fast Day, March 27, 1863* (Milledgeville: Boughton, Nisbet & Barnes, State Printers, 1863).

⁸¹ Benjamin M. Palmer, *A Discourse Before the General Assembly of South Carolina, on December 10, 1863, Appointed by the Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer* (Columbia: Charles P. Pelham, State Printer, 1864).

ministers to pay temporary visits to the army, and circulating books and tracts. Palmer “offered to do service in the West, on his own charges, if he be left to some measure of discretion in respect to the length of time.”⁸² With these conditions, he was thus made Commissioner to the Army of the West. The same Assembly also provisionally appointed Palmer to fill the chair of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary for one year, filling the void left by the death of Thornwell. Certain that the war would soon be over, Palmer could serve as a chaplain to the army that summer, return to the Seminary for the fall term, and return to New Orleans once Confederate forces retook possession.

As Palmer began making preparations to depart for his service in the West, there was a growing concern regarding the health of his oldest daughter, Frances. For a year, the eighteen-year-old had been fighting a bad cough, and in recent weeks had lost her appetite. Pleading for her father to stay, Frances cried, “Father, you are going so far, and I am so ill.”⁸³ But after a tearful good-bye, and with great agony, Palmer departed to fulfill his duty, hopeful that he would return to see his daughter soon.

As Commissioner to the Army of Tennessee, Palmer spent the next couple of months preaching to soldiers, distributing Christian literature, counseling individuals, and attending to the sick and wounded. Keeping a rigorous schedule, he preached in all of the brigades and most of the regiments of one corps of the Army of Tennessee, while it was

⁸² *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America* (Columbia, SC: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1863), 139.

⁸³ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 28.

encamped around Shelbyville.⁸⁴ His work, however, was constantly haunted by thoughts of his daughter's plea for him to stay home:

Oh! how the words kept ringing in my ears amidst the drums and cannon of the camp; and I could not but ask myself daily if duty did indeed require me to be thus cruel to my dying child. She evidently feared it was a final separation, which thanks to God, it did not prove to be. I took advantage of the confusion of the retreat from Shelbyville to run home and look upon the pale face once more.⁸⁵

Arriving home early on the morning of July 4, Palmer found his daughter in a very weak condition. Resolving to stay by her bedside until the end, the father enjoyed several days of touching conversation and companionship with his daughter.

As the days went by, Frances was having increasing trouble breathing, and expressed a great fear of pain and suffocating. Seeking to comfort his daughter, the minister later recalled asking, "Frances, do you feel that you love Jesus?"

She answered promptly, "Yes, I know that I love Him."

"Do you know that you love Him, just as you know that you love your mother and me?"

"Just in the same way," she replied.

"Well, then, if you love Him and He loves you, can you not leave this matter of your dying in His hands, without being distressed; just, for example, as you have often left things to your mother and me, and have given yourself no further concern, simply because you confided both in our wisdom and affection?"

"Yes," she answered feebly.

After some final good-byes and assurances of love from her mother and grandparents, Frances passed away on July 16. Her father later wrote:

⁸⁴ Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 2:41; Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 276-277.

⁸⁵ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 28.

She has left a memory in which there is nothing we would desire changed: as we travel over it in thought, every spot is green and lovely to the eye. I had learned to reverence her. The attributes which she displayed were so beautiful that I, who sought to shape and guide her aright, was often reproved by a virtue superior to my own.⁸⁶

The family buried her by her infant brother in Columbia, and the grieving father prepared to return west.⁸⁷

In late August 1863, Palmer called on Rev. Thomas H. McCallie of the First Presbyterian Church in Chattanooga, Tennessee. On a Thursday designated for prayer and fasting, McCallie invited Palmer to conduct the church service for a large gathering of citizens and soldiers. The Union army was close, and as Palmer began his closing prayer to end the service, the distant boom of a cannon was heard across the Tennessee River. Union troops had managed to creep past Bragg's guard. A flying shell screamed over the roof of the house of worship and exploded with a tremendous crash just outside the window of the church. Regardless, the preacher finished his prayer, but when he opened his eyes he saw empty pews. His congregation had quietly fled. Later, he would often joke that they had left him "alone in his glory," but he would not be shelled out of his duty!⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Ibid., 36-37.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 32-34. Benjamin Blakeley Palmer, Sarah Frances Palmer, as well as James Henley Thornwell, are buried in Elmwood Cemetery on Elmwood Avenue in Columbia, SC.

⁸⁸ Theodore L. Cuyler, *Recollections of a Long Life: An Autobiography* (New York: The Baker & Taylor Co., 1902), 221-222; Sallie C. Bird, letter to Thomas Cary Johnson, July 1, 1904 (Union Theological Seminary); Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 264-265. Johnson suggests the event may have occurred in August of 1862, based on the verbal testimony of Palmer's son-in-law, Dr. John W. Caldwell. However, there is no record of a battle in Chattanooga in August of 1862. The Manual of the First Presbyterian Church, Chattanooga cites August 1863. It was almost certainly the Second Battle of Chattanooga on August 21, 1863. The day was a national day of fasting and prayer, and accounts of the battle recall churches being in service when the surprise bombardment began. Maj. Gen. William S. Rosecrans sent a Union brigade to a location northeast of Chattanooga, where Confederates could see them, reinforcing Gen. Braxton Bragg's expectation that the attack would come from that direction. This allowed the 18th Indiana Light Artillery to begin shelling the town from across the river. See Peter Cozzens, *The Shipwreck of Their Hopes: The Battles for Chattanooga* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois, 1994).

Palmer was back in Columbia by the fall of 1863, filling the pulpit of First Presbyterian and teaching in the seminary. In April of 1864, a group of women called upon him to deliver a welcome address to a group of soldiers returning home after a three-year absence. In a gracious welcome, Palmer took the opportunity to expound on the meaning and significance of the great struggle, and the reasons why the South still had great hope for success. The minister even confessed that he sometimes wished it was his calling to take up arms. Turning to Maj. Gen. Wade Hampton, who was seated on the platform, the minister said:

The day will come when that blade which gleams so brightly by your side in the hour of battle will hang as a relic upon your ancestral walls, and there will come forth some fair haired urchin who, as he takes it down and draws the rusty blade from its scabbard, will say, "This was the sword with which my great-grandfather passed through many battles of the Revolution of 1860 and '64." Mark you, he will not call it "the great rebellion," as neither you nor I do, but a mighty and stupendous revolution, which gave freedom to our land. At the same time there may be a flaxen haired girl who, as she turns over the old pages of her family history and her eye falls upon the name of "Hampton," will call to her remembrances a family tradition, that on a certain April day seventy-five or eighty years ago, her great-grandfather pinned the emblem of South Carolina and the Confederacy as near as he could over General Hampton's heart.⁸⁹

With those words, the minister leaned over and attached to the General's breast an exquisite Palmetto badge interwoven with a small Confederate flag. The brave soldier could not help but weep, and reportedly there was not a dry eye in the house.⁹⁰

During their time in Columbia, Palmer described the status of the family as "refugees," and their full expectation was to return home to New Orleans as soon as the war was won.⁹¹ What had begun as a two-month trip when he departed the city in early

⁸⁹ "Dr. Palmer's Address," Columbia, *The Daily Southern Guardian*, June 10, 1864.

⁹⁰ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 273. After the war, Hampton served as Governor of South Carolina (1876-1879) and as a U.S. Senator (1879-1891).

⁹¹ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 27.

1862 had turned into two years and counting in “exile.”⁹² As a man wanted for treason, he had avoided any contact with his congregation in occupied New Orleans. After two long years, however, he could no longer resist the pastoral urge to make contact with his flock, and the pastor sent his first letter to the congregation dated May 20, 1864. Palmer wrote of his love for the church, lamenting, “How little did I then anticipate the dreadful catastrophe which prevented my return.” The pastor gave them an update on his activities during the separation, including the deaths of Thornwell and Frances. He also focused on encouraging the church in a difficult circumstance with Scripture and hopes for a future reunion:

But in the midst of these distresses, how precious is the thought that this poor world is not our final home! Its vexations and cares are only the methods by which God trains us for the world of light and love on high. Our school days will soon be over, and we shall escape forever from all this hard, but necessary, discipline. When we stand upon those heavenly heights, we will look back with wonder that we made so much of the sorrow that endureth only for a night. We shall see so much of a Father’s love in those very pains which once distressed us, that they will become materials of our song.

In conclusion, the pastor longed for a future day: “Surely after this long and gloomy separation, the Gospel will be both preached and heard as it never was before. I pray God, if I am permitted to return, I may ‘come to you in the fullness of the blessing of the Gospel of Christ.’”⁹³

The war continued to rage, and it soon became apparent that the family would not be returning to New Orleans in 1864. When the General Assembly met in Charlotte, North Carolina, Palmer’s provisional appointment to teach at Columbia was extended for another year, acknowledging the error of the previous Assembly’s expectation that New

⁹² Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to New Orleans First Presbyterian Church from Columbia, SC, May 20, 1864 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 277-282.

⁹³ Ibid.

Orleans would be in Confederate possession by now.⁹⁴ No one imagined that the seminary would be used as a hospital for sick and wounded soldiers in the coming winter, or the degree to which sorrows and suffering would continue to increase in the forthcoming year.⁹⁵ The Federal blockade of the coast had the economy virtually frozen, and times were very difficult. Regular news of Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's devastating invasion of Georgia was shocking, and death was a daily reality. Sunday after Sunday, the church in Columbia served as a house of mourning, where members would gather seeking consolation. Mary Boykin Chesnut, wife of prominent South Carolina politician James Chesnut, Jr., described in her diary an encouraging sermon Palmer preached in November, "What a sermon! The preacher stirred my blood. My very flesh crept and tingled. A red-hot glow of patriotism passed through me. Such a sermon must strengthen the hearts and the hands of many people. There was more exhortation to fight and die, *à la* Joshua, than meek Christianity."⁹⁶

One Sunday, February 11, 1865, as Palmer entered the pulpit to preach, a note was passed to him announcing the death of a young Confederate soldier slain in battle just the day before. He was the husband of Palmer's niece, who was sitting in the congregation. For nearly an hour, the pastor proclaimed the Scriptures as the widow sat

⁹⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America* (Columbia, SC: Presbyterian Publishing House, 1864).

⁹⁵ Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord*, 110. Also notable at the May 1864 General Assembly was Palmer's successfully-led opposition to a proposed union between the PCCSA and the United Synod of the South, comprised of southern New School churches. Palmer opposed the union for the basic reason that the southern New School churches had not made clear their unreserved subscription to the Church's theological Standards. Benjamin M. Palmer, "The Proposed Plan of Union between the General Assembly in the Confederate States of America and the United Synod of the South," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 16 (April 1864): 264-306.

⁹⁶ Mary Boykin Chesnut, *A Diary from Dixie* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1905), 333-334. James Chesnut, Jr. (1815-1885) served as a U.S. Senator (1858-1860), as a Brigadier General in the Confederate Army, and as an aide to Confederate President Jefferson Davis.

listening, unaware of the news that would cause her great mourning at the end of the service. Preaching was hard for him that day.⁹⁷

After reaching Savannah in December, Sherman's army turned north toward the Carolinas in January 1865. After crossing the Edisto River in February, they headed for Columbia. Palmer feared that he would not be spared if caught, and was urged by his family and friends to flee the town. Reluctantly leaving his family in their home on Laurel Street in the care of his brother-in-law, Isaac Hutson, Palmer left with a supply of cornbread to camp out in the rural countryside. When 65,000 Union soldiers poured into the city on February 17, 1865, Confederate Gen. Hampton advised Columbia's mayor to surrender – the situation was hopeless. That afternoon, chaos began to reign in the city as fires started to blaze everywhere. Throughout the night, soldiers partied and reveled in the streets. Terrified civilians scrambled to safeguard possessions and find safety.

