

# Binding Bodies and Liberating Souls: James Henley Thornwell's Vision for a Spiritual Church and a Christian Confederacy

By Christopher C. Cooper

## Introduction

In 1845, while other denominations faced geographical division over the issue of slavery, the Old School branch of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America took the steps required to ensure that it would not face a similar fate over a temporal, political issue that had distracted others from the eternal, spiritual mission of the church. By an overwhelming margin of 164 to 12, the General Assembly declared slavery as neither a bar to Christian communion nor a matter of church discipline.<sup>1</sup> However, by 1861, just months after South Carolina seceded from the Union and only weeks following the attack at Fort Sumter, the Old School Presbyterians finally fell victim to the temporal and political. On May 28, the General Assembly, meeting at Seventh Church in Philadelphia, passed the Spring Resolutions, formally declaring their loyalty to the Federal government, thereby alienating the Southern Presbyterians in their communion and ensuring that division would inevitably follow.<sup>2</sup> For those in the South that had hoped that “the Church could have stretched her arms across the chasm of a great war, preserving the integrity of her ranks unbroken” and securing “a superb triumph for Christianity,” the Northern brethren had robbed Christ of His crown and had not only doomed the union of the Northern and Southern Presbyteries among the Old School Presbyterians, but had also committed an act “unconstitutional, Erastian, and tyrannical.”<sup>3</sup> Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a leading voice among Southern Presbyterians, later recalled that the question of allegiance to one government over another for a transnational communion lay “wholly within the domain of politics ... so that, even if not ejected by what was equivalent to an act of expulsion, the Southern Presbyteries were compelled to separate themselves, in order to preserve the crown rights of the Redeemer, and the spiritual

independence of His kingdom, the Church” (Palmer, 502). In Palmer’s eyes, even though the Spring Resolutions split the Northern Presbyteries from the Southern Presbyteries, the Southern Presbyteries were now at least free to establish a church that would remain focused on its spiritual mission and not speak out unlawfully concerning the political issues of the day.

Curiously, the ministers and elders of the Synod of South Carolina, meeting in November of 1861 in Abbeville, modeled for Palmer the proper care that a Christian church should take concerning political issues by refusing to make political resolutions—at least in their ecclesiastical capacity. However, this did not mean that the persons meeting at Abbeville completely abstained from the temporal and political. Rather, since the Synod of South Carolina had occasioned the gathering of so many South Carolina gentlemen, James Henley Thornwell took the opportunity to put forth a carefully worded declaration upon public affairs, in the form of the following four resolutions that he and Palmer thought stood in contrast to the haphazard actions of the General Assembly in May of that same year:

*Resolved*, 1. By the ministers and elders composing this Synod, not in their ecclesiastical capacity as a court of Jesus Christ, but in their private capacity, as a

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1. D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism*, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007, 154–55.

2. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South: 1861–1890*, vol. 2, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 14.

3. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D.*, Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875, reprinted in New York: Arno Press, 1969, 501–502.

convention of Christian gentlemen, that our allegiance is due, through the sovereign State to which we belong, and shall be rendered, to the Government of the Confederate States, as long as South Carolina remains in the number.

*Resolved*, 2. That the war which the United States are now waging against us, is unjust, cruel, and tyrannical, and in contravention of every principle of freedom, which their fathers and ours bled to establish.

*Resolved*, 3. That we are firmly persuaded, that the only hope of constitutional liberty, on this continent, is in the

success of the Confederate cause; and that we pledge ourselves, and we think we can safely say, the Presbyterian people of these States, to uphold and support the Government, in every lawful measure, to maintain our rights and our honour.

*Resolved*, 4. That we heartily approve of the appointment, by our President, of next Friday, as a day of fasting, humiliation and prayer (Palmer, 509–10).

For Palmer, the care that the Synod took to distinguish between the declarations, that the South Carolina Presbyterians made officially as ministers and then unofficially merely in their role as Christian citizens, exemplified the great lengths the Southern church ventured to keep “herself clear of all political complications” (Palmer, 510). Such care also demonstrates that many among the Southern Presbyterian clergy took seriously *both* their commitment to the spiritual mission of the church and their responsibility as earthly citizens to live righteously before God, hold society responsible for her sins, and think carefully about the most expedient ways to love their neighbors as themselves. It reveals a complex view of church and state that was far more than “merely a protective gesture during the slavery controversy,” and it shows that they were neither mere-spirituality men unconcerned with societal or political issues nor spirituality-denying theocrats, but dual citizens of the church and the state bound before God to carry out their responsibilities as members of both institutions.<sup>4</sup> One person whose writings bear out this variegated perspective further is James Henley Thornwell, the leading Southern Presbyterian of the time.

For the duration of his career, James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862) developed and championed the doctrines of *jure divino* Presbyterianism and the spirituality of the church, arguing that the church prescribed by Christ sufficed for the spiritual task that He had given it.<sup>5</sup> Thornwell devoted a great deal to these doctrines as a writing theologian because he identified an impulse in Northern evangelicalism to broaden the church’s mission beyond the spiritual to include societal and political reform, mixing the spheres of church and state in ways that would ruin them both. He also lamented the fact that his own communion delegated the grand task of gospel proclamation and church planting at home and abroad to extra-ecclesial boards when Christ had instituted His church for these very purposes. Against this Northern evangelical impulse to mix the sacred and the secular and the tendency of some of his fellow Old School Presbyterians to deny the sufficiency of Christ’s

4. E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795–1860*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978, reprinted in Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2007, 154. Jack P. Maddex argues that James Henley Thornwell and other antebellum Southern Presbyterians did not hold to the spirituality of the church doctrine, because they were theocrats that mixed church and state and gave the church a role in the reformation and preservation of Southern society. Maddex rightly points out that men like Thornwell considered Christianity the national religion and expressed Christian views of public policy. However, Maddex fails to define rightly the spirituality doctrine held by Thornwell and as a result fails to distinguish the church as an institution within the Christian religion and Christianity more broadly as a religion encompassing both the institutions of the church and the state. This paper will show that Thornwell recognized these distinctions and could thus consistently hold and remain faithful to the spirituality of the church on the one hand and also speak out on Christianity and societal issues on the other. See Jack P. Maddex, “From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State,” in *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (Winter 1976): 438–57.

