

## Old Princeton and American Culture: Insights from J. W. Alexander

By Gary Steward

The theologians of Old Princeton have often been criticized for their perceived accommodation to certain aspects of American intellectual culture, and yet few historical studies have been done which examine the Princeton theologians within their broader social and cultural contexts. Drawing mainly from the personal letters of James W. Alexander, this paper explores some of the major aspects of one Princetonian's interaction with antebellum American culture. While the contributions of Alexander have often been neglected, his candid reflections on the events of his day give us many important insights that are relevant for understanding the Princetonians as a whole and the relationship of their thought to the nineteenth century. After exploring the broad outlines of Alexander's social, political, and cultural views, this paper concludes that the Princetonians may not have been as naïvely enculturated to nineteenth century American thought as has often been supposed.

“Old Princeton” (Princeton Theological Seminary from 1812–1929) had a profound role in the shaping of American evangelicalism. Its learned faculty left their mark upon thousands of clergymen across a whole range of denominations, and the writings they left behind continue to provide an exemplary model of learning and piety.

In the minds of many, however, the theologians of Old Princeton accommodated their theology to certain aspects of American intellectual culture. As such, they are not to be regarded as faithful proponents of the Reformed tradition. Mark Noll has stated that the Princeton theologians “adapted” their theology to their cultural environment and to a great extent “sailed along with the American intellectual mainstream...”<sup>1</sup> John W. Stewart has stated that the Princeton theology was “Americanized” by its interaction with American intellectual and cultural trends.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, Andrew

Hoffecker has stated that the Princeton theologians were naïve about the impact of culture on one's theology and that “they displayed little sensitivity to historical conditions shaping doctrines and to the necessity of contextualizing faith for each generation.”<sup>3</sup> Many others have built on these perspectives to form a popular consensus that the Princeton theologians were culturally naïve and uncritically co-opted by the broader American culture of which they were a part.

The posthumously-published letters of James Wad- del Alexander (1804–1859) challenge this understanding of Old Princeton's relationship to American culture.<sup>4</sup> Few people today know of Alexander, but he was a

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THE AUTHOR: The Rev. Gary Steward served as pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in St. John's, Newfoundland, Canada from 2004–2011. He is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in Church History and Historical Theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He received his Th.M. in Historical Theology from Westminster Theological Seminary (PA), where his thesis focused on J. W. Alexander and his views on Christian social reform. He co-authored a curriculum for youth on biblical manhood and womanhood with Children Desiring God, entitled: *Rejoicing in God's Good Design*, and he is the author of a forthcoming book from P&R, called *Old Princeton: A Guided Tour of Its Leading Men and Their Writings*.

1. Mark A. Noll, ed., *The Princeton Theology, 1812–1921* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983), 35. Noll understands much of the theology in antebellum America as “Americanized” and heavily influenced by distinctly American thought. See Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

2. John W. Stewart, *Mediating the Center: Charles Hodge on American Science, Language, Literature, and Politics* (Princeton: Princeton Theological Seminary, 1995), 113.

3. W. Andrew Hoffecker, “Princeton Theology” in *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, ed. Daniel G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 941.

4. Upon Alexander's death, two volumes containing over eight hundred letters were published by Alexander's regular correspondent, John Hall. These letters span the years 1819–1859 and were thus published under the title, *Forty Years' Familiar Letters of James W. Alexander, D.D.* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1860).

prominent member of Old Princeton's inner circle. Raised and educated in Princeton, his varied career saw him in pastorates in Virginia, New Jersey, and New York City. For eleven years Alexander served as the Professor of Rhetoric and *Belles Lettres* at Princeton College. For the better part of three years, he also served as Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton Seminary. While Alexander published numerous books, his greatest theological

contribution consists of his numerous articles written for the *Princeton Review*.<sup>5</sup> These pieces reveal the extent of his scholarship,<sup>6</sup> but it is his letters that shed the brightest light upon the relationship of Old Princeton to American culture. While often overlooked, these letters provide a unique window into how the Princeton theologians interacted with their contemporary culture.<sup>7</sup> Since they were never intended for publication, the letters provide candid comments about antebellum America just as Alexander saw it and reported it to his close friend, John Hall.<sup>8</sup>

This paper will explore three areas of antebellum American culture on which J. W. Alexander commented extensively in his letters to Hall. Alexander's comments shed light on Old Princeton's relationship to American culture and challenge the prevailing notion of its uncritical enculturation.

#### ALEXANDER AND AMERICAN POLITICAL CULTURE

America during the "Second Party" Era (1828–1854) has been called "the Age of Jackson," and during this period political sentiments in America were moving strongly in a populist, democratic, and egalitarian direction.<sup>9</sup> Older ideas of social stratification were in decline, and the electorate was being quickly expanded to include more classes of people.<sup>10</sup> While pastoring in southern Virginia, Alexander found his support of Jackson's rival, John Quincy Adams, to be quite out-of-step with his Virginia parishioners. In 1826, Alexander wrote: "I have never yet met with a friend of Adams in this State."<sup>11</sup> Later he would meet rare individuals in Virginia who were "bold enough to advocate the cause of Adams and patriotism in the midst of this perverse and Jacksonian generation," but such encounters were rare.<sup>12</sup> It was during these days that Alexander wrote to Hall: "I do not think it by any means incumbent upon me as an Adams man, or consistent as a preacher, to talk much about politics, but I am sorely vexed from day to day at the enormities of the opposition. My ears are forever ringing with the cant which has become so current on this subject."<sup>13</sup> As Jacksonian fervor continued to build, Alexander would write about "being hemmed in with political heretics" in Virginia.<sup>14</sup> Back in Princeton, Alexander would hear from his own family about the enthusiasm for Jackson which was sweeping the country:

I suppose Archibald<sup>15</sup> in the plenitude of his Jacksonianism has informed you that Princeton is ornamented with a Hickory pole, in the most conspicuous part of the village. It is strange to see with what phrenetic zeal

5. Mark Noll states that Alexander "contributed more material to the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* than anyone else except Charles Hodge" (Noll, *The Princeton Theology*, 16).