At two o'clock in the morning, Palmer's wife and children were told to they needed to leave their house immediately because a factory was about to blow up. Grabbing whatever valuables and clothing they could carry, Augusta led her four girls among burning buildings and trees to her parents' house on Blanding Street. Along the way, a soldier forcibly snatched the box of family silver from her hands. Upon arriving at the Howes', gunshots were heard, and it was apparent the house was not a safe place to remain. The entire family spent the remainder of the night in the streets, huddling around the few possessions they were able to retain. The Palmer home burned to the ground that night, along with most of the city. The next day the family returned to the Howes' home,

⁹⁷ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 286-287.

which managed to survive. While the army continued to occupy the town, the family did not dare change clothes or go to bed for the next five nights.⁹⁸

After several days of sleeping in the cold outside and making his way around the countryside, Palmer received word that it was safe to return to Columbia. Shocked to find such devastated conditions, he was ever thankful to find his family safe. When the army left town on Monday, they had carried all the provisions they could find with them. Palmer quickly led a team of wagons into the country to obtain food for his desolate congregation who had been without for days. The pastor immediately resumed his services at the devastated church, where he would continue to serve until Gen. Robert E. Lee surrendered to Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, less than two months later. The war was over, and at last the time had come when the minister could return to “gather up the fragments” of his scattered congregation in New Orleans.⁹⁹

⁹⁸ See Dr. John W. Caldwell’s account contained in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 288-289. Also, Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord*, 112-113. For accounts of the fire and occupation of Columbia see Marion Brunson Lucas, *Sherman and the Burning of Columbia* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1976); Charles Royster, *The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991).

⁹⁹ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to New Orleans First Presbyterian Church from Columbia, SC, May 20, 1864 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 279.

Chapter 6

The First Citizen of New Orleans¹

I solemnly testify that earth has no significance, save as it is the gymnasium where, under God's great discipline, we are trained for glory and immortality beyond the grave. This is the key which solves the riddle of life. It explains the disappointment, and care, and toil, by whose constant pressure you are to become robust in virtue for eternity.

– B. M. Palmer, “Address to the Graduating Class”

Upon his return to New Orleans, Palmer found that the largest and most prosperous city in the South had been practically reduced to poverty. After Gen. Butler was relieved of his command of New Orleans in 1863 due to an international furor over his rumored heavy-handed tactics, a series of “military mayors” continued to foster resentment for many citizens.² During Federal occupation, commerce and industry had almost completely ceased, and most trade had fled to other cities. In addition, the mouths of the Mississippi were choked with sand, and a national railroad boom was providing unprecedented competition for commercial trade by water. Consequently, the city had seen a dramatic increase in the number of poor and unemployed, including a large number of black freedmen who had fled to the city during the course of the war to find

¹ The designation was given to Palmer by William Preston Johnston, Chancellor of Tulane University. Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 554; New Orleans *New Delta*, June 26, 1891; New Orleans *Picayune*, June 26, 1891.

² For good accounts of life in New Orleans during and immediately after the war, see Howard P. Johnson, “New Orleans Under General Butler,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 24 (April 1941): 434-536; Gerald M. Capers, Jr., “Confederates and Yankees in Occupied New Orleans, 1862-1865,” *The Journal of Southern History* 30 (November 1964): 404-426; John D. Winters, *The Civil War in Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State, 1963); Jefferson D. Bragg, *Louisiana in the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State, 1948).

safety behind Union lines. The New Orleans of 1865 was a sad, hollow shell of the New Orleans to which Palmer had arrived in 1856.

It is no wonder that a newspaper reporter noticed that the returning minister appeared “to be more chastened and subdued than he ever was before.”³ The death of his daughter, the death of Thornwell, the constant death of war, the destruction of his Columbia home and library, and the gloom of destruction and defeat had taken its toll. And on top of this host of tragedies, the pastor was not convinced the people of First Presbyterian would even want him to return.⁴ During his long absence, the congregation had also endured the hardships of war and occupation, as evidenced by a membership depleted by approximately twenty-five percent.⁵ Much had changed through the unspeakable horrors of war, yet this clearly made the pastor all the more determined to get to his pulpit as soon as the way was open. Through his preaching and pastoral work, he would endeavor to comfort, lead, and rebuild the broken church. On Sunday, July 16, 1865 Palmer resumed his position in his old, familiar pulpit. A reporter for the *New Orleans Times* attended the service, and wrote the next day:

The churches, we noticed, were very largely attended, particularly the First Presbyterian Church, where Dr. B.M. Palmer, so famous for his eloquence in other days, held forth as one who had returned from his wanderings to become again a teacher and a guide. It was soon apparent that during his absence the Doctor 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 ever was before. With an humbler hope he looked up to the bow of promise which

³ New Orleans *New Orleans Times*, July 17, 1865.

⁴ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to New Orleans First Presbyterian Church from Columbia, SC, May 20, 1864 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 279.

⁵ On the eve of the war, the church roll contained over 500 members. Johnson reports that there were about 150 fewer members “on the roll” after the war (Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 292). The first indication in the church minutes of an attempt to update the roll after the war is on October 7, 1866. This accounting figured 594 members, 135 of whom could no longer be located, and 23 of whom were categorized “fossils never likely to reappear.” See Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, October 7, 1866, Montreat 2007.

spanned the sky, and with gentler persuasion he called for a renewal of the covenant of grace. He feelingly alluded to the long years of suffering, now so happily closed, and expressed a hope that his own trials and sad experiences would be so far sanctified as to fit him better than ever before for the responsible duties of a Gospel minister. He then told, how in the general affliction, the angel of death had visited his household, and, as he alluded to the sad theme, all hearts were melted and the waters gushed forth from the smitten rock. As for the dead past, he, for one, was anxious to hide it away in the solemn tomb. Henceforth, no word should escape his lips but such as was meet for a humble servant in the temple of his God and King. Wherever called to minister in the land of his birth and of his love, he would emulate the example of Paul the Apostle, by preaching Christ and Him crucified; and his song should be the song of the angels – “Peace on earth, and good will toward men.”⁶

Palmer’s hope that his own trials would better equip him for the duties of a gospel minister would prove true in the years to follow, as his moral influence and oratorical skills continued to flourish.

As had been the case in antebellum New Orleans, Palmer remained in continual demand as a guest preacher and occasional speaker, and his reputation as a wartime orator and gospel preacher generally preceded him. In the fall of 1866, he traveled to New York to perform the marriage ceremony of a former church member. The Sunday after arriving in the city, Palmer attended the Forty-Second Street Presbyterian Church to hear the preaching of former Old School Presbyterian Rev. William A. Scott, his predecessor at First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans.⁷ Upon entering the church, Scott recognized Palmer immediately, and betrayed his surprise with a sly smirk at seeing

⁶ New Orleans *New Orleans Times*, July 17, 1865.

⁷ William Anderson Scott (1813-1885), Presbyterian clergyman, was a native of the Illinois and Tennessee frontiers. Scott served briefly as a chaplain during the Black Hawk War, then studied for a year at Princeton Theological Seminary under Charles Hodge. He served successive pastorates in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Alabama before accepting a call to First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans in 1842 (see Chapter 3). In 1854, Scott accepted a call to Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco. When the 1858 General Assembly met in New Orleans, Palmer invited Scott to preach in his former church on May 2. He was driven from San Francisco in 1861 for pro-southern sympathies, and went into an eight-year exile in Paris, London, Birmingham, and New York. In 1869 he was called back to California to pastor the St. John’s Presbyterian Church in San Francisco until his death in 1885. See Clifford M. Drury, *William Anderson Scott: “No Ordinary Man”* (Glendale, CA: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1967).

him. Turning his eyes away from Palmer, he was careful not to look at him again for the remainder of the service, nor did he greet him afterwards. A couple of days later, Scott sent Palmer a note explaining that he would have liked to have Palmer preach, but he was prevented from extending the invitation by the great impatience of his congregation with Palmer for his course during the war. No doubt, Scott was particularly attuned to the sensitivities of his current congregation. He had left New Orleans in 1854 to serve a Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, only to be driven from the city in 1861 for his pro-southern sympathies.

The following Sunday, on a more humorous occasion, Palmer was invited by Rev. Henry J. Van Dyke to preach in the First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn.⁸ With no introduction, Palmer assumed the pulpit and began preaching on the comforting ministry of the Holy Ghost from John 14:16, “And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you for ever.” The congregation was electrified, and the people went home that afternoon talking about the modest-looking gentleman who commanded the Scriptures with such eloquence and power. That evening the sanctuary was packed with a crowd returning to hear more of Palmer. After the service, an old Union veteran was inquiring to learn the identity of the wonderful

⁸ Henry Jackson Van Dyke (1822-1891), Presbyterian clergyman, was a native of Abingdon, Pennsylvania. He graduated the University of Pennsylvania (1843) and Princeton Theological Seminary (1845), and received a D.D. from the University of Missouri (1860). He served as a pastor in Bridgeton, New Jersey (1845-1852), Germantown, Pennsylvania (1852-1853), and at the First Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, NY. Van Dyke preached a well-known sermon entitled “The Character and Influence of Abolitionism” on December 9, 1860, defending slavery as a divine institution and describing the atheistic spirit of abolitionism. Henry J. Van Dyke, *The Character and Influence of Abolitionism. A Sermon Preached in the First Presbyterian Church, Brooklyn, on Sabbath Evening, Dec. 9th, 1860* (New York: George F. Nesbitt, 1860). One published response to Van Dyke was William H. Boole, *Antidote to Rev. H.J. Van Dyke’s Proslavery Discourse, by Rev. Wm. H. Boole. “American Slavery Has No Foundation in the Scriptures.” Delivered in the M.E. Church, Mount Vernon, New York, On Sunday, January 13, 1861* (New York: Edmund Jones & Co., 1861). See Tertius Van Dyke, *Henry Van Dyke: A Biography By His Son* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1935).

preacher, and learned that it was Benjamin Morgan Palmer of New Orleans. “The arch rebel of that name!” he exclaimed, “He preaches like an archangel!”⁹

While in New York, friends pleaded with Palmer to remain and establish a new church, but he desired to remain with the people of New Orleans. In a visit to South Carolina in 1868, he preached twice in Charleston. The *Charleston News and Courier* reported, “Dr. Palmer is, probably, the ablest pulpit orator in the Southern States, and can have but few if any superior in the North.”¹⁰ In 1870, Palmer was invited to preach at the state prison in Jackson, Mississippi. Upon seeing the preacher, the prison physician, Dr. T.J. Mitchell, asked Judge Thomas J. Wharton, “Why did they send such a piney woods specimen of a preacher to preach to the convicts?” The judge responded with a mere smile.¹¹ After the doctor heard the man, he approached Judge Wharton and said, “Judge, there is only one minister that can read and preach after that fashion. I am prepared to be introduced to Dr. Palmer.”¹²

Palmer’s abilities as a preacher and pastor were also reflected in the steady growth and rebuilding of the New Orleans Church. By 1870, the session reported a membership of 600, not including those whom they still could not locate. The church roll peaked at 740 in 1879.¹³ Such numbers may not appear impressive in comparison to larger northern churches, but it was typically the pattern of southern Protestant churches to spin-off new congregations rather than grow extraordinarily large churches. In New Orleans in 1873 there were a total of eleven Presbyterian churches, and Palmer’s church

⁹ See account of Mary Caldwell of Charleston, SC in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 295.

¹⁰ “It Was Dr. Palmer,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 32, no. 25 (July 26, 1900): 6.

¹¹ Wharton served at various times as the Attorney General and as Marshal of the Mississippi State Supreme Court.

¹² “It Was Dr. Palmer,” 6.

¹³ See Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, *passim*, Montreat 2007.

remained one of the largest Presbyterian churches in the South throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁴ Beyond the official membership number, the church continued to see a regular attendance between 1,500 and 2,000.

Session records show that Palmer was constantly promoting aggressive Christian work throughout the city. He urged the organization of both a “brotherhood” and a “sisterhood” to promote missionary endeavors in the form of mission Sabbath-schools at five strategic locations in the city, under the oversight of the Session, regularly reaching over one thousand children and adults. Two of the missions offered Saturday evening sewing classes on the condition that the girls return to attend the Sabbath-school. Converts were always encouraged to enter any Presbyterian Church that was most convenient, as the goal was to build up Presbyterianism at large in the city, not just First Church. In 1866, Palmer also began the practice of hosting all the Presbyterian Churches in the city at an annual joint celebration of the Lord’s Supper on the first Sunday of each year.¹⁵ In a letter to a friend, Palmer described the status of the church in 1867 with cautious optimism, “We are jogging along – still under military rule, with no early or solid prospect of release; the only comfort that nobody can take us out of God’s hands – and when His purposes, as yet unknown to us, are fully accomplished, He can restrain the wrath which seems bent upon working our ruin.”¹⁶

In 1869, Palmer was instrumental in helping to establish the regional religious newspaper titled the *Southwestern Presbyterian*. The pastor was a member of the Board that published the paper, edited by Henry M. Smith, as well as a regular contributor.