5. For the latest full length treatment of Thornwell’s life, work, and thought, see James Oscar Farmer Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values*, Macon, GA: Mercy University Press, 1986. For a full length treatment of Thornwell’s ecclesiology and its relation to the state, see John Lloyd Vance, “The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell: An Old South Presbyterian Theologian,” Ph.D. diss., Drew University, Madison, N. J.: 1990. For a full length assessment of Thornwell from one of his contemporaries see Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*. For a briefer treatment of Thornwell’s life, thought, and impact upon Southern Presbyterianism see A. H. Freundt Jr., “Thornwell, James Henley (1812–1862),” in *Dictionary of the Presbyterian & Reformed Tradition in America*, ed. D. G. Hart and Mark A. Noll, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999: 261–62; John H. Leith, “James Henley Thornwell and the Shaping of the Reformed Tradition in the South,” in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey Jr.*, ed. Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong, Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1989: 424–47; and Paul Leslie Garber, “A Centennial Appraisal of James Henley Thornwell,” in *A Miscellany of American Christianity: Essays in Honor of H. Shelton Smith*, ed. Stuart C. Henry, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1963: 95–137. For an outline of Thornwell’s theology, see Morton H. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology*, Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1962.

church unintentionally through mission boards, Thornwell stood forth as a bulwark for the biblical fidelity of Presbyterian church government and the spiritual mission of the church. However, Thornwell was not merely a faithful minister of the Presbyterian church, employing his intellectual gifts on her behalf. Rather, he also grew up in South Carolina and, as one of the premier Southern theologians, became an important citizen and intellectual intent on defending his way of life from an outside world that, from his perspective, had much to say in opposition to Southern life, but had little to offer as a solution in its place.<sup>6</sup> In fact, as the strife among the North and the South, in both the ecclesial and political realms, reached an unsustainable boiling point, Thornwell also lent his intellectual gifts and rhetorical muscle to show that, in spite of the impaling judgments of outsiders, the South, by means of secession, would become a Christian confederacy better suited to express the benevolence of the Christian religion than any other nation in the world. When Thornwell's devotion to the church and his social concern as a Southerner are coupled together, a complex vision for a spiritual church and a Christianity confederacy emerges. This essay explores this vision and shows that Thornwell held that the church is a spiritual institution *and* that the confederacy ought to be explicitly Christian. He was able to hold these two seemingly contradictory positions together coherently because he distinguished between the church as an institution with a spiritual mission and Christianity as a religion that encompasses both institutions of the church and the state.

#### The Disparate Natures of Church and Society

For the duration of his career, Thornwell advocated a sophisticated view of the relationship of church and society based on the confessional standards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and what he envisioned as a straightforward reading of Scripture.<sup>7</sup> He propounded this view with tenacity and vigor, even against fellow Old School Presbyterians who shared his basic presuppositions because he recognized a tendency among American evangelicals, particularly the New School Presbyterians to the North, to reframe their key doctrines and ecclesiastical methodology both to fit and to capitalize on the spirit of the age. A survey of Thornwell's understanding of the church, view of fallen society, and criticism of Northern evangelicals demonstrates that at the foundation of Thornwell's view of church and society stood his conviction that the church prescribed by Christ in Scripture ultimately

does a better job of fulfilling the mission of the church than any other means.

#### THORNWELL'S OTHERWORLDLY ECCLESIOLOGY

Thornwell wrote often about the church and her mission, expressing his convictions concerning the offices and operations of the church and concerning slavery and other issues of the day. However, two recurring themes manifest themselves throughout his writings: *jure divino* Presbyterianism and the spirituality of the church. Thornwell's discussion of these doctrines illustrate his understanding of what Christ's church should be and what it should do in a fallen world while awaiting the world to come.

***Jure divino* Presbyterianism.** Thornwell believed that the Presbyterian form of church government was neither a matter of mere expediency nor the construction of human wisdom. Rather, he argued that it was set forth and mandated by Christ himself through the Scriptures. As a result, Thornwell averred that the "power of the Church is purely ministerial and declarative" and that the church exerts this power without the authority to regulate or make judgments upon her own discretion. Concerning this church prescribed by divine right, Thornwell wrote that she "is only to hold forth the doctrine, enforce the laws, and execute the government which Christ has given her. She is to add nothing of her own to, and to subtract nothing from, what her Lord has established."<sup>8</sup> From Thornwell's reading

6. James Oscar Farmer Jr.'s work on Thornwell and the synthesis of Southern values just prior to the Civil War explores the role outside opposition to Southern society played in the formation of a sophisticated defense of Southern life propounded by intellectuals such as Thornwell. Farmer argues that, while critical of Southern society early on, Southern intellectuals rose up against what they saw as Northern aggression to mount a profound intellectual defense of Southern society based upon an orthodox faith, a conservative approach to societal change, and an idealization of Southern society when compared with the North and the other societies of the world. He argues that this "metaphysical confederacy" was necessary in order for the actual confederacy to become a reality. See Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*.

7. John Lloyd Vance argues convincingly that, as much as Thornwell loved the Westminster standards, the Scottish Second Book of Discipline strongly influenced Thornwell's ecclesiology, especially as it regards his *jure divino* Presbyterianism and his spirituality of church doctrine. See Vance, "The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell," iii, 107–11.

8. James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell D. D., LL.D.*, vol. 4, ed. by B. M. Palmer, reprint Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1986 [c. 1875]: IV: 163. Hereafter Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, IV. For a more detailed account of *jure divino* Presbyterianism, see Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in*

of the Reformed tradition, this understanding of the prescribed church went back to “a cardinal principle of the Reformation,” that “whatever could not be traced to [the absolute perfection of the Scriptures] either directly or by necessary inference was denounced as a human invention—as mere will-worship, which God abhors” (Thornwell, IV: 163–64). This *jure divino* understanding of Presbyterianism colored much of Thornwell’s ecclesiastical works. He defended the view that ruling elders ought to take part in ordination services by laying their hands on new ministers because he saw this as necessary based on the teachings of the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, he argued that, while societies for moral reform may be a useful endeavor for Christian gentlemen to undertake, the church of Jesus Christ as an institution has no business supporting them monetarily or mandating Christian involvement, because Christ had not given such instructions in his word.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps the place where Thornwell’s *jure divino* doctrine shines forth most clearly, stressing his faith in the sufficiency of the prescribed church, is in his writings against his fellow Old School Presbyterians concerning church boards.<sup>11</sup>

In his *Argument Against Church-Boards*, Thornwell recognized that the present practice of his communion to appoint mission boards for the expansion of Christ’s kingdom at home and abroad stemmed from a proper desire to ameliorate a past evil.<sup>12</sup> He explains that the church rightly recognized the “first enormous and commanding evil of the voluntary societies [including mission boards]” as “their absolute independence of the authority and jurisdiction of the Church.” As a result, Thornwell explains that, “for years,” the church’s “efforts were directed to the single point that the

*Church*, as such, should have the control of all the spiritual enterprises of Christian benevolence.” From these efforts, Thornwell’s Old School Presbyterian communion adopted the practice of appointing the institutions that would send their missionaries, so that the church would be involved in such tasks (Thornwell, IV: 145–47). However, Thornwell still discerned a fundamental problem with church-appointed mission boards that undermined *jure divino* Presbyterianism and was an affront to Christ’s wisdom as sole Ruler of his kingdom.