6. Charles Hodge eulogized Alexander by stating: "Probably no minister in our Church was a more accomplished scholar. He was familiar with English literature in all periods of its history. He cultivated the Greek and Latin, French, German, Italian, and Spanish languages.... He was an erudite theologian. Few men were more conversant with the writings of the early fathers, or more familiar with Christian doctrine in all its phases" (Charles Hodge, "[Memorial] Sermon," in Charles Hodge and John Hall, *Sermons Preached Before the Congregation of the Presbyterian Church, Corner of Fifth Avenue and Nineteenth Street, at the "Memorial Services," October 9, 1859. Appointed in Reference to the Death of their Late Pastor, James Waddell Alexander, D. D.* [New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1859; repr., *Mourning a Beloved Shepherd: Memorial Sermons for James W. Alexander*, Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004], 28).

7. John W. Stewart has rightly observed that these volumes of letters contain "a gold mine of insights about the Princeton theologians' participation in American culture" ("Introducing Charles Hodge to Postmoderns," in *Charles Hodge Revisited: A Critical Appraisal of His Life and Work*, ed. John W. Stewart and James H. Morehead [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002], 9).

8. Alexander began writing regular letters to Hall as a young man and kept up his correspondence with Hall for the duration of his life. Hall published these letters at the instigation of Charles Hodge shortly after Alexander's death. Theodore Cuyler in 1879 lauded Alexander's letters with these words: "James Hamilton, of London, once said to me that a perusal of them [Alexander's letters] was the next best thing to a visit to America. The most brilliant Bishop in the Methodist Church also said to me that he regarded it as one of the dozen most remarkable works yet produced in this country! To the future historian it will be as valuable a picture of the times as Pepys' Diary and Burnet's Memoirs were to Lord Macaulay" (Theodore L. Cuyler, "Address on James Waddell Alexander, D.D.," in *The Alexander Memorial* [New York: Anson D. F. Randolph, 1879], 23–24).

9. See Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Jackson* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1945); and John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955).

10. See Robert J. Steinfeld, "Property and Suffrage in the Early American Republic," *Stanford Law Review* 41 (1989): 335–376.

11. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:95. Alexander's family derived from Virginia, but his political views differed sharply from those prevalent in his ancestral state.

12. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:37.

13. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:99.

14. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:107.

15. This is a reference to Alexander's younger brother, Archibald.

the Hickories are traversing all the country. Invasion or civil war could scarcely produce a greater fermentation among the populace. My fear is that New Jersey will give her vote for the Chieftain; and indeed, further, that he will be our President.<sup>16</sup>

Jackson did go on to prevail against Adams in the election of 1828; but while a wide sweep of Americans were embracing notions of social equality and democratic populism, Alexander was in the dissenting minority.

Alexander's political views, like those of Charles Hodge, were those of the Federalists of the previous generation.<sup>17</sup> Of the Federalists, Richard Carwardine has said: "Guided by a vision of a hierarchical society, and shivering at the tremors of emerging democracy, Federalists valued religion, education, and the law as the means of maintaining a harmonious and controllable social order."<sup>18</sup> Even as the Federalist Party was fading away in the 1820s, Alexander was reading John Adam's 1787 *Defense of the American Constitution* with great enthusiasm.<sup>19</sup> Edmund Burke also captured Alexander's attention, and Alexander referred to him as "the most fascinating and commanding of writers on Government."<sup>20</sup> He also expressed appreciation for the British writer Hannah More and her writings against the French Revolution.<sup>21</sup>

As a political "conservative," Alexander viewed the agitators of the French Revolution and the proponents of Jacksonian democracy in America alike with great concern. He saw a connection between the populist ferment produced by Jacksonian democracy in America and the mobs that clamored in the streets of revolutionary Paris. Both movements were the product of rebellion, godlessness, and unbelief, and both were to be rejected.<sup>22</sup> After reading the British social commentary contained in Basil Hall's *Travels in North America*, Alexander commented in 1829 that "I accede to many of his political doctrines and join in his abomination of absolute democracy."<sup>23</sup> Preferring a government which balanced the sentiments of the various social classes, Alexander would say in 1836: "Democracy and I are less and less friends every day I live."<sup>24</sup> Again, in 1843 he would write: "I am opposed to all ultra-democracy."

All in all, Alexander opposed the great societal forces of egalitarian populism and "ultra-democracy" that were sweeping America during the "Age of Jackson." In Alexander's mind, the political shift toward democratic egalitarianism was due to secular ideology and atheistic philosophies.<sup>25</sup> In the area of political thought, Alexander clearly stood apart from what was a dominant force in antebellum America.

#### ALEXANDER ON AMERICAN "UTOPIAN SOCIALISM" AND TRADE UNIONISM

In antebellum America there were numerous attempts to set up collectivist communities as a means of social reform. Many of these communities were secular in nature, held together by an optimistic philosophy of economic cooperation and social harmony. The communal rejections of free-market individualism in this period have been called "utopian socialism." Alongside this movement, trade unionism was also beginning to take root in antebellum America, holding out the promise of better wages and a better life to the working class. Just as Alexander rejected the "ultra-democracy" of the Jacksonian era, so too did he reject these two forms of economic egalitarianism and collectivism.