¹⁴ See listing in “Stranger’s Guide and Business Directory” in Jewell, *Jewell’s Crescent City Illustrated*

¹⁵ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 309.

¹⁶ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to Anna from New Orleans, LA, May 1, 1867 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 379.

During its early years, Palmer wrote hundreds of pages for the publication on a variety of topics, including history, philosophy, denominational issues, biblical expositions, and pastoral counsel.¹⁷ From the beginning of the publication, the Session agreed to Palmer's request to subscribe to fifty copies for distribution among those in the church who otherwise could not afford it.¹⁸ An optimistic report submitted by the Session to the New Orleans Presbytery in 1870 provides a picture of more of the church's various labors:

During the past year, the officers of this Church, pastor, elders, and deacons, have been at their several posts, and engaged in the duties assigned to each. The Word has been preached with solemnity and constancy, without a single intermission of the services of the sanctuary. The attendance of the congregation has been punctual; except as it has been diminished by the usual absence of many during the summer. Since the autumn the congregation has been more than usually large; swelled by the presence of strangers during the winter. Throughout the entire season the building has been filled, floor and galleries, with serious and attentive hearers; who have given every outward mark of, at least, a general interest in the truths to which they have listened.

The prayer-meeting on Wednesday night, has been largely sustained, and the attendance upon it has been uniform and large. The lecture-room, seating two hundred or more persons, is generally full and sometimes crowded. It has taken the form of a prayer-meeting and lecture combined: an informal address being always made by the pastor, while the prayers are offered by the private members promiscuously called to lead in these devotions.¹⁹

In 1870, the pastor was also awarded the honorary degree of LL.D. from Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri.²⁰

While devoting most of his time to rebuilding the church in New Orleans, Palmer continued to play a highly influential role in the higher courts of the Presbyterian Church. From 1861-1865 he chaired the Assembly's committee to revise the Presbyterian

¹⁷ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 340.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 335, 306.

¹⁹ See Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, 1870, Montreat 2007.

²⁰ Westminster College was founded by Presbyterians as Fulton College in 1849 and assumed its current name in 1851.

hymnbook, which widely served the southern church until the turn of the century.²¹ In 1869, northern Old School and New School Presbyterian Churches united to form the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Following the merger, the northern Assembly began discussions about the possible union with the southern Presbyterian Church in the United States (the name of the southern church was changed from the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America following the war). Palmer was adamantly opposed to union with the northern church of any form, maintaining that body:

has involved itself in criminal errors touching the kingly office of Christ; ignoring, persistently, His spiritual kingdom, the Church – betraying her spirituality and independence, and perverting the power of the keys to uphold the State, and introducing terms of ecclesiastical communion, unwarranted by Holy Scripture, and contradictory to the commands of Christ.²²

In a series of seventeen lengthy articles printed in the *Southwestern Presbyterian*, Palmer argued against the reunion for a number of reasons, and traced the detailed history of the actions of both Old School Assemblies during the course of the war. The articles were republished in January 1870 in an eighty-seven page booklet, and 2,500 copies were distributed throughout the southern churches.²³ Overtures requesting a union were

²¹ *Psalms and Hymns for the Worship of God. Adopted by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, at its meeting in Memphis, Tennessee, November, 1866* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1867). Palmer noted in a report to the 1865 General Assembly that the original revised edition of the hymnal, prepared by the committee, was destroyed when his house was burned in Columbia, along with all of his personal papers, books, and household effects. He further noted that it would not require much work to reproduce the work from previous committee reports, and recommended the formation of a local committee to complete the work within a period of a couple of weeks. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Augusta, GA: Constitutional Job Office, 1865), 353-354.

²² Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 328.

²³ Benjamin M. Palmer, "Reunion Overture of the Northern General Assembly to the Southern Presbyterian Church," *Southwestern Presbyterian*, series of seventeen articles beginning August 19, 1869; also, Benjamin M. Palmer, *Reunion Overture of the Northern General Assembly to the Southern Presbyterian Church, Considered: or, The Records of the Northern O. S. Assembly, from A.D. 1861 to 1869, Reviewed* (Jackson, MS: Clarion Steam Printing Establishment, 1870).

presented to the southern church at the 1870 General Assembly by a commission of three prominent northern Presbyterians – all formally Old School Presbyterians, carefully selected for their southern acceptability.²⁴ The southern church, however, was well prepared by Palmer and greatly unified in their position.

As the Assembly's Chairman of the Committee on Foreign Correspondence, Palmer drafted the reply to the request for reunion that was finally adopted by the southern church. Palmer's recommendation was simply to decline all correspondence for the reasons assigned, but the Committee on Correspondence deemed this unnecessarily harsh.²⁵ Generally cordial in tone, the adopted report gave assurance that the southern church was fully prepared to advance the discussion of a potential union, and in the interest of the spirit of Christian conciliation and kindness, agreed to appoint a Committee of Conference to meet with a similar committee already appointed by the northern Assembly. It was also made clear, however, that four basic difficulties standing in the way of reunion must be "distinctly met and removed." First, the political declarations of the northern church were viewed as a violation of the independence and spirituality of Christ's kingdom on earth, and must be repudiated by public declaration. Second, the 1869 union of the northern Old and New School Assemblies

was accomplished by methods which, in our judgment, involve a total surrender of all the great testimonies of the Church for the fundamental doctrines of grace, at a time when the victory of truth over error hung low in the balance. The United Assembly stands of necessity upon an allowed latitude of interpretation of the Standards, and must come at length to embrace nearly all shades of doctrinal belief. Of those falling testimonies we are now the sole surviving heir, which must lift from the dust and bear to the generation after us.²⁶

²⁴ The commission included J.C. Backus, H.J. Van Dyke, and W.E. Dodge. See Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 318.

²⁵ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 320.

²⁶ Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 2:225.

Third, the expulsion of a group of Kentucky and Missouri Presbyterian ministers in 1865 for expressing similar grievances by the united northern Assembly was considered unconstitutional.²⁷ Finally, similar “injurious accusations” publically made against the entire southern church, including heresy and blasphemy, must be “openly and squarely withdrawn.” The same four basic objections would continue to frame all discussion of a reunion in the years to come, and no reunion occurred during Palmer’s lifetime.²⁸

Palmer was always known to keep tireless working hours, often to the point of endangering his health.²⁹ It appears his absence during the war only increased his conscientious drive, for in a nine-year period he only took one vacation, and that was almost forced upon him by a concerned congregation in 1871.³⁰ In a series of gracious resolutions of appreciation praising their pastor and his long years of hard work, the congregation beseeched him to take a four-month vacation and presented him with a \$3,000 voluntary contribution. Palmer was overwhelmed at the expression of kindness, but wrote of his reluctance to accept, “Life is so short, and the work of God so vast, in

²⁷ See section on the “Declaration and Testimony” and *Gurely Ipso Facto* Resolutions in Thompson, *Presbyterians*, 2:160-182.

²⁸ Another attempt at union was made by the northern church in 1873. Palmer published another series of articles four articles arguing against the union, stating in the first article, “our basic objection to this basis of union is today exactly what it was three years ago.” Benjamin M. Palmer, “The Olive Branch Again,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* 5 (June 1873). When both the northern and southern Assemblies passed resolutions withdrawing all offensive statements of past Assemblies in 1882, Palmer continued to oppose official correspondence. He continued to maintain that the two bodies disagreed on two basic points: “relations subsisting between the Church and State,” and “doctrinal inclusiveness.” See Benjamin M. Palmer, “Fraternal Relations,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 34 (April 1883): 306-330. At the General Assemblies of 1875, 1886, and 1887 he gave stirring speeches opposing reunion. See Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 458-475.

²⁹ Johnson describes Palmer working up to fifteen hour days in antebellum Columbia, coming “perilously close to making a shipwreck of his health.” Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 154.

³⁰ Alfred Hennen, a prominent member of the New Orleans Bar and First Presbyterian Church, died on January 19, 1870. Palmer was asked by the Bar to deliver a memorial address, for which he prepared a discourse expounding on six ways that Christianity complements the legal profession. The piece was later published. This serves as another example of the breadth of occasions for which Palmer was called to prepare and speak. Benjamin M. Palmer, *Christianity and the Law; or, The Claims of Religion Upon the Legal Profession* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1871).

such a world as ours, that one would think every inch of time should be spent in active labor. My feeling has always been that nothing short of compulsory illness could excuse a respite from toil.”³¹

Adding to the appeal of an extended vacation was Palmer’s desire to remove his seventeen-year-old daughter, Kate, to a better climate for her health. For months, she had been fighting a hard cough. That summer, the Palmers traveled through the North and into Canada, enjoying the time together, but regretfully facing the reality that Kate’s cough was only getting worse. In mid-September they passed through Columbia on their way home to visit Augusta’s parents and make the most of the fleeting time with the sick child. The ominous similarities to Frances’s rapid decline were obvious, but after three weeks she seemed well enough to return with the family to New Orleans. The trip was made in careful stages by train over a three-week period, with Kate in the embrace of her father’s arms or reclining on beds in the cars. At last they arrived to their home on Prytania Street, and her final days were spent in the presence of family, her father kneeling by her bed in prayer until the end.³² In a touching letter, Palmer later confessed:

It teaches me whole volumes of theology – these timid, tender girls treading upon the fears of death and the solemnities of the tomb as if they were roses strewn upon their bridal path. I never knew before how strong grace is, nor how easy it is for faith to walk upon the sea. My dead children have been my teachers, and I bow with awe before them.³³

Ever passionate in promoting education, Palmer began advancing the idea within his Presbytery and Synod of a Presbyterian university in the Southwest. At the 1870

³¹ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to J.N. Lee from New Orleans, LA, June 10, 1871 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 304.

³² Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 41-57.

³³ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to Mrs. W.F. Hutson from New Orleans, LA, December 18, 1872 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 386.

General Assembly, the Synod of Mississippi made the recommendation that the church organize a “University of the South,” and a sub-committee was formed by the Assembly to study the motion.³⁴ At the next annual meeting, the study committee suggested that rather than a single university maintained by the entire church, each individual Synod should take responsibility for maintaining educational institutions in their respective areas.³⁵ Though frustrated with the Assembly’s reluctance to give up the old inefficient approach of attempting to maintain a college in every Synod, Palmer continued to work for the establishment of a university with broad support, and ultimately persuaded six Synods (Arkansas, Alabama, Memphis, Mississippi, Nashville, and Texas) to work together to found a university. Directors for the school were chosen by the Synods, and at a meeting in January 1874 plans were made to found Southwestern Presbyterian University in Clarksville, Tennessee. The board of directors, including Palmer, petitioned First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans to grant Palmer a six-month leave of absence to allow him to raise funds as Financial Agent of the Board.³⁶ Though highly supportive of the University, the Session of First Presbyterian declined the request due to lack of congregational support. Instead, they regretted they could only agree to a three-month leave of absence.³⁷

³⁴ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Columbia, SC: Office of the Southern Presbyterian Review, 1870), 502, 519. Note that after the war, the Assembly changed the name of the southern denomination to the Presbyterian Church in the United States. The northern church carried the title of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America after an 1869 reunion of northern Old School and New School churches.

³⁵ *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Columbia, SC: Office of the Southern Presbyterian Review, 1871).

³⁶ Thomas R. Welch, VP of the Directory, letter to the Session of First Presbyterian Church from Memphis, TN, January 15, 1874 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 406-409. Also, see Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, 1874, Montreat 2007.

³⁷ William C. Black, Clerk of Session, letter to Rev. Jonathan N. Waddell, Chancellor University of Mississippi, from New Orleans, LA, January 28, 1874 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 409-410.