The problem with mission boards, according to Thornwell, was that they comprised courts sanctioned neither by the church’s confessional standards nor the Scriptures and that they utilized officers as foreign to the Scriptures as cardinals and popes. Thus, while the church correctly recognized a problem with voluntary mission societies, they failed to find a solution that might reach to the source of the problem. Concerning the church’s decision to envelop mission boards under her wing, Thornwell wrote that it

never occurred to her to ask the question, whether what she does by an organization unknown to her Constitution is really any more done by her in her *ecclesiastical capacity*, than what she did by the voluntary societies. In her anxiety to throw off an abuse of the former system, she overlooked the inherent evils of the system itself and destroyed nothing but its voluntary character. Her Boards are only substitutes for the voluntary societies, and can no more justly be regarded as the *Church* than the Home Missionary Association or the American Education Society (Thornwell, IV: 147).

For Thornwell, church boards were inherently evil institutions, not because they sought to undertake a mission foreign to Scripture, but because they were not the means that Christ had prescribed for such a mission. According to Thornwell, “the only permanent officers in the Church of God ... are Bishops, Elders and Deacons,” and “the only courts are Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods and the General Assembly.”<sup>13</sup> These officers and these courts “embod[y] the leading principles of Church government established by the Apostles of the Lord.... Whatever, therefore, is not done by Elders and Ministers, assembled in some of the courts above mentioned, is not done by them as *Presbyterians*” (Thornwell, IV: 148–49).

For Thornwell, what mission board advocates among his fellow Old School Presbyterians failed to recognize was that extra-ecclesial boards, whether voluntary or appointed by the church, were unnecessary when Christ

*the South: 1607–1861*, vol. 1, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 510–29. Thompson’s assessment of *jure divino* Presbyterianism is helpful, but he makes an overstatement when he asserts that this view represents “a new conception of the church’s nature and mission” rather than a development of the doctrines of the Reformed tradition.

9. For Thornwell’s understanding of the role of elder as prescribed in Scripture, see Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, IV: 14–142.

10. For Thornwell’s understanding of the relationship, or lack thereof, between the church and societies for moral reform, see Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, IV: 467–78.

11. For Thornwell’s argument against church boards, see Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, IV: 143–296.

12. Thornwell’s *Argument Against Church-Boards* was first published in 1841 in the *Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*. It can be found in Thornwell’s *Collected Writings*, IV: 145–72.

13. For Thornwell, the term bishop signified an elder who was also set apart for the ministry of the Word and the administration of the sacraments. With regards to his authority to rule, Thornwell believed that the bishop, as an elder, had the same power as ruling elders, no more or no less.

had appointed the church *herself* to undertake the spiritual tasks of the kingdom. He argued that the “great object of a visible church-organization or definite system of church-government” prescribed by the Scriptures is “to put the Church in a situation, and provide her with all the necessary furniture of officers and means, for building up the kingdom of God and extending its conquests throughout the world” (Thornwell, IV: 163). Therefore, according to Thornwell, the real question concerning the debate over church boards was whether or not the church prescribed by Christ could accomplish the task given by Christ. His answer was that “the Church is adequate to do, through her Divine organization, all that in the Scriptures is enjoined to her” (Thornwell, IV: 193). He argues that Christ did not constitute the church so that the church could create means to fulfill his mission, but that the church prescribed by Christ “is herself the *very means* by which her glorious Head accomplishes His purposes in the world; and, therefore, as being ordained by Him, must be completely adequate to meet the ends in view” (Thornwell, IV: 210). Thus, to deny the sufficiency of the church prescribed by Christ is to charge him “with folly in all His arrangements” and to assert that “His plans” are “utterly defective and inadequate” (Thornwell, IV: 208). Finally, in spite of the popularity and apparent success of voluntary mission societies and church mission boards, Thornwell not only believed that the church was sufficient for her task, but that the church *herself* would, at the end of the day, do a better job of extending Christ’s kingdom than any other human institution. He wrote: “We must confine ourselves simply to what God has sanctioned, and rely for success upon His promises; and just as far His favour transcends in importance the applause of men, and his Spirit excels in efficacy the co-operation of mortals, so far may we hope that the success of scriptural measures will exceed the success of our present contrivances” (Thornwell, IV: 175). For Thornwell, the *jure divino* understanding of the church showed that the church was the sufficient, the best, and the only lawful means of fulfilling Christ’s mission for his people. Equally important to his ecclesiology, however, was the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Whereas the *jure divino* doctrine helped Thornwell understand what the church should be, the spirituality of the church steered his understanding of what the church should do.

**The Spirituality of the Church.** According to Thornwell, Christ gave his prescribed church a mission that is purely spiritual. Directly connected to the idea that the church should consist of only what is prescribed in

Scripture, Thornwell’s doctrine of the spirituality of the church stated that the church should only attend to the tasks that Christ has given her in His Word.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, when Thornwell looked at Scripture, he recognized that Christ had commanded the ministers of his church to preach the good news of salvation, to baptize, to administer the Lord’s Supper, and to plant churches, purely spiritual tasks not given to any other constituted body in human society. In a speech on African colonization, which Thornwell personally saw as a noble enterprise, Thornwell argued that it was not the business of the church to take part in such a pursuit, because it lay outside her proper sphere.<sup>15</sup> He explained that the “Church is exclusively a *spiritual* organization, and possesses none but spiritual power. It is her mission to promote the glory of God and the salvation of men from the curse of the law. . . . She has no mission to care for the things, and to become entangled with the kingdoms and the policy, of this world.” For this reason, as honorable and desirable as it might be for Christians in their capacity as members of society to take part in them, it “is not the business of the Church to build asylums for the insane and the blind.” Rather, “the Church deals with men *as men*, as fallen sinners standing in *need of salvation*; not as citizens of the Commonwealth, or philanthropists, or members of society” (Thornwell, IV: 473). Even though the church comprises a spiritual organization with a purely spiritual mission, Thornwell did believe that the church plays an important role in society. However, this role is indirect rather than direct.<sup>16</sup> He wrote that the church’s “mission is to bring men to the Cross, to reconcile them to God through the blood of the Lamb, to imbue them with the Spirit of the Divine

14. As with *jure divino* Presbyterianism, the doctrine of the spirituality of the church should be seen as a logical development if not direct continuation of the Reformed tradition. For a recent book that argues that the spiritual nature of the church is an important doctrine that runs through both church history and the Reformed tradition, see David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010. See also Vance, “The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell,” 365–70. For a work that argues that the spirituality doctrine was a departure from the Reformed tradition, see Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States*, Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1961.

15. Thornwell’s “Speech on African Colonization” was originally delivered in the General Assembly of 1859. It can be found in Thornwell’s *Collected Writings*, IV: 472–78.

16. Vance also comes to this conclusion. He writes: “The Christian’s influence upon society, according to Thornwell, is to be direct; the church’s indirect. It is the business of the Christians to make society; it is the church’s business to make Christians” (371).

Master, and then send them forth to perform their social duties, to manage society, and perform the functions that pertain to their social and civil relations” (Thornwell, IV: 473; italics added for emphasis). For Thornwell, Christian citizens make the best citizens because they obey the mandates of the state and attend to the needs of their neighbors from a new heart, while unbelievers obey the law from constraint and aspire after social prestige and success from selfish desire. Nevertheless, *the church* exists to warn sinners concerning the coming judgment, to announce the good news of forgiveness, and to baptize and teach converts those things that Christ has commanded.