A leading proponent of utopian socialism in America was Robert Owen. When Owen first came from Scotland to America in 1824, he was received by a favorable

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Alexander also differed with the political views of his brother William Cowper Alexander, who was among "the first stump speakers" in New Jersey and who campaigned actively for Andrew Jackson in the 1828 election ("Biographical Sketch of Col. Alexander," 1856[?], Alexander Family Collection, 3:1, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ). William was later elected to the New Jersey legislature as a Democrat (the party of Jackson), and ran unsuccessfully as the Democratic candidate for Governor of New Jersey. For more on William Cowper Alexander, see John Frelinghuysen Hageman, *History of Princeton and Its Institutions* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1878), 1:351–354.

16. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:113.

17. Archibald Alexander Hodge, *The Life of Charles Hodge, D.D., LL.D.* (London: T. Nelson, 1881), 230. The Federalists believed in a strong central government. They were pro-British in their sentiments and did not look favorably upon the French Revolution. For more on the Federalist Party and the period of their predominance, see Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

18. Richard J. Carwardine, "The Politics of Charles Hodge," in Stewart and Morehead, *Charles Hodge Revisited*, 257.

19. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:125–126.

20. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:103.

21. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:117, 220, 240.

22. The religious views of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, both supporters of the French Revolution, likely affected the assessment of many like Alexander. Alexander referred to Jefferson as an "infidel" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:279) and had a similar appraisal of Thomas Paine. Regarding a birthday celebration for Paine held by the Society of Free Inquirers, Alexander stated: "It is a horrible outrage upon the moral and religious public" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:122).

23. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:134.

24. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:239.

25. This conclusion is similar to that expressed by Christian historian C. Gregg Singer. See C. Gregg Singer, *A Theological Interpretation of American History*, 3rd ed. (Greenville, SC: A Press, 1994), 24–91.

press as a philanthropist, obtaining an audience with politicians at the highest levels, including President Monroe and ex-presidents Jefferson and Madison.<sup>26</sup> In 1825, President-elect John Quincy Adams gave Owen permission to deliver two special addresses in the Capitol building, which Adams himself attended.<sup>27</sup> President Adams even displayed in the White House a six-foot-square architectural model of a village designed by Owen to bring about his vision of a “New Moral World” in America.<sup>28</sup>

Another utopian socialist was Charles Fourier, a French social theorist. Fourier’s ideas were popularized and adapted for an American audience by Arthur Brisbane, and Fourierism quickly found adherents among such notables as Horace Greeley, William Henry Channing, and Parke Godwin.<sup>29</sup> When the Transcendentalist community in Brook Farm, Massachusetts, adopted Fourierism in the late 1830s, Fourierism spread even further, attaching itself to the Transcendentalist movement as a whole.<sup>30</sup> Between 1843 and 1858, at least twenty-eight Fourierite “phalanxes” were established in America, directly involving at least 15,000 people.<sup>31</sup>

While utopian socialism may have existed only in

26. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 293.

27. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 294.

28. Pitzer, “The New Moral World of Robert Owen and New Harmony,” 96–98.

29. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 498. See also Carl J. Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative: Fourierism in Nineteenth-Century America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 25–34.

30. For more on the relation between Fourierism and Transcendentalism in antebellum America, see Guarneri, *The Utopian Alternative*, 44–59.

31. Carl J. Guarneri, “Brook Farm and the Fourierist Phalanxes” in *America’s Communal Utopias*, ed. Donald E. Pitzer (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 167. For a list of Fourierist communities, see the appendix in Pitzer, *America’s Communal Utopias*, 460–461.

32. Quoted in Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *Religious History of the American People*, 491.

33. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 292–293.

34. Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 1:375.

35. Guarneri, “Brook Farm and Fourierist Phalanxes,” 168.

36. Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 1:392. For more on Parke Godwin, see Carlos Baker, “Parke Godwin: Pathfinder in Politics and Journalism,” in *The Lives of Eighteen from Princeton*, ed. William Thorp (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 212–231.

37. See James W. Alexander, *Discourses on Common Topics of Christian Faith and Practice* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1858; repr., *A Shepherd’s Heart: Sermons from the Pastoral Ministry of J. W. Alexander*, Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), 23–24; James W. Alexander, *Thoughts on Family Worship* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Education, 1847), 103.

38. Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 1:376.

39. Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 549.

pockets of antebellum American culture, the concern for social reform and the optimistic humanism it embodied were widespread. According to Ralph Waldo Emerson, “We are all a little wild here with numberless projects of social reform. Not a reading man but has a draft of a new community in his waistcoat pocket.”<sup>32</sup> Far from being a fringe movement, utopian socialism embodied the secular and egalitarian ideals that were increasingly popular in the age of Jackson.<sup>33</sup>

Utopian socialism was not a distant phenomenon to Alexander and Old Princeton. Alexander wrote to Hall in 1844 that: “Brisbane, the Fourierist, and some aids, are looking out for a farm of a thousand acres in this neighbourhood [of Princeton], whereon to exemplify their socialism.”<sup>34</sup> Brisbane was successful in his search, and along with Horace Greeley, he did in fact establish a commune not far from Princeton.<sup>35</sup> As Fourierism progressed, Alexander noted that even Princeton alumni were being attracted to it. Writing to Hall that same year, Alexander stated: “Parke Godwin, the leading Fourierite, is an alumnus of the College and Seminary. Cooke represents the scheme as becoming formidable, from the numbers taken in.”<sup>36</sup> In spite of its appeal to some connected with Princeton, Alexander rejected utopian socialism as incompatible with biblical Christianity.<sup>37</sup> By seeking to make the commune the basic social unit, Alexander believed that utopian socialism would destroy the family unit it sought to replace. Writing to Hall he would say: “These Fourier-systems would make every one live in public, and obliterate little family-circles, and all that we call Home.”<sup>38</sup>

Another movement promoting social and economic egalitarianism in antebellum America was trade unionism. Although trade unions had only a limited following in antebellum America, they too drew the alarm of Alexander, who saw them closely linked to the socialist thought of Fourier and Owen.<sup>39</sup> Writing to Hall in 1830, Alexander stated:

The movements of the Jacobin party calling themselves...the “Working Men,” give me unfeigned alarm, more than any threats of disunion, or violence of mere party rage. If we love our country, something must be done. It will not do to despise so formidable an array. They are indeed, with us, not the dregs, but in the exercise of their elective franchise, the *primum mobile* of this nation. The Godwinism, Owenism...which possesses them, may ruin us. Could not a series of “Letters to Working Men” be put in some popular journal commending honest labour, asserting the rights of mechanics, etc., but unveiling the naked deformity of this

levelling system? Could not you serve your country, by doing something of the sort? It would be arduous, but by so doing, you would deserve well of posterity. No better work, I truly think, could just now engage any honest patriot.<sup>40</sup>

In 1836, Alexander continued to hope that someone might counter trade unionism among the working classes: "It occurs to me that a tract might be written in the dialogue form, after the model of [Hannah] More's *Village Politics*, against the trades unions..."<sup>41</sup> Eventually Alexander took it upon himself to write a series of newspaper articles under the penname "Charles Quill" to answer the growing trade union movement. Writing to Hall in 1838, Alexander stated: "By recourse to the 'Newark Daily' you will see some able papers, by a great political economist [Charles Quill, i.e. himself], on 'Trades Unions.'"<sup>42</sup> His opposition to trade unions could not be stated more forcibly than in this series of articles.

#### ALEXANDER ON AMERICAN SLAVERY

On the issue of slavery, Alexander's letters also illustrate how countercultural his thinking was to many strands of antebellum American culture. As a student at Princeton Seminary, Alexander wrote to Hall regarding his plans for relocation after seminary: "[M]y feelings and prepossessions would lead me southward, but slavery appalls me."<sup>43</sup> Despite these sentiments, Alexander was in fact settled in slave-holding Virginia for his first pastoral charge in 1827, and while there he saw firsthand the moral and intellectual degradation that slavery left in its wake. Writing to Hall in 1835, Alexander stated as part of his considered position: "I abhor slavery, and think the public mind should be enlightened, and every lawful means immediately taken for an eventual and speedy abolition."<sup>44</sup>

Even though he desired the abolition of slavery, Alexander rejected the abolitionist movement of his day. He had many reasons for doing so, the first being its radicalism and blanket condemnation of all slaveholders—including those he had come to know and respect in Virginia.<sup>45</sup> Alexander saw a sharp contrast between the militant abolitionism of his day and the temperate efforts of earlier abolitionists like William Wilberforce, whom he appreciated.<sup>46</sup> In Alexander's eyes, the

abolitionists were guilty of bringing needless division and strife to the nation.<sup>47</sup> He also noted how churches

41. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:240.

42. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:266. Alexander's articles on trade unions can be found in Gary Steward, "James W. Alexander's Christian Social Reform in Its Antebellum American Context" (ThM thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 2010), 145–165.

43. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:37.

44. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:228.

45. Alexander never made a blanket condemnation of slaveholders. From his initial introduction to slave society, Alexander developed a sense of sympathy for slaveholders, recognizing the practical difficulties that hindered many of them from freeing their slaves. Writing to Hall in 1826, Alexander stated: "You hear daily complaints on the subject [of slavery] from those who have most servants. But what can they do? Slavery was not their choice. They cannot and ought not to turn them loose. They cannot afford to transport them; and generally the negroes would not consent to it. The probable result of this state of things is one which philanthropists scarcely dare contemplate" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:93). After leaving the South in 1828, Alexander continued to maintain his friendships with Southern slaveholders through occasional visits to Virginia (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:19). As he and his family were waited on by slaves at a Virginia plantation during one stay in 1842, Alexander felt his sympathies only deepen for his slave-holding friends. He reflected on this experience in a letter written to Hall, stating: "I am more and more convinced of the injustice we do the slaveholders. Of their feelings towards their negroes I can form a better notion than formerly, by examining my own towards the slaves who wait on my wife and mind my children. It is a feeling most like that we have to near relations" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:352). See also Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:309; Alexander, *Thoughts on Family Worship*, 70–71). When Alexander journeyed abroad in 1851, he expressed frustration with what he considered to be English ignorance of slaveholding in America. He wrote to Hall: "They [English Christians] all have the grossest views of our slavery, and lose temper when spoken to" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:154). Out of this frustration, he refused to attend the meetings of evangelical organizations in England which excluded slaveholders. Writing again from England in 1851, Alexander stated to Hall: "The Christian Evangelical Alliance meets on the 20th, and lasts twelve days. I do not expect to go, after their acts concerning American slave-holders. I declared to Dr. Hamilton that whatever my private opinions were on slavery, I would sit in no body where my Southern brethren were excluded..." (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:339).

46. James W. Alexander, "The Life of William Wilberforce," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 10 (1838): 571.

47. Alexander, "Life of William Wilberforce," 572. Garrison's political anarchism is widely recognized by historians. He once called the United States Constitution, "a covenant with death and an agreement with hell" (Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 651). He also publicly burned a copy of the Constitution on July 4, 1854, stating, "So perish all compromises with tyranny" (Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* [New York: Harper Collins, 1997], 447). For more on Garrison's political anarchism, see David Torbett, *Theology and Slavery: Charles Hodge and Horace Bushnell* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 143. Upon hearing Frederick Douglas in 1847, Alexander described his speech as follows: "It was Catilinarian and treasonable. He said, up and down, that he despised and hated the country and the Constitution, and invoked the aid of England" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:69).

40. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:145–146. The words "Jacobin" and "*sans culottism*" have reference to the revolutionary parties and ideology of the French Revolution. For more on the "Working Men" political parties and their connection with trades unions, see Howe, *What Hath God Wrought*, 539–548.

across the nation were being harmed by abolitionists, as racial tensions between whites and blacks were being inflamed by abolitionist rhetoric.<sup>48</sup>

Another reason why Alexander rejected abolitionism was because it was connected, in his mind, with the same anti-Scriptural egalitarianism he saw in trade unionism, utopian socialism, and the “ultra-democracy” of his day. Alexander saw the social anarchism of the

48. As tensions rose between black and white believers in Princeton, Alexander wrote to Hall in 1837: “. . . in consequence of the abolition movements the prejudice of the lower classes of whites against the [free] blacks has become exorbitant and inhuman” (Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 1:260). Alexander was aware of disruptions being caused by abolitionists in other churches as well (Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 1:251).

49. Alexander, “Life of William Wilberforce,” 571. David Calhoun concludes that the Princetonians’ commitment to “a stable and hierarchical society” and their sense of alarm at the “terrors of the French Revolution and the disorders of Jacksonian democracy” kept them from supporting the abolitionist cause (David B. Calhoun, *Faith and Learning, 1812–1868*, vol. 1 of *Princeton Seminary* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994], 327).

50. Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 2:52.

51. Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 2:65.

52. William Lloyd Garrison rejected the authority of Scripture, crediting Thomas Paine’s influence for his views on the Bible. Mark Noll quotes Garrison as stating: “To say that everything contained within the lids of the Bible is divinely inspired, and to insist upon the dogma as fundamentally important, is to give utterance to a bold fiction, and to require the suspension of the reasoning faculties. To say that everything in the Bible is to be believed, simply because it is found in that volume, is equally absurd and pernicious” (Mark Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* [Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006], 31).

53. When the politician John Randolph granted his slaves freedom in his will, Alexander made the following comments to Hall: “They adored him [Randolph] as almost above the human standard, and preferred being his slaves to being free. It is perhaps (after all our abstractions) better for these negroes, as a set, that they are not freed. I say this seriously, founding my judgment on the following striking fact: Richard and John Randolph were brothers, and divided between them the estate of their father. Each took a moiety of the slaves. Richard set his free: John retained his on the estates. Col. Madison published the history of the former moiety and their offspring. They have almost become extinct; those who remain are wandering and drunken thieves, degraded below the level of humanity, and beyond the reach of Gospel means. The slaves of Roanoke are the descendants of the other moiety. They are nearly four hundred, and though not free, are sleek, fat, healthy, happy, and many of them to all appearance ripe for heaven. These I know to be facts, and they are worth more to me than a volume of dissertations on the right to freedom” (Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 1:270, cf. 271). As Alexander observed the difficulties of the Irish and the freed blacks as a pastor in New York City, he stated: “I can’t help thinking how much better off the Southern slaves are, physically and morally, than the Irish. Who ever heard of slaves starving until the master starved? . . . The wretchedest portion, by far, of the black race, is the free portion. . .” (Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 2:65).

54. Alexander, *Forty Years’ Letters*, 2:52.

abolitionists to also be connected with the revolutionary radicalism that lie behind the French Revolution.<sup>49</sup> Believing that the Bible condoned a relationship of authority and subservience, Alexander stated to Hall in 1846:

I can go a peg higher than you about slavery, and fail to see the scripturalness of much that is postulated now-a-days, respecting the popular idol, liberty. As existing, slavery is fraught with moral evil; the want of marriage, and of the Bible, and the separation of families, &c., &c., are crying sins; but I am totally unable to see the relation to be necessarily unjust. The moral questions are so various from the circumstances, that each must be decided apart. . .<sup>50</sup>

Writing to Hall in 1847, Alexander stated his fundamental disagreement with the abolitionists clearly: “I see no trace of the modern dogmas about absolute freedom in the Bible.”<sup>51</sup> Their ideology of equality, their over-estimation of personal liberty, and their blanket condemnation of slavery simply did not fit with Alexander’s understanding of Scripture.<sup>52</sup>

A third reason why Alexander opposed abolitionism was because he did not believe that immediate emancipation would be the best thing for many of the slaves. He did not believe all slaves were adequately prepared to live as free individuals in antebellum America. Without education, without property, and faced with a culture of pervasive racism, Alexander observed that freed blacks often ended up in a worse condition than slaves. These personal observations formed a powerful argument in Alexander’s mind against total and immediate emancipation.<sup>53</sup> His own observations led him to conclude that:

The most miserable portion, physically and morally, of the black race in the United States, is the portion which is free, I am as well assured as I can be of any similar proposition. That immediate emancipation would be a crime, I have no doubt; and therefore believe there are cases in which there is neither injustice nor inhumanity in holding [slaves].<sup>54</sup>

Because of the plight of freed blacks in America, Alexander rejected the abolitionists’ call for immediate emancipation as impractical and potentially harmful. Alexander believed that simply freeing the slaves would not necessarily give them a better life, as long as racist attitudes prevailed at large. Alexander stated that “the prejudice of colour and caste” was the “real hindrance” to the betterment of blacks in antebellum America, and he viewed white prejudice against blacks as a significant

societal evil to be addressed.<sup>55</sup> Without removing racial prejudice and the widespread disapproval of interracial marriages, simply freeing the slaves was an insufficient solution to their plight. Writing to Hall in 1845, Alexander stated:

Amalgamation, say what they please, can go on, does go on, and will go on. ...leave [the emancipation question] out of view, and what becomes of our negroes, slave or free? Those called by mockery free people, are a race of Helots or Yahoos, in our estimation. We do not give them our dinners, or our daughters; we debar them from pulpits, pews, and omnibuses; we deny them actual citizenship. ...Educate them, and this prejudice makes them miserable.<sup>56</sup>

This quotation leads us to believe that Alexander may have been more open to interracial marriages than other Princetonians.<sup>57</sup> At the very least, Alexander understood that racial prejudice was a main hindrance to the elevation of blacks in antebellum America. Since abolitionism did not address the more fundamental issue of racism, Alexander was not convinced that their goal of immediate emancipation would truly better the condition of blacks in American society.