The next request from the Board of Directors to First Presbyterian Church was bolder. At their May 1874 meeting, they elected Palmer to become the Chancellor of Southwestern Presbyterian University. This was a position that would demand the minister's full attention, requiring him to resign his office of Pastor in New Orleans. Reluctantly, Palmer submitted his request to dissolve his relationship with the church to the church's Session, listing several reasons why it was believed that the school had a greater need for his service.³⁸ Predictably, the Session repeatedly urged Palmer to change his mind, but the minister was convinced that it was his duty to support the institution that he had worked for years to establish:

I see no course to be pursued now, but to let the case go before the Presbytery of New Orleans; which, as a Constitutional Court, will be bound to look at both sides of the question, and whose decision either way will be final with me. I need not reiterate to you that I have no personal wishes in the matter, beyond the simple desire to ascertain the will of God in the disposal of my future labors.³⁹

When the Presbytery met in late June, the case was fully argued by speakers representing both sides of the issue. Recognizing that Palmer was acting more out of duty, and that his great desire was for pulpit ministry, the Presbytery denied the request to dissolve the pastoral relationship by a large majority.⁴⁰ Palmer remained on the Board of Directors, and the school continued to be an institution of special interest to him. When failing health forced him to resign from the Board in 1889, Palmer wrote, "In this prospective

³⁸ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to the Session of First Presbyterian Church from New Orleans, LA, May 23, 1874 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 410-412.

³⁹ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to the Session of First Presbyterian Church from New Orleans, LA, May 30, 1874 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 413.

⁴⁰ In 1925, the college moved from Clarkesville to its present location in Memphis, Tennessee, and shortened its name to Southwestern. In 1984, the college's name was changed to Rhodes College. The prominent Palmer Hall, completed in 1925 on the campus of Rhodes College, is dedicated to "the father of this institution." See *Catalog of Southwestern Presbyterian University 1925* (Clarkesville, TN: Southwestern University Press, 1925), 109; W. Raymond Cooper, *Southwestern at Memphis 1848-1948* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1949).

severance of my relations with the Directors, permit me to say to them that, during a long life, no association has been more pleasant or profitable than with my Brethren of the Board.”⁴¹

Palmer was also active in supporting Tulane University, and was named as a trustee from the date of its establishment in 1884. He was a close personal friend of University President William Preston Johnston (son of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston), and he was called countless times to speak at public exercises associated with the University.⁴² John W. Caldwell, Palmer’s son-in-law, moved from Clarkesville, Tennessee in 1884 to take a position as Curator of the University. John and Sarah lived with the Palmers on Prytania Street for several years.

Throughout the war, Palmer had played a large part in bolstering a sense of southern nationalism and maintaining southern morale. A close friend commented after the war that curious northerners often came to New Orleans see “the big villain of the play,” well aware of his war record and thanksgiving day secession sermon.⁴³ In the wake of defeat, hopes and expectations were dashed, and people were longing for answers. If the South was truly fighting to defend a holy cause, why were they allowed to suffer defeat? After the war, Palmer continued to be a defender and spokesman for the

⁴¹ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to Rev. Dr. C.C. Hersman, from New Orleans, LA, May 27, 1889 in Burrow Library Archive, Rhodes College. Quoted in Hayne’s, *Noah’s Curse*, vi.

⁴² Known published addresses at Tulane include Benjamin M. Palmer, *Commencement Address at the H. Sophie Newcomb Memorial College of Tulane University of Louisiana* (New Orleans, 1890); “Memorial Oration,” in *Memorial Service in Honor of William Preston Johnston, LL. D., First President of Tulane University, 1884-1899. Introductory Address by Judge Charles E. Fenner. Memorial Oration by B.M. Palmer, D.D.* (New Orleans, 1899); “The Representative Life and Character of Dr. T.G. Richardson,” in *In Memory of Prof. T.G. Richardson, M.D.*, 45-61 (New Orleans: The Faculty of the Medical Department of the Tulane University of Louisiana, Graham Press, 1893); *Address of the Rev. B. M. Palmer, D.D., at the Commencement Exercises of the Medical Department of the University of Louisiana, New Orleans, March 17, 1881* (New Orleans, 1881). See Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 491.

⁴³ Henry Martin Smith in Robert Q. Mallard “Personal Reminiscences of Rev. Benj. Morgan Palmer, D.D., LL.D.,” *Union Seminary Magazine* 14, no.2 (1903): 111.

righteousness of the Lost Cause, regardless of the mysterious providence of defeat.⁴⁴ He also remained convinced that future historians would also exonerate the South and her cause in the tribunal of history.⁴⁵ Though he apparently never again brought politics into his pulpit, he had ample opportunity to address the issue through his constant demands to speak for dedications, commencements, memorials, and historical lectures.

In 1869, former Confederate Major General Dabney H. Maury organized a society for the purpose of collecting and publishing political, military, and civilian records documenting the events of the war, from both North and South. The group met in New Orleans and organized as the Southern Historical Society. Palmer was an eager founding member in the endeavor, and in April 1869 was elected as the first President of the society, comprised of many well-known ex-confederates.⁴⁶ The Southern Historical Society quickly developed an impressive regional network, including state Vice Presidents such as Robert E. Lee for Virginia, Alexander H. Stephens for Georgia, and Wade Hampton for South Carolina. During its early years in New Orleans, the society struggled financially, and was generally suppressed by local Federal authorities. In 1873 the headquarters moved to Richmond, Virginia, and Gen. Jubal A. Early was elected as President. Throughout the late nineteenth century, the society gathered and carefully

⁴⁴ Important studies on the role of southern clergy in interpreting the South's defeat include Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1980); Gaines M. Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy: Defeat, the Lost Cause, and the Emergence of the New South 1865 to 1913* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2001); Timothy F. Reilly, "Benjamin M. Palmer: Secessionist Become Nationalist," *Louisiana History* 18 (1977): 287-301.

⁴⁵ See Benjamin M. Palmer "The Tribunal of History," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 23 (1872): 245-262. Palmer delivered the article as a lecture before the Historical Society of New Orleans on February 16, 1872.

⁴⁶ Gen. Braxton Bragg served as Vice-President. Other founding members included Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard, Gen. Harry T. Hays, Gen. Simon B. Buckner, Hon. Thomas J. Semmes, and various prominent citizens of New Orleans. Dr. Joseph Jones, a New Orleans physician and son of Charles Colcock Jones, served as secretary-treasurer.

arranged documents for publication in the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, which over a period of years developed into a massive fifty-two volume set.⁴⁷

The death of Gen. Robert E. Lee in October of 1870 provided a momentous occasion for Palmer to speak to the misfortune of the South.⁴⁸ For two days, the entire city of New Orleans shut down. Businesses, homes, churches, and synagogues were draped in black bunting. On the evening of October 18, thousands of mourners, mostly dressed in black, thronged the St. Charles Theatre in New Orleans.⁴⁹ Not a square foot of standing room remained inside, including the hallways and lobbies, and multitudes spilled into the streets. Stretching from the lofty dome inside, broad folds of somber black and white cloth covered the elaborate gilded trim down the walls. The place for entertainment had been transformed into a house of mourning. Seated on the stage were approximately 350 representatives of the most prominent and wealthy families in New Orleans, selected to serve as Vice-Presidents of the event, including ex-Confederate generals Beauregard, Hood, Taylor, and Bragg. After the Hon. William Burwell pronounced an extravagant opening eulogy, the orchestra performed Rossini's haunting "Prayer" from *Moses in Egypt*. Next, Thomas J. Semmes delivered an address praising

⁴⁷ Dabney H. Maury, "The Southern Historical Society: Its Origin and History," *Southern Historical Society Papers* 18 (1890): 349-365; Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 50-51; Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 261-262.

⁴⁸ See Michael A. Ross, "The Commemoration of Robert E. Lee's Death and the Obstruction of Reconstruction in New Orleans," *Civil War History* 51, no. 2 (June 2005): 135-150. Ross argues that conservatives conspired to deny Republicans and Unionists a role in Lee's massive memorial service, and used the event "to defend secession, the Confederacy, and white supremacy."

⁴⁹ Located on St. Charles, between Poydras and Commercial alley (100 St. Charles Ave. today), the original St. Charles Theatre was built in 1835, and seated 4,000. The theatre burned to the ground in 1842, and was immediately rebuilt on the same location. The second St. Charles Theatre was affectionately known as "Old Drury," and also burned to the ground in 1899. A third theatre was built on the site in 1902, this time called the Orpheum. In 1924, the theatre was sold to the Saenger circuit and once again named the St. Charles. In 1932, the theatre was remodeled and used as a movie house until it was razed in 1965 to make a parking lot.

“the Christian soldier.” After an aria from “Lucie,” the stage was set for the final orator of the night.⁵⁰

The Presbyterian minister took the podium and proceeded to extol Lee’s Christian virtues and military valor as enduring aspects of southern character. Palmer applied his reformed theological framework, founded on the proposition that God sovereignly rules all creation and history, to explain not only personal trials, but also the trials of a nation:

Perhaps I slide naturally into this comparison, for it is my province to teach that our hearts are made to taste both sweetness and human woe, and through human woe the heart becomes purified – and what is true in the individual case is oftentimes immensely true of a nation in the collective.⁵¹

In God’s mysterious providence, admittedly beyond the full comprehension of the finite mind, defeat was not necessarily an indicator of divine disapproval. In fact, in God’s comprehensive plan, Palmer believed “dark providences” were often used to purify and ultimately further the cause of righteousness.⁵²

Palmer held up Lee as “the true type of American man, and the Southern gentleman.” The “second Washington” represented the model of a righteous steadfastness that emerged ever stronger through misfortune and defeat. “There is a grandeur in misfortune when born by a noble heart, a heart that has strength to endure without bending or breaking.”⁵³ Rather than focusing on the impossible task of understanding why southern defeat was part of God’s supreme will, Lee exemplified the better response of clinging to the righteous principles fought for all the more:

⁵⁰ See introduction from *New Orleans Times* in Benjamin M. Palmer, William Burwell, and Thomas J. Semmes, “Tribute of New Orleans to the Memory of Lee. Eulogies by the Rev. Dr. B.M. Palmer, Hon. Wm. Burwell, Hon. Thos. J. Semmes,” *De Bow’s Review* 7 (1870): 840-860. The full address also ran in the *New Orleans Picayune* and *Times* on October 19, 1870. Also, Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 346-347.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² For a fuller treatment of Palmer’s doctrine of “dark providences,” see B.M. Palmer, “The Darkness of Providence” in *A Weekly Publication, Containing Sermons*, vol. 1, 217-230.

⁵³ Palmer, “Tribute of New Orleans,” 860.

In this he represents the true attitude of the South since the close of the war – an attitude of quiet submission to the conquering power, and of obedience to all exactions – but without resigning those immortal principles which were embalmed in the struggle, and which, as the convictions of a lifetime, no honest mind could release. [Applause.]

All over this land of ours there are men like Lee – not as great, not as symmetrical in the development of character, not as grand in the proportions which they have reached, but who, like him, are sleeping upon memories that are holy as death, and who, amidst all reproach, appeal to the future and to the tribunal of history, when she shall render her final judgment of that struggle, and of the people who embarked in that struggle. [Applause.]

On June 27, 1872, Palmer was invited to address the literary societies of Washington and Lee University in Lexington, Virginia. In an oration titled “The Present Crisis and its Issues,” he reminded his audience that the greatest problem facing the South was the issue of race and “adjusting the relations between the two distinct peoples that must occupy the same soil.”⁵⁴ Before the war, the relationship between the two races was “exceedingly simple, because it was domestic.” Now, the two races were equal before the law. This sudden transition was a “tremendous experiment,” and the nation was struggling with the place of freedmen in society. In the face of this crisis, the minister urged several responses.