For Thornwell, the church must stay true to her spiritual nature not only because she should obey the principles of *jure divino* Presbyterianism, but also because she handles matters that are eternal in nature rather than temporal. In an ordination sermon on the nature of church ministry, Thornwell argued for the necessity of the church’s ministerial office in a way that exemplified both the eternal nature and importance of the church and her spiritual mission.<sup>17</sup> Thornwell averred that “sinners hate the truth and will not come to it, and would willingly and gladly live in a total ignorance of it, and yet their eternal all depends upon a cordial acceptance and hearty approbation of the truth as it is in Christ. There must be men, therefore, set apart to hold it up before them, to enforce its claims with all the solemn sanctions of eternity” (Thornwell, IV: 564). For Thornwell, the object of Christian ministry, the ministry that belongs to the church, is not to reform society or fix the many ills that are common among men in a fallen, yet temporal world. Rather, a minister of the church exists “to persuade men to be reconciled to God through Christ, to persuade them to accept of the blessed Saviour in all His offices, and to rest upon Him and Him alone for ‘wisdom and righteousness

and sanctification and redemption” (Thornwell, IV: 565). As noble as it may be for Christian citizens to aid their neighbors by meeting their temporal needs and by thinking through important social issues that affect human life, the church as a prescribed institution and her ministers must remain focused on the inestimably more important matters that involve eternity.<sup>18</sup> Thornwell argued that the minister of the church “has in his hands the words of eternal life” and that “heaven or hell, life or death, eternal life and eternal death, depend on the success of his message” (Thornwell, IV: 571, 574). According to Thornwell, the spreading of this gospel message of the forgiveness of sins and the hope of eternal life makes up the important spiritual mission that Christ has given his prescribed church. When coupled with his doctrine of *jure divino* Presbyterianism, Thornwell’s ecclesiology can be summarized as the belief that the church that Christ prescribed comprises the sufficient, best, and only lawful means that Christ has given for the expansion of his spiritual kingdom throughout the earth through the proclamation of the gospel. Along with Thornwell’s *jure divino* and spirituality doctrines, a quick survey of Thornwell’s view of fallen society also demonstrates Thornwell’s belief that the church prescribed by Christ in Scripture ultimately does a better job of fulfilling the spiritual mission of Christ’s people than any other means.

#### THORNWELL’S VIEW OF FALLEN SOCIETY

For Thornwell, society in this present age is a fallen society and will remain a fallen society until Christ establishes the new heavens and the new earth wherein “the effects of transgression shall have been purged from the earth” (Thornwell, IV: 420). As fallen, Thornwell explained that society contains many natural ills like disease and death. It also contains structures that will not be carried over into the consummated state. Ruler and subject, master and slave, rich and poor are all class structures brought about and carried forward by the entrance of sin into this world and will not continue in the world to come. Thornwell wrote that, upon “an earth radiant with the smile of heaven, or in the Paradise of God, we can no more picture the figure of a slave than we can picture the figures of the halt, the maimed, the lame and the blind; we can no more fancy the existence of masters and tasks than we can dream of hospitals and beggars. These are the badges of a fallen world” (Thornwell, IV: 420). However, according to Thornwell, it does not follow that, since the world to come will be a perfect and glorious society, God intends for these structures to be eliminated in the present age. Moreover, as seen

17. Thornwell preached this sermon at John Douglas’s ordination on April 30, 1836. It can be found in Thornwell’s *Collected Writings*, IV: 562–77.

18. Thornwell did believe that the church possessed a spiritual office in the diaconate that provided for the temporal needs of Christ’s people. However, even the nature of this office highlights that spiritual mission of the church. Its purpose was to relieve ministers of temporal tasks so that they could focus on attending to the Scriptures and the message of salvation. Moreover, the office requires officers just as spiritually and morally qualified before God as teaching and ruling elders. For a survey and defense of the diaconate in Presbyterian history and church life, see C. N. Willborn, “The Diaconate: God’s Office of Temporal Affairs,” in *Confessing Our Hope: Essays in Honor of Morton Howison Smith on His Eightieth Birthday*, edited by Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn, Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2004, 153–80.

from Thornwell's *jure divino* and spirituality doctrines, it certainly does not follow that the church should attempt to reform or manipulate these societal structures, since Christ did not give his church this mandate and since the New Testament church did not set such an example. Rather, Thornwell argued that God is in the history of human society, guiding it along slowly, providing humankind opportunities to manifest his moral perfections in the many capacities in which humans beings find themselves. In fact, he averred that the societal structures and ills brought about by the fall of humankind could be turned into blessings in the providence of God. Thornwell wrote:

The Gospel does not propose to make our present state a *perfect* one—to make our earth a heaven.... The sterility of the earth is, no doubt, in itself considered, an evil; but in its relations to man, who has lost his integrity, and to whom labour has become a burden, it is a needful stimulus of industry, and is so overruled into a blessing. The distinction of ranks in society, in the same way, is an evil; but in our fallen world, an absolute equality would be an absolute stagnation of all enterprise and industry (Thornwell, IV: 420–21).

For Thornwell, God does not intend the leveling of all human relationships and societal structures, so that society itself might be fit for heaven. Rather, he intends for human beings to demonstrate their fitness for heaven through their faithfulness in whatever lot or role given to them in the providence of God, whether they be a king or subject, employer or contracted worker, or master or slave. Particularly speaking of slavery, Thornwell argued that, though “it is a natural evil which God has visited upon society, because man kept not his first estate, but fell ... under the Gospel,” slavery “is turned like all other natural evils into the means of an effective spiritual discipline” (Thornwell, IV: 420). According to Thornwell, God desires this spiritual liberty from sin produced by the gospel, leading men to become godly citizens, over any supposed freedom that comes from the reconstruction of society in a fallen world.

Thornwell's view of fallen society meshed well with his ecclesiology. Since godly citizens can manifest spiritual liberty produced by the gospel in any capacity—Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female—the church that preaches the gospel, in accordance with her spiritual mission, can thrive in any society, whether under a monarchy that reigns over its subjects, in an emerging industrial society dependent upon contracted labor, in a slaveholding society dependent upon slave labor, or

in an infidel nation that persecutes believers, as was the case with the early church. Regarding the early church that remarkably spread in the midst of periodic local and empire-wide persecutions, Thornwell wrote that, “when she expected nothing from the world but its malice, and asked nothing from the world but to be patiently heard,” “the Church of God ... gr[ew] and flourish[ed] and spread her conquests far and wide in the midst of scorn, persecution and reproach” (Thornwell, IV: 175).<sup>19</sup> For Thornwell, what the church needed was not cleverly devised structures created according to human wisdom, but the kind of faith in the prescribed church and her spiritual message possessed by the early church. In other words, for Thornwell, the church not only should not but also need not attempt to reform society for the advancement of the gospel because the church prescribed by Christ is sufficient, irrespective of outside societal structures, and provides the best means available for the spiritual task that Christ has given it. Furthermore, members of Christ's prescribed church can readily demonstrate their freedom in Christ to obey his laws at any level of society.