In his views on slavery, Alexander was in overall agreement with Princeton's chief spokesman on the issue, Charles Hodge.<sup>58</sup> Along with Hodge, Alexander disagreed with abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison, who viewed slavery as an absolute sin, and also with Southerners like James Henley Thornwell, who came to the position that slavery was a positive social good.<sup>59</sup> Hodge published his views on slavery in numerous books and articles, and Alexander found himself in agreement with Hodge's mediating position. Writing to Hall in 1856, Alexander stated: "Dr. Hodge has most

admirably stated the slavery doctrine, in his [commentary on] Ephesians. ...How nobly this clear enunciation of Scriptural principle towers above all the extravagancies of both sides!"<sup>60</sup>

In further contrast with many abolitionists, Alexander was more concerned with the spiritual condition of blacks in America than with freeing those still in a state of slavery. Writing to Hall in 1847, Alexander stated: "To give the gospel to the slaves, is a duty pressing above all

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and *Princeton Review* 21 [1849]: 594). Nowhere does Alexander give any indication that he holds to Hodge's views on racial amalgamation. For Alexander's appreciation of individuals of mixed ethnicity, see Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:18–19.

58. While many New School Presbyterians embraced abolitionism, many of the Old School Presbyterians in the North held views similar to those expressed by Hodge. We could almost speak of a "Princeton position" on slavery (Calhoun, *Faith and Learning*, 325). For others of this "school," see Cortlandt Van Rensselaer, *Miscellaneous Sermons, Essays, and Addresses* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1861), 243–410; Robert J. Breckinridge, "Hints on Colonization and Abolition" *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* 5 (1833): 281–305; Miller, *Life of Samuel Miller*, 292–300.

59. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 2. For more on Thornwell's view on slavery, see James Henley Thornwell, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery" in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1873), 4:398–436.

60. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:225. The "moderate" position of Hodge and Alexander was the position adopted by the Old School Presbyterian Church at its 1845 General Assembly. See Charles Hodge, "The General Assembly," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 17 (1845): 437–441. For Alexander's hearty endorsement of the 1845 General Assembly's position, see Alexander, "Religious Instructions of Negroes," 605–606. Alexander, Hodge, and the Presbyterians General Assembly of 1845 could be labeled "gradual emancipationists" (see Hodge, "Slavery," 275). Mark Noll labels Hodge a "moderate emancipationist" (Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 128). Hodge believed that a host of efforts should be exerted to bring about the gradual removal of slavery. He also believed that God would eventually bring an end to slavery providentially and to run ahead of God's providential working would only bring harm to the slaves (Hodge, "Slavery," 268–269; Hodge, "West India Emancipation," 606). Like Hodge, Alexander also believed in a gradual approach toward the removal of slavery, writing: "I am more and more convinced that our endeavours to do at a blow, what Providence does by degrees, is disastrous to those whom it would benefit" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:65). Hodge believed that slavery would gradually pass away under God's providence as Biblical norms and principles were spread by the Church throughout society (Hodge, *Ephesians*, 267, 273; Hodge, "Slavery," 286). By reforming slave laws according to Scriptural norms, so as to allow slaves to become educated and to accrue personal property, Hodge believed that slaves could be elevated and bettered as slaves and thus prepared for freedom. Hodge believed that such preparation for emancipation might be necessary to help slaves live as free and responsible individuals (Hodge, "West India Emancipation," 625). Along these same lines, Alexander called the evangelism of slaves "the best preparative for freedom" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:272). Alexander also believed that reforming slave laws

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55. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:18.

56. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:18–19.

57. Charles Hodge argued strongly against the "amalgamation of distinct races" in the *Repertory*, stating: "There are natural laws which forbid the union of distinct races... The effects of amalgamation of distinct races is seen in the physically, intellectually and socially degraded mongrel inhabitants of Mexico and South America. In these cases the chief elements were the Spanish and Indians, elements less widely separated than the Anglo Saxon and the Negro. The amalgamation of these races must inevitably lead to the deterioration of both. It would fill the country with a feeble and degraded population, which must ultimately perish. For it is a well ascertained fact that the mulatto is far more frail than either the white man or the negro. We read in the disastrous physical effects of the amalgamation of the blacks and whites, a clear intimation that such amalgamation is contrary to the will of God, and therefore is not an end which statesmen ought in any way to facilitate" (Charles Hodge, "Emancipation," *Biblical Repertory*

others...<sup>61</sup> Alexander believed that abolitionists were bringing real harm to slaves through their misguided approach to social reform, when so much good might

would help slaves transition to freedom, stating: "Our church, I am clear, ought to protest against the laws about reading, &c. As clear am I, that our States should regard slavery as a transition-state, to be terminated as soon as possible, and that they should enact laws about the *post-nati*" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:52). By appealing to slaveholders to deal with their slaves according to Scriptural principles and to reform the slave laws of their separate states, Hodge and Alexander both believed that slaves would be healthily transitioned out of slavery and truly bettered in the long run. For a statement of Alexander's optimism, see Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:65. For a further statement on reforming the slave laws, see Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:217–218.

61. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:65.

62. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:272.

63. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:102, 2:19. Writing of one slaveholder in 1827, Alexander described the spiritual concern for her slaves to Hall: "Mrs. Le Grand lodges and boards a good Episcopalian... for this business [of evangelism] among her slaves. ...Now it is my deliberate belief, that more of these slaves are likely to go to heaven, than of an equal number of servants of pious people in our Middle States; and such being the hopefulness of the work, how earnestly ought Christians to engage in it! Thousands might be got to attend public preaching, as hundreds now do" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:272). Upon Le Grand's death in 1845, Alexander recounted her relationship with her slaves with great appreciation: "She was distressingly exercised about slavery. But what could she do? She often asked me, but I was dumb. She had as many as possible taught to read, and this up to the present time. A large number of her slaves are real Christians, not to speak of perhaps a hundred who have gone to heaven. I fully believe that more of them have secured eternal life, than would have been the case in any freedom conceivable. And surely, if eternity is more than time, this is a consideration to be pondered. But she saw no escape; individual opinion was inert" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:19).