Based on what he believed to be clear biblical and historical evidence, Palmer argued first and foremost that “it is indispensable that the purity of race shall be preserved on either side.” While he consistently maintained that “God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on the face of the earth,” he insisted on maintaining racial distinctions.⁵⁵ Furthermore, he insisted that the problem of race was too difficult to

⁵⁴ Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Present Crisis and Its Issues. An Address Delivered Before the Literary Societies of Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Va., 27th June, 1872* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1872), 18.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 19.

be solved by mere political or ecclesiastical legislation. It was a predicament that would require patience and the “assimilating and conciliatory influence” of time:

What I ‘proclaim upon the housetop’ to-day, I have uniformly ‘spoken in the closet’ to the representatives of the black race, as I have had opportunity. I have said to them – and to their credit it can be testified, the proposition has generally been accepted as the council of wisdom – if you are to be a historic people, you must work out your own destiny upon your own foundation. You gain nothing by a parasitic clinging to the white race; and immeasurably less, by trying to jostle them out of place. If you have no power of development from within, you lack the first quality of a historic race, and must, sooner or later, go to the wall. . . . Accepting squarely, as the terms of national pacifications, the Negro’s emancipation and his political status, however hastily or unwisely conferred, along with these franchises should go the privileges of education and culture. But let these stand upon their own footing. The true policy of both races is, that they shall stand apart in their own social grade, in their own schools, in their own ecclesiastical organizations, under their own teachers and guides: but with all the kindness and helpful co-operation to which the old relations between the races, and their present dependence on each other would naturally predispose.⁵⁶

In his insistence on segregation of the races, Palmer was prophetic and predictably paternalistic.⁵⁷ In his urging for education and a cooperative effort to advance the condition of the black race, he was perhaps surprisingly progressive.

Surpassing the crisis of race, the peril that Palmer dreaded most in the present crisis was the threat of materialism. He warned that the subtle and dangerous spirit of materialism, the lure of “external and material prosperity,” was rapidly displacing legitimate commerce, corrupting public justice, invading the sanctity of the bench, prostituting the solemn priesthood, and converting public office from a ministry of responsibility to a place of profit. “Throughout all its grades, from the highest to the lowest, every man is striving to outstrip his neighbor in the possession and exhibition of wealth; and the most sacred claims of love, and all the sweet charities and refinements of

⁵⁶ Ibid., 20-21.

⁵⁷ James B. Bennett, *Religion and the Rise of Jim Crow in New Orleans* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

social life are sacrificed upon the altar of greed.”⁵⁸ Against the many temptations in American society “to exaggerate material prosperity as the chief good in life,” the minister called his audience to “carry over those gentlemanly instincts which have hitherto characterized our people.” These virtues included duty, benevolence, truth, integrity, courtly honor, self-respect, propriety, and hard work. These virtues were best cultivated in the agrarian lifestyle of the Old South:

An agricultural people, living apart from one another, every man in the center of a given circle of dependence for whom he was called to think and plan, there was nourished a personal independence which we cannot afford to lose. On the contrary, in a crowded population, men are cheapened in value, like the leaves in a forest. The individual comes to be little more than a single brick in a blank wall, answering only to so many square inches of a common surface. Through a perpetual commingling, thought ceases to be a fresh production of the mind, and there is substituted for it a public opinion which is caught and given back, just as one breathes in and breathes out a common atmosphere.⁵⁹

In conclusion, the minister called for a renewed patriotism born out of adversity and trial. As in his eulogy for Lee, Palmer called for a steadfast commitment to the principles fought for, now “more intense and purer than in the prosperous and joyful past.”

And this land of ours, furrowed by so many graves and overshadowed with such solemn memories, calls for a consecration of the heart which shall be equal to its grief. The patriotism which these days demand must refine itself into martyrdom. It must suffer as well as act. Strong in the consciousness of rectitude, it must nerve itself to endure contradiction and scorn. If need be, it must weep at the burial of civil liberty; and wait with the heroism of hope for its certain resurrection. Such a spirit will wear out the longest tyranny, and assist in the coronation of a brighter destiny.⁶⁰

As far as Palmer was concerned, the firing had ceased, and the nation was now united. A war would continue to rage indefinitely, however, for the principles involved.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 25.

A humorous account was later given of Palmer's address before the Virginia audience. The distinguished group seated on the platform that day included Commander John Randolph Tucker and Commodore Matthew Fontaine Maury.⁶¹ When Palmer began to speak, Maury turned to Tucker and remarked, "He is the ugliest man I ever saw, sir."⁶² About ten minutes into the discourse, Maury remarked to Tucker again, "He is getting better looking sir." As the Commodore was becoming visibly stirred by the orator, unable to sit still in his seat, he turned to Tucker and said, "He is the handsomest man I ever saw, sir."⁶³

In addition to funeral orations and occasional addresses, the erection of Confederate monuments provided an important means for interpreting and explaining southern defeat. The Confederate dead and their monuments served as powerfully emotional cultural symbols across the South. On April 10, 1874, Palmer presided over the dedication of the first major memorial to be erected in New Orleans in Greenwood

⁶¹ John Randolph Tucker (1812-1883) was a native of Alexandria, Virginia. He served in the United States Navy (1826-1861). During the Mexican-American War, he served as Lieutenant Commander of the USS *Stromboli* in the Gulf of Mexico. He later served as Commander of the USS *Pennsylvania*. After Virginia seceded, he served as Commander of the CSS *Patrick Henry* (1861-1862) and the ironclad CSS *Chicora*. With U.S. permission, he served as Rear Admiral in the Peruvian Navy during their war with Spain (1866-1871). In 1871, he was appointed President of the Peruvian Hydrographical Commission of the Amazon, which discovered the Trinidad and Herrera-yacu rivers. See David P. Werlich, *Admiral of the Amazon: John Randolph Tucker, His Confederate Colleagues and Peru* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990); James H. Rochelle, *Life of Rear Admiral John Randolph Tucker, Commander in the Navy of the United States* (New York: Neale Publishing, 1903).

⁶² Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-1873) was a native of Spotsylvania, Virginia. He served in the United States Navy (1825-1861) aboard the frigate *Brandywine*, and later as the first superintendent of the United States Naval Observatory (1842-1861). He published several books on sailing, geography, and astronomy, and was instrumental in the formation of the United States Naval Academy and Virginia Agricultural and Mechanical College (Virginia Tech). During the Civil War, he served as the Chief of Seacoast, River and Harbor Defenses. See Frances L. Williams, *Matthew Fontaine Maury: Scientist of the Sea* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1963); Charles Lee Lewis, *Matthew Fontaine Maury: The Pathfinder of the Seas* (Annapolis: The United States Naval Institute, 1927).

⁶³ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 362. Johnson cites the Rev. Dr. S.C. Chester, a member of that graduating class, who witnessed the exchange on the platform. Presumably, this was Rev. Samuel Hall Chester, who is listed as the valedictorian for the class of 1872. See *Catalog of the Officers and Alumni of Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, 1749-1888* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1888), 160.

Cemetery. Marking the mass grave of six hundred Confederate soldiers gathered through the efforts of the Ladies' Benevolent Association of Louisiana, the imported marble monument stood sixteen feet high and featured a fully armed life-size Confederate soldier, surround by busts of Lee, Jackson, Johnston, and Polk.⁶⁴ Before a large gathering, Palmer prayed, "If it is Thy will to carry our people beneath the brow of that mount which burneth with fire, grant that under the discipline of Thy law, they may learn all that is just in principle and heroic in endurance."⁶⁵

Palmer continued to keep a busy schedule in New Orleans, as well as trying to keep up with demands across the South. A sample of his regional speaking included preaching at the dedication of the new church edifice of his former First Presbyterian Church in Savannah, Georgia on June 9, 1872. On June 15 he addressed the Nazareth Presbyterian Church in Spartanburg, South Carolina on the occasion of their one-hundredth anniversary.⁶⁶ In March 1873 he preached at the Southern Free Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas at the laying of the corner stone. Included in the audience was Gov. Edmund J. Davis, as well as many state and city officers. On the same trip, he preached at the large Methodist Church in Houston, the large Baptist Church in Austin, and the Bible Society in Galveston. On March 17, 1873 he preached morning and

⁶⁴ See Foster, *Ghosts of the Confederacy*, 37-38. The monument is preserved in Greenwood Cemetery on City Park Avenue. Another significant memorial event was the removal of the body of Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston from New Orleans to Texas. Palmer most likely took part in the ceremonies. See Jerry Thompson, "When General Albert Sidney Johnston Came Home to Texas: Reconstruction Politics and the Reburial of a Hero," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 103 (April 2000): 453-478.

⁶⁵ *Dedication of the Confederate Monument, at Greenwood Cemetery, on Friday, April 10th, 1874, by The Ladies Benevolent Association of Louisiana* (New Orleans: Jas. A. Gresham, Printer and Publisher, 1874), 8.

⁶⁶ Benjamin M. Palmer. *An Address at the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Organization of the Nazareth Church and Congregation in Spartanburg, S.C.* (Richmond: Shepperson & Co., 1872).

evening before an audience of about 1,000 in the Texas House of Representatives.⁶⁷ In 1876 he preached at the dedication of the new church building of the Central Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri.⁶⁸ On March 17, 1881, he delivered an address on the literary responsibility of professional men as leaders of thought in society at the commencement of the Medical Department of the University of Louisiana.⁶⁹

During these years, Palmer continued to raise funds for various causes, notably Columbia Seminary, Southwestern Presbyterian University, and ministries of First Presbyterian Church. He served on various committees of the Presbytery and General Assembly, preached, pastored, wrote, and published. In 1875, he published a six hundred-page biography of James Henley Thornwell.⁷⁰ After failing to find a northern publisher for the book, he wrote to his friend John Adger, “The difficulties attending southern authorship have impressed me with a new sense of the importance of our board or committee of publication.”⁷¹

In 1876, he published *The Family in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects*, drawing from a series of articles written for the *Southwestern Presbyterian*.⁷² Palmer extolled the family as a small model of the State, “a strongly compacted government,” where the great principles of government and society are molded and developed. After a series of

⁶⁷ Ibid., 353, 363-364

⁶⁸ Benjamin M. Palmer, *Discourse at the Dedication of the New Church Edifice of the Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri* (New Orleans: Clark & Hofline, 1876).

⁶⁹ Benjamin M. Palmer, *Address of the Rev. B. M. Palmer, D.D., at the Commencement Exercises of the Medical Department of the University of Louisiana, New Orleans, March 17, 1881* (New Orleans, 1881).

⁷⁰ Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL. D., Ex-President of the South Carolina College, Late Professor of Theology in the Theological Seminary at Columbia, South Carolina* (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875).

⁷¹ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to John B. Adger from New Orleans, LA, February 24, 1875 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 482.

⁷² Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects. An Essay, in Two Parts* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1876).

lectures on character to young men at First Presbyterian Church, he published *The Formation of Character* in 1889.⁷³ The following year, Palmer published *The Broken Home or Lessons in Sorrow*.⁷⁴ The book contains moving poetry and reflections on the life and death of his son, four of his five daughters, and his wife. Introducing the book, Palmer wrote, “From the simple desire of comforting those who mourn, this story of repeated bereavements is here told.”⁷⁵

In 1894, the seventy-six year old pastor published *A Theology of Prayer*, dedicated to the members of the First Presbyterian Church “who have kindly listened to his voice through a period of six and thirty years, and now with watchful tenderness wait on his declining age, this written voice speaks a pastor’s gratitude.”⁷⁶ In this volume, Palmer warmly analyzed the various aspects of prayer, and provided answers to the various common objections offered by skeptics. Palmer began work on his final publication in 1892, *The Threefold Fellowship and the Threefold Assurance*, which was completed and published in 1902.⁷⁷ The book presents a classical Reformed treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity, the fellowship that Christians enjoy with each, and the resulting assurances of understanding, faith, and hope.

Palmer’s life was still continually beset with intense personal tragedy. On February 1, 1873, his youngest daughter Marion passed away, just fifteen months after Kate. The seventeen-year-old had contracted pneumonia the year before, and was unable

⁷³ Benjamin M. Palmer, *Formation of Character. Twelve Lectures Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, La.* (New Orleans: E.S. Upton, 1889).

⁷⁴ Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Broken Home: Lessons in Sorrow* (New Orleans: E.S. Upton, 1890).

⁷⁵ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, “Introductory Note.”

⁷⁶ Benjamin M. Palmer, *Theology of Prayer as Viewed in the Religion of Nature and in the System of Grace* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1894).