Thornwell's otherworldly ecclesiology and view of fallen society entail a distinct position concerning the most hotly debated social issue of the day—slavery. These views can be found in a report given by Thornwell at the Synod of South Carolina in 1851 and in a sermon that he preached late in the spring of 1850.<sup>20</sup> First, consistent with his ecclesiology, Thornwell taught that, when it came to slavery, the church should speak where the Scriptures speak and remain silent where they are silent. He wrote:

If the Church is bound to abide by the authority of the Bible, and that alone, she discharges her whole office in regard to Slavery, when she declares what the Bible teaches, and enforces its laws by her own peculiar sanctions. Where the Scriptures are silent, she must be silent too. What the Scriptures have not made essential to a Christian profession she does not undertake to make so. What the Scriptures have sanctioned she does not condemn (Thornwell, IV: 385–86).

19. Thornwell used this argument against those who supported church boards because of their expediency. Although Thornwell was not discussing his view of fallen society directly at this point, his argument demonstrates his conviction that, because the prescribed church is sufficient to perform its spiritual task, the gospel can advance, and the church can multiply, in any society.

20. Both the report and the sermon can be found in Thornwell's *Collected Writings*, IV: 381–436.

When it came to what the Scriptures actually said, Thornwell argued that they neither condemn slavery as a societal structure so evil that it must be abolished in this present age nor do they charge slaveholders with sin. Rather, the Scriptures “distinctly sanction it as any other social condition of man” through the example of Old Testament patriarchs, since the “Church was formally organized in the family of a slaveholder,” and through its positive instructions to masters and slaves in the New Testament (Thornwell, IV: 385). Moreover, Thornwell argued that the commands to masters and slaves are what pastors are to report to their congregations as ministers of the church who herald only the word of God. This conviction stemmed from and did not breach his spirituality doctrine.<sup>21</sup> He wrote that the church “cannot undertake to disturb the relation” between masters and slaves, because “the Bible . . . teaches that there are duties growing out of this relation—duties of the master and duties of the slave. The Church must enforce these duties upon her own members” (Thornwell, IV: 386). Even though he taught that the Bible sanctions slavery, Thornwell neither believed that abolitionists were unfit church members nor that they were wrong to oppose slavery, as long as they opposed it in the proper sphere and without charging their slaveholding brethren with sin. Thornwell argued that he was “far from insinuating that Abolitionists, *as such*, are unfit to be members of the Church.” Rather, he averred that “slavery may evidently be contemplated in various aspects—as a social arrangement, involving a distinction of classes, like Oriental caste, or European gradation of

21. Maddex uses Thornwell and other clergymen’s teachings regarding the moral duties of masters and slaves, as well as the moral duties of citizens to obey society’s laws, to argue that they were proslavery theocrats, who did not really hold to the spirituality of the church (Maddex, “From Theocracy to Spirituality,” 439–40). However, such teaching stemmed from their spirituality doctrine. After all, the spirituality doctrine, as held to by the Southern Presbyterians, did not require that they abstain from preaching something found in Scripture if it touched an issue that related to a political matter of the day as well. Rather, their spirituality doctrine required that they only command and be about the task of what Scripture commanded. Thornwell writes: “It is true that there is a point at which their respective jurisdictions seem to meet—in the idea of duty. But even duty is viewed by each in very different lights. The Church enjoins it as obedience to God, and the State enforces it as the safeguard of order” (IV: 449–50). While they believed that they could not require slavery of every society nor condemn slavery in any certain society because the Scriptures did not warrant it, Scripture did require them to relay to their hearers the moral duties that God required of his people within their various positions in society, whether master, slave, or citizen bound by the laws of the state. Whether or not people obeyed their moral duties before God concerned or gauged their spiritual status. It was thus a spiritual issue as addressed by the church and her ministers, not a political issue.

ranks; as a civil relation, involving rights and obligations corresponding to its own nature; as a political condition, bearing upon the prosperity, happiness and growth of communities.” For Thornwell, a church member, as a citizen of the state, could lawfully argue “in any or in all of these aspects,” opposing slavery “upon considerations of policy and prudence . . . without the imputation of sin upon the nature of the relation itself” (Thornwell, IV: 387). Nevertheless, when it came to the church as a prescribed institution and when it came to the church’s officers as officers, the church and Christians could speak only where the Scriptures have spoken.

As with his ecclesiology, Thornwell’s view of fallen society shaped his view of slavery. For Thornwell, slavery, like all social structures in this fallen age, provides human beings with an opportunity to manifest their spiritual liberty in Christ through relating to others in the way that Christ has commanded. He wrote that slavery “is one of the conditions in which God is conducting the moral probation of man—a condition not incompatible with the highest moral freedom, the true glory of the race, and therefore, not unfit for the moral and spiritual discipline which Christianity has instituted” (Thornwell, IV: 430). For Thornwell, slavery gives masters the opportunity to obey Christ through treating their slaves as fellow men deserving of dignity and respect and as perishing souls or beloved brothers in Christ desperately in need of the gospel. Likewise, slavery grants slaves the opportunity to honor, obey, and work for their masters as unto the Lord. In fact, although slaves may be looked upon with pity in this temporary age, he argued that slavery affords them the opportunity to exhibit faithfulness to Christ in an extraordinary way. Thornwell wrote that the “slave may be fitted, in his humble and, if you please, degraded lot, for shining as a star in the firmament of heaven. In his narrow sphere, he may be cherishing and cultivating a spirit which shall render him meet for the society of angels and the everlasting enjoyment of God” (Thornwell, IV: 430). Because the Scriptures upheld slavery through its positive sanctions to masters and slaves and because slavery as a social structure provided an avenue for masters and slaves to exhibit their devotion and obedience to Christ, Thornwell argued throughout his career as a minister for the *permissibility* of slavery. For Thornwell, a slave society was one of the many societies in which the church prescribed by Christ can sufficiently perform her spiritual task. In addition to Thornwell’s positive declarations concerning the church and society, Thornwell’s confidence in the sufficiency of a spiritual church can also be demonstrated through

his critique of the Northern evangelicals outside the Old School communion.

THORNWELL'S CRITIQUE OF NORTHERN EVANGELICALS  
Thornwell identified an impulse in Northern evangelicalism to broaden the church's mission beyond the spiritual to include societal and political reform, mixing the spheres of church and state in ways that would ruin them both. In his criticisms of this unholy alliance, Thornwell repeatedly accused the Northern evangelicals of getting lost in the spirit of the modern age, of emphasizing temporal liberty over spiritual liberty, and of setting the nation on a course that would destroy it and blind its churches to her spiritual mission. Whether they recognized it or not, for Thornwell, the Northern churches were attempting to manipulate society to fulfill the mission of the church, and, by doing so, they would advance neither society nor the kingdom of Christ.