64. The correspondence of Jones and his family has been published in the following volumes: Robert Manson Myers, ed., *The Children of Pride: A True Story of Georgia and the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972); and Robert Manson Myers, ed., *A Georgian and Princeton* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1976). For a recent sketch of Jones's life see: Iain H. Murray, *Heroes* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2009), 175–256.

65. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:337.

66. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:319, cf. 351.

67. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:272, cf. 353.

68. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:377.

69. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:271. Alexander's labor among slaves in Virginia was exceeded by his labor among freed blacks in the North. As a pastor in Trenton, Alexander preached regularly to freed blacks and tried to set up a Bible class for them, though he found the blacks in Trenton to be "strangely averse to white interference" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:65; 1:162–163). While in New York, he attempted to start a black congregation as well (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:65). While serving in Princeton as the Professor of Rhetoric and *Belles Lettres* at the College of New Jersey, he preached weekly to a black congregation and was the founding pastor of a black church, Witherspoon Street Presbyterian Church (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:301, 334). This church grew out of the heightened

was brought to them through the gospel. Writing from Virginia in 1838, Alexander stated:

The law (thanks to the meddling of anti-slavery societies) forbids schools, and public teaching to read; it was not so when I lived here: but I hold it to be our business to *save their souls*; and however criminal slavery might be, I see with my eyes that God has so overruled it, as that the slaves are more open to Gospel truth than any human beings on the globe.<sup>62</sup>

Instead of calling for immediate emancipation, then, Alexander pressed slaveholders to evangelize their slaves. He commended slaveholders he knew who were faithful in evangelizing and giving biblical instruction to their slaves.<sup>63</sup> One such individual was Charles Colcock Jones. Jones was a graduate of Princeton Seminary, and Alexander was very enthusiastic about his work among slaves.<sup>64</sup> Writing to Hall in 1841, Alexander stated: "C. C. Jones, of S.C., preaches to the slaves three times on Sunday, and every evening in the week. Yet this is the man whom the young Andoverians would not let preach in their chapel. *Sit anima mea cum Jonesio!*"<sup>65</sup> Alexander knew of others like Jones, and he similarly commended their work in slave evangelism, stating: "I know of five or six men who are silently wearing out life in most devoted labour among the slaves. Slavery must and will end; I hope peaceably; but, anyhow, we ought to save the souls of this generation."<sup>66</sup> Alexander personally labored in slave evangelism and was so enthusiastic about it that he worked to recruit other slave evangelists.<sup>67</sup> He frequently commended such work to Hall and in 1843 posed this question to him:

Quere: whether all missionary enterprises among us ought not to yield precedence to the work of evangelizing the Southern slaves? Ministers ought to be among them, in sufficient numbers, even if they were to be emancipated to-morrow; so that the question has no limitation from that of Abolition. Next in order, I think, come the Indians, whose condition is now more favourable than that of any heathen tribes on earth, for receiving the gospel. The prestige, however, of this mission = 0.<sup>68</sup>

After Alexander moved from Virginia, he continued to personally labor at slave evangelism whenever his travels took him to the Southern states.<sup>69</sup>

As a summary statement of his views on slavery, Alexander wrote the following to Hall while visiting Virginia in 1842:

My mind has been, and is, filled with the negroes. What I say on this point I say with, I do believe, as much love for the race as any man feels; and with an extent of observation perhaps as large as I can pretend to on any subject, having seen the worst as well as the best of their condition. And the result of all, increasingly, is, what you I am sure would agree to if you were on the spot, that the *average physical evils* of their case are not greater than of sailors, soldiers, shoeblacks, or low operatives; while their *moral evils* are unspeakably great. My point is this, then: The soul of the negro is precious and must be saved. Aim at this, at this first, at this directly, at this independently of their bondage, and the other desirable ends will be promoted even more surely than if the latter were made the great object. A gradual emancipation is that to which the interior economy of the North-Southern States was tending, is tending, and will reach; it is desirable; in my view it is inevitable; it is craved by thousands here; but an emancipation even gradual may arrive in such sort as to leave a host of blacks to be damned, who, by the other means, may be Christianized, while their eventual freedom is not less certain. It is the salvation of the slave, which is infinitely the most important, which moreover Southern Christians *can* be led to seek, and of which the very seeking directly tends to emancipation. I say this, on the obvious principle, that when the owner by seeking the salvation of his slave, gets (as he must) to love him, he will not rest (I speak of the mass) without trying to make him a free-man. I cannot describe the pleasure I have had in preaching and talking to the slaves: if I have ever done any good, this is the way.<sup>70</sup>

Alexander's perspective on slavery was controlled by his evangelical priorities and convictions. His position occupied the "shrinking middle ground" on this issue as the nation was being pushed toward two extremes and open war. And though his views on slavery may appear enculturated to us who live on this side of emancipation, in his own day they were certainly counter-cultural in many respects.