⁷⁷ Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Threefold Fellowship and the Threefold Assurance: An Essay in Two Parts* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1902).

to recover. May also brought the sad news that Palmer's close sister, Sophronia, had died. Palmer's friends often wondered at his ability to endure through severe struggles. He was convinced that endurance and self-control were Christian virtues, and through repeated hardships he drew strength from his belief in the absolute sovereignty of God, who governed and ordained all things that come to pass for his own glory.⁷⁸ Regarding the death of Marion, he wrote to a dear friend, "It is over now: 'the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away - *blessed* be the name of the Lord.' But if you do not know from experience how hard it is to turn anguish into worship, I cannot tell you, nor could Job."⁷⁹

While the grief of Marion's death was still heavy, there were also occasions for rejoicing. Palmer's oldest daughter, Mary, had safely given birth to his first grandchild on Christmas Day, 1872.⁸⁰ And Gussie, his third daughter, was planning a May wedding to Mr. Daniel D. Colcock of South Carolina. But Palmer's "cup of sorrow was not yet full."⁸¹ Gussie gave birth to a baby girl in June of 1874, but after several months of resulting complications, she died on January 29, 1875. On a beautiful Sunday afternoon, the Palmers buried their fifth child.⁸² The next month, the grieving father wrote to his dear friend, John Adger:

I will not say a word as to our own sorrow, except that the weight of four graves lie upon us at once, and this last bereavement leaves us almost stripped and bare. Nothing but a conviction of God's gracious sovereignty, and the immense love He has shown to us in them all, keeps us from sinking beneath the pressure. We do not repine; but it is very hard to lift ourselves up, and I am almost without

⁷⁸ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 388-389, 395; Benjamin M. Palmer, "Temptation in Sorrow," *Southwestern Presbyterian* 2 (November 1871): 2. See Ephesians 1:4,11; Romans 9:14-15, 18, 22-23; Psalm 33:11; Westminster Confession of Faith chpts. 3-5

⁷⁹ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to Sallie Baxter Bird from New Orleans, LA, April 15, 1873 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 399. The quote is from Job 1:21.

⁸⁰ Palmer, *The Broken Home*, 66. Mary's husband was John W. Caldwell.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁸² The three daughters who died in New Orleans (Kate, Marion, Gussie) were interred at Washington Cemetery (Lafayette Cemetery No.1), and later transferred to the family tomb at Metarie Cemetery.

strength to take up even my necessary duties. May God help us to carry ourselves patiently, and to His glory!⁸³

Palmer faced other personal struggles. For years he had been a heavy smoker of fine cigars, a pleasure he learned from Thornwell during his days in Columbia. In his older years, when he began to experience feelings of nervousness and sleepless nights, he resolutely quit the habit in 1876.⁸⁴ Difficult personal decisions were required as he continued to receive calls from various churches in attempts to draw him away from New Orleans. In the spring of 1881, the Board of Directors of Columbia Seminary elected Palmer to the Chair of Pastoral Theology, which the General Assembly heartily endorsed. In conjunction, the First Presbyterian Church of Columbia also called him to serve again as Pastor. After careful consideration of the tempting call, Palmer announced to his congregation that he did not intend to accept the call. He remained convinced that his services were best suited for New Orleans.⁸⁵

Until his last day, Palmer was a stalwart for precise Reformed theological orthodoxy. This did not, however, prevent him from endearing himself to the various religious traditions found in New Orleans. Especially during years of bad yellow fever epidemics, he was known to labor outside the bounds of his own communion, visiting receptive households of all faiths.⁸⁶ Palmer stood firm in the distinctive beliefs that he believed to make his the one true religion, yet he did so with tremendous respect,

⁸³ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to John B. Adger from New Orleans, LA, February 24, 1875 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 513.

⁸⁴ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 512.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 433, 539-544. The Seminary again attempted unsuccessfully to call him in 1892.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 188.

fairness, and kindness.⁸⁷ And without subordinating or compromising on principle, he consistently showed a willingness to cooperate with various faith traditions. He held close working relationships and friendships with several rabbis and priests in New Orleans. Though he did not recognize Roman Catholic baptism as valid, he sought to live on the best possible terms those of the predominant faith of New Orleans.⁸⁸ Rabbi Max Heller of Temple Sinai in New Orleans recognized Palmer as a man who represented the staunchest Presbyterian orthodoxy, yet he “swept away every barrier,” and, therefore, “was the minister of all of us.”⁸⁹

Promoting Sabbath observance in New Orleans was a great concern to Palmer, and an issue that seemed well-suited for interfaith cooperation. He sorely lamented the growing tendency in New Orleans and across the nation to disregard the Sabbath obligation to set aside a day for rest and worship. He believed this was particularly reinforced by “the complex and materialistic character of our civilization,” illustrated in “the system of railroads and telegraphic communication, which has revolutionized the old modes of commercial business.”⁹⁰ Palmer worked to organize the interfaith Sabbath Observance League of New Orleans in 1882. Comprised of Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews, the League encouraged citizens to “plead for the Sabbath upon any grounds which the State shall feel itself competent to admit, and upon the validity of

⁸⁷ Johnson wrote, “If he had decided and clean cut views as to what his own Church should hold he always coupled with that a readiness to acknowledge all that was good in men of other faiths and to cwork with them for any common end.” *Life and Letters*, 438.

⁸⁸ See Session minutes of First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, March 4, 1860, Montreat 2007. Also, Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 188.

⁸⁹ New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, May 31, 1902, quoted in Scott Langston, “Interaction and Identity: Jews and Christians in Nineteenth Century New Orleans,” *Southern Jewish History* 3 (2000): 84. Langston provides a very helpful overview of Palmer’s understanding and appreciation of the Jewish faith in particular, and the close friendships held with several Rabbis in New Orleans. Temple Sinai is still located at 6227 St. Charles Avenue.

⁹⁰ Palmer, quoted in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 437.

which it may be able to pronounce.”⁹¹ At the inaugural meeting, Rabbi James K. Gutheim of Temple Sinai addressed the League, and expressed his support for a Sunday law that would prevent employees from being forced to work on the Christian Sabbath.⁹² Though Jews recognized Saturday as the Sabbath, both Gutheim and Rabbi Isaac L. Leucht of Touro Synagogue agreed that materialism was a threat to the morality, human rights, and spirituality of all people.⁹³ Leucht later proclaimed to his congregation, “I believe a better observance of a Sunday by the Christian community will have the effect of inducing you to hallow and reverence your own Sabbath.”⁹⁴

In 1882, Palmer joined Protestants, Roman Catholics, and Jews of New Orleans in denouncing the persecutions of Jews in the Russian Empire. On March 16, 1882, he attended a public rally, presided by mayor Joseph A. Shakespeare, to express public indignation for the atrocities being committed in Russia, and offer sympathy and support for the oppressed. Included on the platform were the Hon. Percy Roberts, the Rev. Father

⁹¹ Ibid., 438. See “The Sabbath,” *Southwestern Presbyterian* (April 20, 1882) for the ecumenical platform that was adopted by the League. See also New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, March 28, 1882; *Southwest Presbyterian* (March 30, 1882). Palmer called the first meeting to order on March 27, nominated Methodist Bishop J.C. Keener as president, and read a note from Roman Catholic Archbishop J.N. Perche expressing his support and regret at not being able to attend.

⁹² James Koppel Gutheim (1817-1886) was born near Westphalia, Germany, and arrived in the United States in 1843. He served for a time in Columbus, Ohio before moving to New Orleans in 1850 to serve a synagogue. An ardent Confederate, Gutheim fled New Orleans in 1863 after refusing to take the oath of allegiance, and served Jewish communities in Montgomery, Alabama and Columbus, Georgia. He returned to New Orleans after the war to serve Gates of Mercy, left for a few years to serve Temple Emanuel in New York, then returned again to New Orleans in 1872 to serve Temple Sinai in New Orleans until his death. Gutheim also served as President of the New Orleans Board of Education. See Irwin Lachoff and Catherine C. Kahn, *The Jewish Community in New Orleans* (Mount Pleasant, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2005).

⁹³ Isaac L. Leucht (1844-1916) was born in Hesse, Germany, and arrived in New Orleans in 1868 to serve as cantor for Gutheim’s Gates of Mercy. A few months after his arrival, Gutheim left for New York, and Leucht became minister. Four years later, he left to serve as cantor of Temple Sinai. Leucht returned to Gates of Mercy when Yellow Fever took both the cantor and Rabbi in 1879. When another congregation merged with Gates of Mercy, Leucht renamed the congregation Touro Synagogue after a large benefactor. Leucht served as President of the Louisiana Red Cross and President of the Commission on Prisons and Asylums. Touro Synagogue is still located at 4238 St. Charles Avenue.

⁹⁴ New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, April 3, 1882, quoted in Langston, “Interaction and Identity,” 115. Also see *Southwestern Presbyterian* (April 6, 1882).

John F. O'Connor, and the Hon. Thomas J. Semmes.⁹⁵ Mayor Shakespeare began by reading a series of resolutions denouncing the treatment of Russian Jews, and endorsing a plan by Gov. Samuel D. McEnery to provide agricultural colonies for Russian Jewish refugees. The committee organizing the event, comprised of Christians and Jews and chaired by Rev. Henry M. Smith of Third Presbyterian Church, asked the mayor to appoint a committee to collect and distribute a relief fund for the refugees in New Orleans.

After the resolutions were read and approved, the four speakers addressed a large crowd. Roberts recognized the indebtedness of Christians to Jews for their law, code of morals, and religion. O'Connor emphasized factors that united Jews, Protestants, and Catholics, such as sympathy and dedication to the rights of peace, prosperity, and life. Semmes denounced the persecutions as violating the great American principles of freedom of speech and religion. Finally, Palmer took the podium as the concluding speaker. The minister painted a vivid picture of the atrocities perpetrated by violent mobs against millions of Russian Jews, referring to them as horrors belonging to the Dark Ages rather than the summer of 1881. After chastising the Russian government for failing to stop the pogrom, he called Americans to offer refuge for the oppressed. In a moving conclusion, Palmer declared of the Jews:

Their sacred books are in part my sacred books, and through their hands I derive that religion which is the ground of my hope beyond the grave. For more than two thousand years their history has been one of unspeakable pathos. Whenever persecution bursts upon the Jew there would I be at his side – an Hebrew of the Hebrews – to suffer and to do. If we cannot stay the hand of persecution abroad,

⁹⁵ Robert and Semmes were both local lawyers. Semmes was a former Confederate Senator, a founding member of the Southern Historical Society, and a speaker with Palmer at the New Orleans service honoring Robert E. Lee. John F. O'Connor was the assistant pastor of Jesuit's College and Church of the Immaculate Conception.

let us welcome them to our homes and our bosoms here, and roll up such a sentiment in favor of civil and religious freedom on this new continent that it shall never be darkened with the stain which rests upon the old.⁹⁶

At his concluding words, the largely Jewish audience went wild with applause.

The 1884 World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition was held in New Orleans to advertise the city's revitalization following the end of Reconstruction. The date commemorated the centennial of the first shipment of cotton from the United States to England. Running from December 16 to June 2, the event offered many attractions to thousands of visitors. The fair covered an area of 249 acres, stretching from St. Charles Avenue to the Mississippi River, and organizers boasted that the fair could be accessed by railway, streetcar, steamboat, or ocean-vessel. Elaborate buildings were erected for the event, including a thirty-three acre main building with 5,000 electric lights.⁹⁷ On a day devoted to African Americans, Palmer was invited to address an assembly of thousands of black citizens of New Orleans. The minister delivered a discourse emphasizing the familiar themes of preserving the races and building up character.⁹⁸

A few years later, Palmer's close friend Rabbi James K. Gutheim died, and the funeral service became a large public ceremony. The Louisiana State Senate adjourned for the day, public buildings closed, and courts adjourned, all in recognition of Gutheim's lifetime of devoted service to charitable and educational work. As a great honor, Palmer was invited to deliver the closing address at Temple Sinai for the funeral of his close

⁹⁶ Palmer's speech is printed in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 488-490, and the *Southwestern Presbyterian*, June 17, 1886.

⁹⁷ The Fair suffered from serious financial difficulties, and most of the structures were auctioned off for scrap. The location is the current site of Audubon Park and Audubon Zoo. Palmer gave his speech from a Victorian Mansion built for the World Exposition in 1884, and is still located at 7004 St. Charles Avenue. A decorative monument from the fair entitled "Peace, the Genius of History" is located on Esplanade Avenue. See Chapter 29 in John Smith Kendall, *History of New Orleans* (Chicago: Lewis Publishing Company, 1922).