First, Thornwell charged Northern evangelicals with adopting the progressive spirit of the modern age, ignoring the temperate and otherworldly nature of the New Testament Scriptures and the New Testament church. Concerning the Northern abolitionist desire to abolish slavery at all costs, Thornwell wrote that the "very same spirit of Rationalism, which has made the Prophets and Apostles succumb to philosophy and impulse in relation to the doctrines of salvation, lies at the foundation of modern speculation in relation to the rights of man. Opposition to Slavery ... has sprung from visionary theories of human nature and society" (Thornwell, IV: 393). Instead of blindly following the optimistic progressivism of the age, Thornwell pleaded with his Northern brethren to consider the example of the apostles before it was too late. He wrote:

We would earnestly and solemnly expostulate with those denominations at the North who have united in the outcry against us, and urge them to reconsider their steps in the fear of God and under the guidance of His Word. We ask them to take the Apostles as their guide. We are solemn and earnest, not only because we deplore a schism in the body of Christ, but because we deplore a schism among the confederated States of this Union (Thornwell, IV: 394–95).

For Thornwell, the Northern evangelicals had wedded the church's mission to the spirit of the age through their desire to reform society in their ecclesiastical capacity, and they had breached the bounds of the Bible, twisting Christianity from the message of eternal

life in the world to come into a tool for radical social reconstruction.<sup>22</sup>

Second, directly connected to the embracement of modern progressivism, Thornwell criticized Northern evangelicals for emphasizing temporal liberty over spiritual liberty, posing an extra-biblical argument that, when taken to its logical conclusion, would lead to an outcry against all social inequalities and eventually to socialism and communism. Thornwell explained that the "fundamental mistake of those who affirm Slavery to be essentially sinful is that the duties of all men are specifically the same.... A little attention to their reasoning puts it beyond doubt, that this is the radical assumption upon which they proceed—all men are bound to do specifically the same things" (Thornwell, IV: 422–23). As seen earlier, Thornwell argued that a person's liberty to have and do the same things as others is not what is important to God in this present age. Rather, God is concerned that persons demonstrate, in whatever role they find themselves, the spiritual liberty that comes when Christ enables a person to fulfill his commands through the work of the Holy Spirit. For Thornwell, such a biblical understanding of spiritual liberty would cause human beings to work along side each other in their various capacities with dignity and respect and in a harmonious manner. Masters would care for their slaves, knowing that they also have a master in heaven, and slaves would work for their masters as unto the Lord. In contrast, the temporary liberty desired by the Northern evangelicals would lead to social unrest and political radicalism. He wrote: "The argument, fully and legitimately carried out, would condemn every arrangement of society, which did not secure to all its members an absolute equality of position; it is the very spirit of socialism and communism" (Thornwell, IV: 423).<sup>23</sup>

22. Thomas S. Kidd posits a thesis consistent with Thornwell's charge that the Northern evangelicals had wedded Christianity to the spirit of the age. Kidd argues that "deists and evangelicals ... united around principles of religious freedom that were key to the success of the Revolution and that aided in the institution of a nation" (6). According to Kidd, one of the principles that deists and evangelicals united around was the idea that the creator God is "the guarantor of fundamental human rights." He argues that this key principle was carried on past the Revolution by deists and evangelicals in their criticisms of slavery (6–7). See Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*, New York: Basic Books, 2010. For an example of a Northern evangelical wedding the commands of the gospel to extra-biblical social issues, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *Charles G. Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996; and Paul E. Johnson, *A Shopkeeper's Millennium: Society and Revivals in Rochester, New York, 1815–1837*, revised edition, New York: Hill and Wang, 2004.

23. In another place, Thornwell wrote that such an argument "is as

Finally, along with leading to radical positions on national polity and eventual social unrest, Thornwell also argued that, in the immediate future, the Northern abolitionist outcries and ploys against slavery would destroy the union and blind the church to her spiritual mission. Thornwell wrote that, “in the sacred names of religion and liberty, private efforts have been made to turn the hearts of servants against their masters; and public institutions . . . have been treacherously converted into engines of sedition and organs of tumult. . . . The utter ruin of this vast imperial Republic is to be achieved as a trophy to the progress of human development” (Thornwell, IV: 400–01). Even worse than the destruction of a great temporary nation, however, Thornwell discerned that, by accommodating the church’s mission to the progressive spirit of the age, the Northern church would forget her true mission to liberate souls in her attempts to unbind bodies. Thornwell stated that, while the Northern churches sought to turn the earth into a heaven, he and other Southern ministers would devote themselves to the cause of saving souls. He wrote:

While they are wrangling about the distinctions of men according to the flesh, we shall go forward in our Divine work, and confidently anticipate, that, in the great day, as the consequence of our humble labours, we shall meet millions of glorified spirits, who have come up from the bondage of the earth to a nobler freedom than human philosophy ever dreamed of. Others, if they please, may spend their time in declaiming on the tyranny of earthly masters; it will be our aim to resist the real tyrants which oppress the soul—Sin and Satan (Thornwell, IV: 459–60).

Thornwell recognized that, when churches make it their task to reform this present world, they forget that their spiritual task is to prepare individual persons for the world that is to come. In other words, the church that goes beyond the bounds of what is prescribed in

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much the weapon of the socialist and leveler as of the Abolitionist, and the Church cannot accept it without renouncing the supremacy of the Scriptures; neither can she proceed, upon it, to excommunicate the slaveholder without fulminating her anathemas against the rich and the noble” (Thornwell, IV: 390).

24. Thornwell’s “Sermon on National Sins” can be found in his *Collected Writings*, IV: 510–48.

25. Thornwell’s memorial on the relation of the state to Christ was a paper that he submitted to the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America in December of 1861. He later withdrew the paper because there was not enough time for a full discussion on the matter. This paper can be found in Thornwell’s *Collected Writings*, IV: 549–56.

Scripture loses her drive and proves as insufficient for her spiritual task.

#### SUMMARY

A particular view of the church streamed through Thornwell’s *jure divino* and spirituality doctrines, his view of fallen society, and his criticisms of Northern evangelicals. In any society, whether esteemed by the state in a predominately Christian nation or brutally persecuted by unbelievers in a pagan nation, the church prescribed by Christ in Scripture is sufficient to fulfill the spiritual mission of Christ’s people. When she remains focused on her spiritual task and trusts in the wisdom of Christ and the efficacy of the Holy Spirit to bless the prescribed church, she is primed to blossom and spread the spiritual kingdom of Christ. However, when she abandons her spiritual mission and attempts, consciously or unconsciously, to manipulate society for the advancement of the gospel, she inevitably loses her focus and power.