#### CONCLUSION

It is outside the limits of this paper to discuss Alexander's critiques of the temperance movement, the common school movement, and the widespread "pew-rental system."<sup>71</sup> It is also outside the scope of this paper to explore Alexander's comments on Common Sense Realism and Enlightenment Philosophy, but even on these

issues Alexander's letters are illuminating.<sup>72</sup> Writing to Hall in 1844, Alexander stated:

Much talk in Princeton of the amazing genius of a young poet. He belongs to the set which may be said to constitute the 'New America.' They go for metaphysics, Coleridge, almost for Spinoza. They laugh at Locke, Reid, Stewart, &c. They undervalue Newton and Bacon. They applaud Plato. They care less, than they once did, for prayer-meetings, missions, &c. Keep your eye on this. How much we need to stick by the plain declarations of the written word!<sup>73</sup>

The America occupied by Old Princeton was indeed a "New America"—a Jacksonian America of increasing populism, egalitarianism, and secularism—an America of social and economic experimentation—an America of social reform and activism and transition away from the older ideals and values of the colonials and the early Federalists. Whatever relationship earlier Princetonians had with the founding of America (e.g. John Witherspoon and Ashbel Green), Alexander and the theologians of Old Princeton lived in a "new America" which was becoming quite different from what it was at its beginning. Alexander's critical rejection of much of

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racial tensions between blacks and whites in Princeton in the 1840s (See David B. Calhoun, *Princeton Seminary: Faith and Learning, 1812–1868* [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1994], 330). For more information on the state of blacks in Princeton, see David Torbett, *Theology and Slavery: Charles Hodge and Horace Bushnell* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2006), 69–73. As pastor of Witherspoon Street Church, Alexander was scorned by "some of the lowest of the white canaille" in Princeton as "the preacher to the blacks," but in this ministry he found great joy nonetheless (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:263). Alexander wrote of his ministry here to Hall in 1835: "I believe my happiest hours are spent on Sunday afternoons in labouring among my little charge" (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:227). Although he delighted to serve this black congregation, Alexander found the black slaves of Virginia to be more receptive to the gospel (Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:351; 2:65).

70. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:354.

71. For Alexander's increasingly critical thoughts on the temperance movement, see Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 1:150, 155, 157, 229, 237, 243, 299, 358. For Alexander's critique of the common school movement and promotion of Christian education, see Alexander, *Forty Years' Familiar Letters*, 1:192, 193, 219, 220, 312–313. For Alexander's growing discouragement over the pew-rental system in his New York church, see Alexander, *Forty Years' Familiar Letters*, 2:95, 183, 194, 206, 208, 223.

72. For a recent reevaluation of the Princeton theologians on this issue, see Paul Kjoss Helseth, *"Right Reason" and the Princeton Mind* (Phillipsburg, NJ, Presbyterian & Reformed, 2010) and David P. Smith, *B. B. Warfield's Scientifically Constructive Theological Scholarship* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2001).

73. Alexander, *Forty Years' Letters*, 2:12.

contemporary American thought challenges the interpretation of Old Princeton as naively and uncritically accommodated by American culture. If Alexander's interaction with the areas above is any indication, the Princeton theologians might rightly be viewed in many

respects as *countercultural* critics of the American culture they occupied. At the very least, Alexander's letters powerfully suggest that the theologians of Old Princeton may not have been as naively enculturated to nineteenth century American thought as has often been supposed. ■

### *In Brief: Rev. Dr. Alexander in Virginia.*

[Excerpted from *The Charlotte Observer* XVII.31 (5 August 1843): 122, columns 2–3.]

The Annual Commencement of Washington College, at Lexington, Virginia, was held a few days since. The Lynchburg Republican has the following interesting incident which occurred in connexion with it.

On the afternoon of commencement day, the Alumni of the College was addressed by the Rev. Dr. Alexander of Princeton Theological Seminary, (N. J.) This venerable and excellent Divine is the oldest Alumnus of the College living, and stood up, in his 82nd year [*sic* 72nd], to perform the duty assigned to him. Great interest was imparted to the occasion by the fact that the aged speaker was amongst his native hills, breathing his native air, and surrounded by numerous relatives and friends, who all revered him as a patriarch, and loved him as a brother and a father. His address, which was upon the subject of Education, was full of simplicity and sound wisdom. It presented the matured opinions and reflections of a long experience in teaching. He looked with a jealous eye upon many of the novelties in our system of Education, and seemed to cry, with oracular wisdom, "seek ye the old paths, and walk ye in them."

After having advanced with apparent ease through more than half of his speech, in consequence of the oppressive heat and bad air of the room, he was compelled to rest for awhile. He shortly resumed his discourse; but was compelled again to take his seat, when he soon *swooned*. The scene now became one of deep and thrilling interest. All feared a serious, if not a fatal issue, and every heart was full of anxiety and sorrow. However on being removed from the house into the pure air of the yard, he soon recovered, and rising from the grass he insisted on returning to the Church

and resuming his discourse. The congregation assembled, but he had not proceeded far before the paleness of death stole over his face, and he was again carried forth apparently lifeless. Again he was speedily recovered, and again he expressed his desire and determination to proceed with his address; nor could the prayers and entreaties of friends turn him from his purpose. He did not however return to the Church, but, seated upon a chair in the midst of that venerable Church yard, he discoursed to the congregation, while they stood around him, listening to his words with silent and breathless attention. The portion of the discourse which he seemed so reluctant to leave unuttered was a glowing eulogy upon the late Mr. Graham, the founder of the College,— a person to whom it would seem the College and the state owe much. In concluding his remarks in that place of graves, he referred to the fact of his being the oldest of the Alumni, and that soon some of those who were then surrounding him would occupy his place. He was soon to pass away, and they in their turn would be the last. He tenderly counseled them to put their trust in God, to make the Saviour of sinners their friend, and with his solemn testimony to the truth and value and excellency of religion he bade them all a final farewell, with the prayer that he might meet them all in Heaven. It was a solemn, heaven scene! A place where we were forced to say, "It is good to be here." The venerable Father in Israel, from amongst the tombs of departed generations, had, as it were, delivered his dying council—it had been received into eager ears and softened hearts, and we were waiting to hear from his lips the word of one of old, "Now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace!" That place was Bochim; but they sorrowed most of all for the words which he spoke, that they should see his face no more." ■