⁹⁸ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 491.

friend. While a number of Rabbis from across the South spoke that day, Palmer was the only Protestant to take part in the service. He eulogized Gutheim as

the incarnation of virtue and religion, in whom these are embodied as a living personal agency to renew and bless mankind. This is a kind of gospel which men easily understand, for while they may fail to read the black letter of our different schools of philosophy, or even to interpret aright the dogmas of a religious creed, these are instantly comprehended when translated into the daily actions of a pure and virtuous life. It is the printing in raised type which sets abstract principles in such relief before the eye that he who runs may read.⁹⁹

Palmer was generally known for his calming influence and pastoral counsel for those in distress, regardless of creed. About a year before his death, a restless ex-Confederate President Jefferson Davis once announced to his wife that he intended to travel from Biloxi to New Orleans. Mrs. Davis described the event:

We had several guests in the house and I suggested his waiting until Monday, but he said decidedly, 'I want to go today.' It was Saturday. He came back on Monday evening very calm and cheerful. In a day or two he said, 'I went to commune with Dr. Palmer, and it has done me a world of good.' I asked him if Dr. Palmer would accept an Episcopalian at his communion table. He answered, 'Dr. Palmer would never break a bruised reed.' Something had disquieted him greatly and he went to Dr. Palmer for comfort.¹⁰⁰

Davis died in New Orleans on December 6, 1889, and his funeral was one of the largest the South had ever seen. Tens of thousands flocked to the city to pay tribute, as his body lay in state at City Hall on Lafayette Square for several days. Palmer served as a pallbearer in the grand procession to Metairie Cemetery.¹⁰¹

Loss and the burden of sorrow continued to mark Palmer's life. In 1882 he received news that his father, Edward Palmer, had passed away. He experienced his

⁹⁹ New Orleans *Times-Democrat*, June 15, 1886, quoted in Langston, "Interaction and Identity," 119-120.

¹⁰⁰ Varina Jefferson Davis, letter to Mary Palmer Caldwell from Hotel Gerard, New York City, June 3, 1902 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 432.

¹⁰¹ The house where he died is located at First Street. The home belonged to Davis's friend, Judge Charles E. Fenner of New Orleans. Davis was later moved to Hollywood Cemetery in Richmond, Virginia in 1893. See Donald C. Collins, *The Death and Resurrection of Jefferson Davis* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2005).

greatest loss in the fall of 1888 with the death his beloved wife of forty-seven years.

Confessing his suffering, he wrote to Mrs. Mary McMaster, “My friend, I cannot tell you what a wrench this is. She was everything to me and to this house; with her quiet force she ruled this home, its center and its stem.”¹⁰² In a letter to his friend Theodore Cuyler, he wrote:

I have this to thank Him for, the greatest of all His mercies, and then for this, that He gave her to me so long. The memories of almost half a century encircle me as a rainbow. I can feed upon them through the remainder of a short, sad life, and after that can carry them up to Heaven with me and pour them into song forever. If the strings of the harp are being stretched to a greater tension, it is that the praise may hereafter rise to higher and sweeter notes before His throne – *as we bow together there.*¹⁰³

Augusta died on November 13 and was buried the following day. A great crowd of Protestants, Jews, and Roman Catholics attended. It was an immeasurable comfort to Palmer that his daughter Mary and her family were living with him during this period.

As he had done in the past, Palmer continued to show remarkable steadfastness in the face of great sorrow. Against the advice of the Session, he insisted on taking the pulpit and preaching the following Sunday, “I have been telling men how Christians should bear even such bereavements. I must illustrate my preaching by setting an example.”¹⁰⁴ The minister preached a powerful message on “Christian Fortitude” from Lamentations 3:28, and the congregation wept.¹⁰⁵ The Palmer home on Prytania Street had seen many years of joy and sorrow, and the minister now thought it best to move. He

¹⁰² Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to Mrs. Mary Jane Macfie McMaster from New Orleans, LA, November 17, 1888 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 523.

¹⁰³ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to Theodore L. Cuyler, in Cuyler, *Recollections*, 223.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 524.

¹⁰⁵ “He sitteth alone and keepeth silence because he hath borne it upon him.” Lamentations 3:28

found relief and joy in overseeing the construction of a new home on Henry Clay Avenue, where he would live the rest of his days with Mary and the family.¹⁰⁶

Following the death of Palmer's friend Rabbi Gutheim, Rabbi Max Heller became his successor at Temple Sinai.¹⁰⁷ Palmer quickly befriended the twenty-six year old rabbi, and became a mentor to him.¹⁰⁸ Both staunchly subscribed to their respective faiths, but they found common ground when it came to working against materialism and the Louisiana lottery. In 1868, the Louisiana State Lottery Company had received a twenty-five year charter from the State General Assembly, and in 1892 electors were faced with the decision of whether to renew the original charter. The lottery had begun as a relatively unassuming way to raise funds in a struggling economy, but over the years had become a tremendous financial institution with gross ticket sales running as high as twenty-nine million dollars a year. In an effort to convey a message of southern patriotism and dignity, the company employed Gen. P.G.T. Beauregard and Lt. Gen. Jubal A. Early

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 608. Palmer and the Caldwells moved to the new home in 1891. The home remained in the Caldwell family until 1928. The home is still located at 1718 Palmer Avenue. The Avenue was named in Palmer's honor in 1898, the year of his eightieth birthday. Around the same time, Palmer Park was dedicated in a new section in New Orleans. The park remains today, bordered by S. Carrolton Avenue, S. Claiborne Avenue, Dublin Street, and Panola Street. It is located at the end of the St. Charles Streetcar line. In 1895, a Presbyterian orphanage was chartered in Columbus, Mississippi by First Presbyterian Church of Columbus. The Pastor, William States Jacobs, was a Columbia Seminary graduate and great admirer of Palmer (his father had founded South Carolina's Thornwell Orphanage). The orphanage was named after Palmer, and today the Palmer Home for Children continues to provide care for over eighty boys and girls. See Joe Maxwell, "Palmer Yesterday: A Century of Caring," in *Palmer Home for Children: A Century of Hope, a Passion to Care. Centennial Edition 1895-1995* (Columbus, MS: Palmer Home for Children, 1995), 28-49.

¹⁰⁷ Max Heller (1860-1929) was born in Prague, Bohemia and arrived in the United States in 1879 to study at Hebrew Union College and the University of Cincinnati. After briefly serving a synagogue in Houston, Texas, he was selected as the successor to Gutheim at Temple Sinai. He served as Professor of Hebrew Language and Literature at Tulane University, and was a member of the Louisiana Board of Education. See Bobbie Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner 1860-1929* (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1997).

¹⁰⁸ Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller*, 50, 69.

to supervise the drawings. The staggering wealth and power of the lottery company, however, led to growing opposition and rumors of corruption.¹⁰⁹

The first organizational meeting of the New Orleans Anti-Lottery League was held on February 28, 1890, and leagues of anti-lottery campaigners soon formed all over the state. Benjamin Palmer and his young friend Heller immediately became leading forces in the campaign. On June 25, 1891, one of the largest meetings of the Anti-Lottery League was held in the Grand Opera House in New Orleans.¹¹⁰ William Preston Johnston, Chancellor of Tulane University, presided over the meeting of thousands. Palmer was the keynote speaker. After a brief statement, Johnston introduced Palmer, saying, “It is now my privilege to introduce to you a man who by his talents, his eloquence, and his virtues, well deserves the title of the first citizen of New Orleans.”¹¹¹ The audience received Palmer with cheering applause.

Taking the podium, Palmer plainly stated, “Mr. Chairman and fellow citizens of Louisiana: I lay the indictment against the Lottery Campaign of Louisiana that it is essentially an immoral institution whose business and avowed aim is to propagate gambling throughout the State and throughout the country.” In prime form, Palmer proceeded forcefully to denounce the lottery on a number of ethical grounds. According to Palmer, the lottery enriched a few through the poverty of the many. Not only was it a form of gambling, standing in opposition to the universal law of living by personal labor,

¹⁰⁹ See Berthold C. Alwes, “The History of the Louisiana State Lottery Company,” *Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 27 (1944): 964-1118.

¹¹⁰ Opened in 1871, the Grand Opera House was located on Canal Street between Dauphine and Burgundy. The theater was one of the best known in the south, with a staircase reaching 100 feet. The theater was torn down in 1899. Kendall, *History of New Orleans*, 739; *The Picayune’s Guide to New Orleans Revised and Enlarged*. 6th ed. (New Orleans: The Picayune, 1904), 83.

¹¹¹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 554; *New Orleans New Delta*, June 26, 1891; *New Orleans Picayune*, June 26, 1891.

but it was an active propagandist of gambling. “It goes forth under the charter of the state to persuade man, woman, child where ever they meet to gamble.” He predicted that if the charter was renewed, within ten years it would carry every governor of the state in its pocket, removing “every honest judge from the bench, and put their men in the places to do their bidding.”

Palmer’s speech was full of colorful analogies, humor, and emotional appeal. The sympathetic audience was electrified, crying out, laughing, cheering, and applauding throughout the discourse. At one point, the fiery-tongued campaigner declared, “If this lottery cannot be destroyed by forms of law, it must unquestionably be destroyed by actual revolution.” Though he would later receive much criticism for this line in particular, the crowd went wild, shouting, “Go on, go on!” Perhaps ironically, Palmer ended the inspiring discourse by reminding his audience that the moral sentiment of the world had destroyed slavery. By analogy, he thundered,

The moral sentiment of mankind is against the lottery, and all the countries that have given it a temporary existence have found that it exhausted the resources of the land and have more or less divested themselves of the curse; but if, notwithstanding all these things, the curse should still be inflicted upon us, Louisiana must become a lost Pleiad in the sisterhood of States, and she will go forth an outcast pariah with the scarlet letter of shame branded forever upon her head.¹¹²

At his conclusion, the audience was near hysterics. Men stood in their seats and shouted themselves hoarse. Women waved their handkerchiefs in the air. Rabbi Leucht later described the experience, “I give you my word, sir, that night Dr. Palmer did not permit me to think for myself, not to feel for myself, not to will for myself, but picked me up and

¹¹² The speech was printed in its entirety in New Orleans *Daily New Delta*, June 26, 28 1891 and *Southwestern Presbyterian*, July 2, 1891. It is also printed in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 554-561.

carried me withersoever he would.”¹¹³ The next day, Leucht confidently explained to a friend, “Your lottery is doomed, your holding will soon be worthless as chaff. Not one parson has spoken! *Ten thousand parsons have spoken!*”¹¹⁴

Palmer’s anti-lottery speech set off a firestorm in Louisiana. For weeks, pro-lottery newspapers attacked Palmer as a revolutionary, while anti-lottery papers praised him as a champion.¹¹⁵ On July 8, the *Daily New Delta* announced that 20,000 copies had been printed and distributed throughout Louisiana, but that had not satisfied demand.¹¹⁶ On August 13 Rabbi Max Heller also delivered a stirring anti-lottery speech in Shreveport, despite opposition from the Synagogue’s President.¹¹⁷ Palmer’s leadership and public oratory brought the united force of Protestants, Jews, and Roman Catholics across the state against the lottery. The tide had turned, and the lottery was overwhelmingly defeated in the April 1892 vote.¹¹⁸

As Palmer entered his older years, he more frequently lamented the loss of friends and family. In 1889, he wrote to a friend, “Oh, how death is thinning our number and soon the marble slab will contain the last record of us all!”¹¹⁹ When his long-time friend Rev. Robert L. Dabney died in 1898, Palmer confessed, “I am lonesome, now that Dabney’s gone.”¹²⁰ The next year would bring the news that John Adger had died.

¹¹³ New Orleans, *Daily Picayune*, June 6, 1891.

¹¹⁴ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 562-563.

¹¹⁵ See Wayne C. Eubank, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer’s Lottery Speech, New Orleans, 1891,” *Southern Speech Journal* 24, no. 1 (1958): 2-15.