#### Thornwell’s Vision for a Christian Confederacy

For a quarter of a century, Thornwell espoused the doctrines of *jure divino* Presbyterianism and the spirituality of the church and defended both the sufficiency and the purity of the church that his Lord had prescribed. However, as one of, if not, the most intellectually able of Southern clergymen, Thornwell also made declarations concerning the sectional rift dividing the nation in two. Just fifteen days after it became apparent that Abraham Lincoln would be the next president of the United States and just weeks prior to his state’s secession from the Union, Thornwell preached to the citizens of the nation wherein he pointed out sociological criticisms of the North.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, when the Southern Old School Presbyterians met for the first time a year later as the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, he penned a petition to the Confederate government, asked the nation’s leaders to make their commitment to orthodox Christianity official, and made his own hopes for a Christian confederacy vocal.<sup>25</sup> Such actions come not from a spirituality-denying theocrat. Rather, they emerge from a man that took seriously not only his duties in the church as a minister but also his duties before God as a citizen of the state. Moreover, there were several reasons for which Thornwell believed it his duty to address societal issues in his role as an influential Christian minister and for which he did not breach his spirituality principles while doing so.

First, Thornwell distinguished between the church

narrowly as an institution of Christ and Christianity broadly as the religion of Christ.<sup>26</sup> As seen above, Christ instituted the church, and she operates according to the way Christ commands in Scripture and has as her mission that which Christ has specifically given her. However, Christianity claims more broadly that Christ is not merely the Lord of the institutional church, but also that he is the ruler of all nations. Therefore, just as the church acknowledges that Christ is Lord, so also the state must officially acknowledge that just government is his ordinance and that all magistrates are his servants, "who must answer to him for the execution of their trust" (Thornwell, IV: 550).<sup>27</sup> Secondly, Thornwell held that the state is a moral body that will be held accountable for whether or not she acknowledges Christ's lordship and for whether or not she accomplishes the duties given to her (Thornwell, IV: 551). For this reason, as an influential citizen and expert in the Scriptures, Thornwell saw it as his responsibility to point out the shortcomings of the nation as well as the duty of the nation to acknowledge the reign of Christ.<sup>28</sup> Before he addressed the nation on their sins, Thornwell explained why he had the right to address the nation's citizens and thus why this did not transgress his spirituality doctrine. Thornwell explained: "As a citizen, a man, a member of the Commonwealth, [a minister] has a right to form and express his opinions upon every subject, to whatever department it belongs, which affects the interests of his race. As a man, he is as free as any other man; but the citizen must not be confounded with the preacher, nor private opinions with the oracles of God" (Thornwell, IV: 513). As a minister of the church, the minister should only command what Christ commands and should only seek to do the task that Christ has given him. However, as a citizen and in his capacity as a citizen, he, like other Christians, has the right and responsibility to point out the sins of the nation and to promote those practices most beneficial to the cause of justice. Thornwell afforded abolitionist citizens this right when he argued that they could oppose slavery upon the considerations of policy and prudence, but not on biblical demands, and he reserved for himself the right to critique the prudence of policies as well. Moreover, when Thornwell searched the Scriptures, he found that, in this present fallen age, God's justice did not call for the leveling of society, but did call for all men to be cared for, fed, and clothed. When compared to the North and European nations, Thornwell's opinion as a Christian citizen was that the Confederacy had greater potential to become a just, godly state than the North.

#### THE SUPREMACY OF SOUTHERN SOCIETY

As a minister, Thornwell argued for the permissibility of slavery based upon the fact that it was not forbidden in the pages of Scripture. However, as a Christian citizen with responsibilities to God as a member of the state, Thornwell argued that slavery was not only permissible, but when rightly practiced an expedient system for the care of laborers. In his sermon to citizens on a national day set aside for fasting and prayer, Thornwell argued that the South's slaveholding society provided for both the physical needs and the spiritual needs of laborers and preserved societal harmony in a way that exceeded Northern society whose economy relied upon free labor.<sup>29</sup> Concerning physical needs and social unrest, Thornwell argued that "where labour is free, and the labourer not a part of the capital of the country, there are two causes constantly at work, which, in the excessive contrasts they produce, must end in agrarian revolutions and intolerable distress" (Thornwell, IV: 539). One cause of social distress, for Thornwell, comes from "the tendency of capital to accumulate." He explained that when accumulated capital "does not include the labourer as a part, it will employ only that

26. Vance has a helpful discussion of Thornwell's distinction between Christianity and the church in his discussion of church and society ("The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell," 345–56). He concludes: "Something . . . must be kept in the forefront at all times if one is to be fair to Thornwell's thought on these matters, i.e., the Christian religion in all its relations is not confined to the church. The church per se is the missionary society of Christ, but Christians as a people are called to participate in all aspects of society" (347).

27. In another place he writes: "The State must be impressed with a profound sense of [God's] all-pervading providence, and of its responsibility to Him as the moral Ruler of the world. The powers that be are ordained of Him. From Him the magistrate receives his commission, and in His fear he must use the sword as a terror to evil doers and a praise to them that do well. Civil government is an institute of Heaven, founded in the character of man as social and moral, and is designed to realize the idea of justice" (IV: 514).

28. Although Thornwell believed the state should acknowledge the lordship of Christ and that its magistrates should fulfill the duties given them by God, Thornwell did not believe "that America had a special relationship to God as his covenant people" (Vance, "The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell," 309).

29. Although Thornwell critiqued free labor he was not against capitalism. Rather, Thornwell was among a group of Southern intellectuals, who sought to utilize slavery within the modern corporate state. See Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *Slavery in White and Black: Class and Race in the Southern Slaveholders' New World Order*, New York: Cambridge, 2008, 9–10. For an article that looks more closely at Thornwell's particular views on this issue, see Douglas Ambrose, "Statism in the Old South: A Reconsideration," in *Slavery, Secession, and Southern History*, ed. by Robert Louis Paquette and Louis A. Ferleger, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2000, 101–25.

labour which will yield the largest returns," because "it looks to itself, and not to the interest of the labourer." According to Thornwell, a second cause of social distress comes from "the tendency of population to outstrip the demands for employment." After all, a growth in labor both "reduces wages to the lowest point" and "leaves multitudes wholly unemployed." For Thornwell, these factors would eventually lead to a society divided between the very rich and the very poor. Thornwell wrote: "While the capitalist is accumulating his hoards, rolling in affluence and splendour, thousands that would work if they had the opportunity are doomed to perish of hunger. The most astonishing contrasts of poverty and riches are constantly increasing. Society is divided between princes and beggars." Finally, Thornwell argued that, if the excessive poverty that resulted from such a society were not properly handled, this system would inevitably lead to a social uprising. "There is a point at which," Thornwell wrote, "[the starving poor] will rise in desperation against a social order which dooms them to nakedness and famine, whilst their lordly neighbor is clothed in purple and fine linen, and faring sumptuously every day" (Thornwell, IV: 539–40).