¹¹⁶ New Orleans, *New Daily Delta*, July 8, 1891.

¹¹⁷ Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller*, 54.

¹¹⁸ Alwes, “Louisiana State Lottery Company,” 1097. For a list of numerous speeches given for various occasions by Palmer during this time, see Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 563-565.

¹¹⁹ Benjamin M. Palmer, letter to a friend from New Orleans, LA, September 3, 1889 in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 574.

¹²⁰ Ibid. Robert Lewis Dabney (1820-1898), Presbyterian clergyman, was a native of Virginia. He studied at Hampden-Sydney College, graduated from the University of Virginia (1842), and graduated from Union Theological Seminary (1846). He served as a missionary in Louisa County, Virginia (1846-1847), a Pastor

Palmer's health was failing, as he was often greatly troubled by an enlarged prostate gland, requiring extra care from his devoted daughter, Sarah. By the summer of 1896 his failing eyesight prompted him to spend July and August in Glens Falls, New York, seeking the best specialized treatment. He was diagnosed with glaucomatous, and prescribed to avoid all glares in hopes of preserving what eyesight was remaining. In 1898, he confessed that with the aid of a strong magnifying glass, good light, and large print, he could only read a little in the Bible.¹²¹

The "first citizen of New Orleans" celebrated his eightieth birthday in 1898. To honor the occasion, the Ladies' Association of First Presbyterian Church planned a surprise reception at the beloved pastor's new home on Tuesday, January 25. The event began at four in the afternoon, and lasted well into the night. It was estimated that over ten thousand people from every walk of life called on Palmer that day. Local newspapers dubbed it "Palmer's Day," and ran articles lauding Palmer and his church.¹²²

Despite his age and nagging health problems, Palmer would not slow down.¹²³ In May of 1899 he travelled with his daughter to Columbia for a farewell tour. At the age of eighty-one, he preached again in the Stony Creek Church where had first been received

at Tinkling Spring, Virginia (1847-1853), a Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Polity and Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary (1859-1869), and a Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy at the University of Texas (1883-1894). Dabney served as a chaplain in the Confederate Army, founded Austin School of Theology (later Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary), and wrote a major biography of Gen. Thomas J. Jackson. See Thomas Carey Johnson, *Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Richmond, 1903); Sean Michael Lucas, *Robert Lewis Dabney: A Southern Presbyterian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2005).

¹²¹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 531-533.

¹²² Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 608-616.

¹²³ On the occasion of a small celebration for his eighty-first birthday, Palmer said to his friend Rabbi Leucht, "There is a certain solemn and peculiar beauty and joy in old age. There is comfort and holy calm in those maturer years, when the animal passions are at rest, and when one settles down to the quiet contemplation of the past and the serene expectancy of the nearness of the life to come. I have lived to know that there is beauty in old age." Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 616.

into church membership at the age of eighteen.¹²⁴ In May of 1900 he travelled to Louisville, Kentucky to attend the tenth annual Confederate Reunion. Up to 150,000 visitors and veterans descended upon Louisville during the weeklong event. Palmer was the orator of the day for the opening ceremony on May 30, and delivered a patriotic speech assuring his audience of three thousand that later historians would vindicate the southern cause. Afterward, the Daughters of the Confederacy presented him with a magnificent bunch of flowers and the purple badge of the Ladies' Confederate Memorial Association.¹²⁵

Surely the most fitting address in Palmer's concluding years was one delivered on New Year's Day of 1901, at the request of the citizens of New Orleans. Two thousand people packed into the church, representing every faith tradition and class to be found in the Crescent City. Palmer's oration presented a sweeping narration of history as a great drama, through which the hand of God may be traced, working out his divine purpose to reveal the splendor and majesty of his love to humanity.¹²⁶ A reporter described the event:

Enraptured by the uplifting discourse of the speaker the great throng of listeners sat for more than an hour under the spell of his majestically moving eloquence; and when the last of his intellectually profound and rhetorically finished periods had been spoken the thought was strong with everyone present that a more eloquent, more scholarly or more spiritually uplifting address had not been heard in New Orleans within the memory of men now living.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Ibid., 617.

¹²⁵ New York, *New York Times*, May 28, 31, June 1, 1900. The full speech is printed in Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 565-568.

¹²⁶ Palmer's Century Sermon was published in pamphlet form. Bejmain M. Palmer, *The Address of Rev. B.M. Palmer Delivered on the First Day of the New Year and Century* (New Orleans: The Brotherhood of the First Presbyterian Church, 1901). The address was also printed *New Orleans Times Democrat* and *Daily Picayune*, January 2, 1901. For a helpful review of the content of Palmer's sermon, as well as a critique of his rhetoric and delivery, see Wayne C. Eubank, "Palmer's Century Sermon, New Orleans, January 1, 1901." *Southern Speech Communication Journal* 35, no. 1 (1969): 28-39.

¹²⁷ *New Orleans Times Democrat*, January 2, 1901.

After sixty years of service as a preacher, Palmer still had full command of the pulpit.

Until his last, Palmer was a remarkably vigorous and moving influence in the Church and State, from the local to national level. In April of 1901, the Louisiana Historical Society announced that President William McKinley and his cabinet would be visiting New Orleans on the occasion of the ninety-eighth anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Paris. This was the first time a U.S. President in office had visited the state, and the Historical Society enjoyed the privilege of officially receiving the honored guest at the old Cabildo building on Jackson Square. The Presidential party arrived on Thursday, May 2 to a grand reception at Jackson Square. As McKinley made his way to the historic second floor balcony to address the crowd, Benjamin Morgan Palmer was presented to the President, and a warm greeting was exchanged.¹²⁸

On July 16, 1901, Palmer preached the baccalaureate sermon at his alma mater, the University of Georgia. In February of 1902 he delivered an address “Love of Truth and the Inspiration of the Scholar” before Tulane University. On May 5, 1902, the old minister left his home after lunch to speak to a meeting of a ladies’ society at First Presbyterian Church. At the corner of Palmer Avenue and St. Charles Avenue, a streetcar struck him, breaking his right leg and injuring his head. Apparently he had misjudged the speed of the car he was attempting to board. Nearby workmen making street repairs hurried to his aid and gently carried him back to his home. The pastor received the best medical attention available, but the strain of the injury exasperated his old prostate and kidney troubles. On Tuesday, May 27 he lapsed into a coma. His

¹²⁸ “Reception of President Wm. McKinley at the Cabildo, New Orleans, May 2nd, 1901,” in *Publications of the Louisiana Historical Society, New Orleans, Louisiana*, Vol. 3 Part 1 (New Orleans: Louisiana Historical Society, 1902), 1-23.

daughter and granddaughter were at his bedside.¹²⁹ Benjamin Morgan Palmer was born into the Church militant on January 25, 1818, and passed into the Church triumphant on May 28, 1902. He was eighty-four years of age.

Palmer's funeral was one of the largest ceremonies in the history of New Orleans. For days the local papers were filled with columns reminiscing Palmer's life. Flowers, gifts, and telegrams came to the house from all over the country.¹³⁰ From five until ten in the evening on Thursday, his body lay in state before his pulpit in the sanctuary of First Presbyterian, and the Session sat guard over it through the night. Inside and out, the church was draped in black mourning cloths. Thousands attended his funeral the next morning, packing the sanctuary and lining the streets from the church to the cemetery. The Revs. Robert Q. Mallard and John A. Nall presided, assisted by several local clergymen. When the procession left the church, the hearse was followed by a solemn detachment of men in gray. Old and grizzled, they had come from the Confederate Veterans Home to pay their final respects to the beloved pastor, statesman, and orator.¹³¹ He was respectfully laid to rest in Washington Cemetery.¹³²

On Sunday, November 16, 1902 a second memorial service was held for Palmer at the First Presbyterian Church. Rev. Eugene Daniel of Lewisburg, West Virginia delivered the keynote address. Palmer's longtime friend Rabbi Isaac Leucht offered the following words:

¹²⁹ Johnson, *Life and Letters*, 623-624. Note the typographical errors in the dates on p.624.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 626ff.

¹³¹ "The Men in Gray," *New Orleans Times Democrat*, May 31, 1902.

¹³² In 1904, Palmer's body was moved to a stately family tomb in Metairie Cemetery. See *The Picayune's Guide to New Orleans Revised and Enlarged*, 6th ed. (New Orleans: The Picayune, 1904), 150. The epitaph reads, "Erected by First Presbyterian Church in Memory of Their Beloved Pastor. 45 Years Pastor of the 1st Presbyterian Church. These All Died in Faith, God Having Provided Some Better Thing For Them."

I have come because I loved him and he was my friend for so many years, and because we together were seeking light. Although seeking it on different paths, we met and never quarreled as to its source. And here at once I touch the pivot upon which the character of Dr. Palmer revolved – broad-mindedness and large-heartedness. Only great men have the capacity of harboring strong convictions, and at the same time of allowing others to differ; only good men will take an opponent by the hand and say, ‘Be my friend.’ No one doubts that he clung to his faith with a pertinacity that knew no compromise. What had once crystallized into conviction – be it religion, politics or social problems – he never deviated from it for a moment. No matter how the world stormed against it, no matter what evolution would take place in the minds of his colleagues, pupils or contemporaries, he stood fast and immovable upon the rock of his judgment; and no doubt he took it unaltered and unabridged into his grave. Bigots and zealots are recruited from the ranks of such men – but Palmer rose to the level of forbearance and broad-mindedness rarely found, pardon me, among theologians.¹³³

¹³³ Eugene Daniel and I.L. Leucht, *In Memory of Rev. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, D.D., Pastor of the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, La. December 1856 to May 1902* (New Orleans, 1902), 17.

CONCLUSION

If, then, science proclaims a theory seemingly at variance with Scripture, the alternative is plainly this: Either the interpretation of the Scripture is wrong, or else science has made a blunder. If the former, we are willing to correct our errors by any light which can be turned upon the sacred volume. If the latter, we wait till science shall gather other facts and make a truer induction.

– B.M. Palmer, “Baconianism and the Bible”

Palmer’s death marked the dawn of a new century, and there seemed to be a general sense among contemporaries that it also marked a significant diminution in the power of oratory:

The great public speakers of his stamp are rapidly passing away, with few, if any, to take their places. The tendency in education to-day is to make men specialists. They are required, by the exigencies of the times, to devote themselves to some particular branch of study, a rule which is unfavorable to the turning out of minds of symmetrical, and, it may be said, universal development, while another favorable feature in modern study is that it discredits and disparages culture in pure literature. Doubtless the orators of coming generations will be equal to the demands that may be made upon them, but in an age which discourages and mocks at sentiment there will be no longer developed the dignity, the pathos, the might, the majesty and the dominating and abiding power that characterized the oratory of the great man who, so lately towering in our midst, now lies with the lowliest.¹

Palmer was an influential southern archconservative in almost every sense. Much of the white South looked to Palmer, and the elite circle of intellectuals with which he associated, to define, explain, and defend what was believed to be a divine order for society, as outlined in the Bible. The qualities that made him a legendary pastor –

¹ New Orleans *Picayune*, May 30, 1902.

personal piety, magnetic personality, moral authority, steely resolve, powerful oratory – made him all the more effective as a spokesman for the causes that he chose to embrace. An unreconstructed Confederate to the last, Palmer viewed the Civil War as the brief shooting portion of a larger theological and ideological war that he waged his entire adult life. “I am a South Carolinian, you know,” served as a battle cry in a war to decide the future of America, the future of what he believed to be God-ordained order in society, and the future of the Church and Scripture in society. In many ways, defending the traditional body of divinity against modernism and theological liberalism would sum up both his life’s work, as well as the story of the nineteenth-century southern Presbyterian Church.

Ironically, it was his lack of novelty that made him novel. Palmer was a stalwart for precise theological orthodoxy and fixed societal organization in an age when the very existence of such notions was coming under suspicion, even within the church itself. It is equally ironic that such a stalwart for Old School and Old South principles should pass the turn of the century mark only to be struck down by the modern electric streetcar. Palmer left a South that was increasingly embracing the materialism, theological liberalism, and political and societal views that he stood firmly against for a lifetime. The observant modern reader familiar with southern society, however, may conclude that many of Palmer’s beliefs about culture and religion still resonate.

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