While an economy that relied on free labor led the affluent to ignore the physical, much less the spiritual, needs of laborers and led to social unrest, a slaveholding society, by its very nature, guarded slaveholders from ignoring the needs of the population, thereby removing the cause of social upheaval. For Thornwell, the genius of slavery existed in the fact that it did not separate labor from capital. On the contrary, Thornwell explained that slavery converts labor into capital "by giving the employer a right of property in the labour employed" (Thornwell, IV: 540). As a result, Thornwell argued that, with slavery, "the master must always find work for his slave as well as food and raiment. The capital of the country, under this system, must always feed and clothe the country." Moreover, by feeding and clothing the country, hunger and nakedness would not result in revolution (Thornwell, IV: 541). Even more important than nourishing the physical needs of laborers, slaveholders were also in a better position to attend to the spiritual needs of their servants. For Thornwell, the slaveholder's laborers were not simply a means to an end to be discarded with whenever their work was no longer desired. Rather, slaves made up an integral part of the master's household, and, as a part of his household, they had been entrusted, body and soul, to his care. Thornwell wrote, "Our slaves are a solemn trust, and while we have a right to use and direct their labour, we are bound to feed, clothe and protect them, to give them

the comforts of this life, and to introduce them to the hopes of a blessed immortality" (Thornwell, IV: 544).

Thornwell believed that the Southern slaveholding society exceeded the Northern society when it came to the physical and spiritual well being of its subjects. He also declared that, in due time, the South would no longer be ridiculed by outsiders, but would provoke the nations to jealousy. "We cherish the institution," Thornwell wrote, "not from avarice, but from principle. We look upon it as an element of strength, and not of weakness, and confidently anticipate the time when the nations that now revile us would gladly change places with us" (Thornwell, IV: 539). In the face of abounding criticism, Thornwell possessed a confidence in his society and slave labor and both became a part of his vision for a Christian confederacy. However, Thornwell, the Christian citizen, not only believed that the South should employ an economy that promoted justice. Rather, he also believed that the Confederacy should make its allegiance to Christ official in order to be a truly Christian republic.

#### A TRULY CHRISTIAN REPUBLIC

Even though Thornwell had formerly lamented the disruption of the Union, the birth of the Confederate States of America brought with it fresh opportunities. One opportunity concerned a correction that could now be made to what was originally the Constitution of the United States but was now also the Constitution of Confederate States. In a petition that Thornwell penned on behalf of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, Thornwell wrote to his new governmental leaders that "the Constitution, admirable as it is in other respects, still labours under one capital defect. It is not distinctively Christian" (Thornwell, IV: 549). To correct this, Thornwell asked that the following be added to the portion of the Constitution that mandated liberty of conscience: "Nevertheless we, the people of these Confederate States, distinctly acknowledge our responsibility to God, and the supremacy of His Son, Jesus Christ, as King of kings and Lord of lords; and hereby ordain that no law shall be passed by the Congress of these Confederate States inconsistent with the will of God, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures" (Thornwell, IV: 556). Thornwell believed that the state was "lord of no man's conscience" and that "as long as he preserves the peace, and is not injurious to the public welfare" any man whether an atheist, deist, Muslim, or pagan should be able to live freely without constraint (Thornwell, IV: 552). However, the nation as a whole was a moral person as well, and

God required that it acknowledge its founder and lord as its sovereign. Thornwell believed that this change in the Constitution was of the utmost importance because, if disobedient to Jesus Christ, the lord of nations, this new nation was destined to fail as had the one from which it seceded. However, with Christ, the Confederate states could accomplish something the world had yet to see. Thornwell wrote: "Our republic will perish like the Pagan republics of Greece and Rome, unless we baptize it into the name of Christ.... We long to see, what the world has never yet beheld, a truly Christian Republic, and we humbly hope that God has reserved it for the people of these Confederate States to realize the grand and glorious idea" (Thornwell, IV: 555). Thornwell longed for the South to become a truly Christian nation that honored Christ as Lord and where justice reigned in the relations of men. He held to this vision because he recognized Christ as lord over both the church and the state and that he had duties before God unique to each institution.

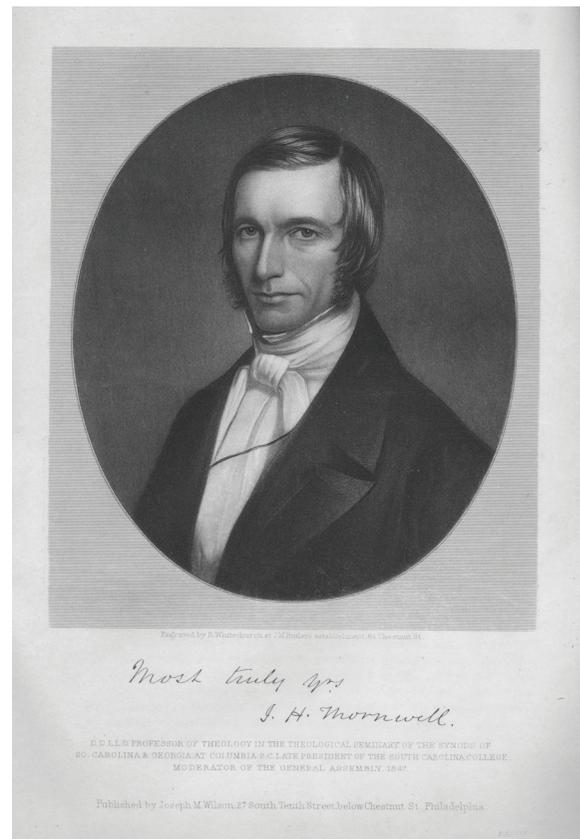
#### SUMMARY

As a churchman, Thornwell argued for the biblical fidelity of Presbyterianism and for the importance of the church to remain purely spiritual. As a Southerner, in distinction from his role as a churchman, Thornwell evaluated and esteemed his own society as potentially ideal amidst the differing societies of the world. This potential could be met if the masters and slaves would fulfill their mutual obligations to one another in love and if the confederacy would acknowledge officially the supremacy of Christ as the ruler of the nations. Thornwell did not see his role as a citizen of the state as impeding upon his role as a churchman because he had duties before God that were unique to each God-ordained institution. As long as he kept these two responsibilities distinct, one commitment did not transgress another.

#### Conclusion

As with Thornwell's four resolutions adopted by the Synod of South Carolina in December of 1861, Thornwell's writings show that he took his duties as a Christian minister *and* as a citizen seriously and that he was dedicated to the progress of the church *and* to the prosperity of his nation. As a dedicated churchman, Thornwell championed the doctrines of *jure divino* Presbyterianism and the spirituality of the church and argued that the church prescribed by Christ is sufficient for the spiritual task that he has given her. These doctrines were not a smokescreen for the perpetuation of slavery, but deeply

held religious beliefs rooted in Presbyterian tradition and Scripture. These beliefs guarded his words from the pulpit, shaped his convictions about voluntary societies and church boards, and molded his ideas concerning the role of the Christian minister. As a dedicated citizen, Thornwell also longed for the state to acknowledge Christ as Lord and for the cause of justice to flourish. Moreover, when his state neared secession and finally became a part of a new nation, he expressed his vision for a Christian confederacy as a concerned member of the commonwealth. From these varying desires and duties, Thornwell constructed a complex vision for both a spiritual church and a Christian confederacy, a vision that, for Thornwell, was worth the effort it took to uphold. ■



Engraving of J. H. Thornwell (circa 1857), courtesy of The PCA Historical Center, Saint Louis, Missouri. Used with Permission.