

To the Law and the Testimony: James Henley Thornwell & *Jus Divinum* Presbyterianism

By Chris Thomas

Let all our Presbyteries, marshalled under their glorious Leader, go out like the tribes of Israel under the conduct of Joshua; let them all come up in unbroken phalanx to the help of the Lord, the help of the Lord against the mighty, and they will soon have as signal wonders to celebrate as the ancient people of God. What we want is faith—faith in the Divine promises, faith in the Divine appointments; and when this faith is imparted, earthen pitchers and lamps will be strong and resistless in our hands.

The great defect, as it strikes me, of all the missionary schemes of the day is, that the principles upon which they rely for success, their leading measures, the general plan upon which they are conducted, are addressed to the natural sympathies of men and not to the faith of the saints of the Most High.

—James Henley Thornwell, 1842¹

The career of James Henley Thornwell illustrates the mettle of the antebellum Southern tradition.² His academic prowess dents any tenuous thesis that the Old South was intellectually inferior to their more enlightened Northern cousins. Thornwell possessed a keen moral compass and clear Biblical vision. One of many heralded sons of early South Carolina, Thornwell wielded considerable influence during the 19th century. The shadow of this influence stretched across a burgeoning nation, and the ringing of his eloquence could be felt long after his passing to glory.

Born on December 9, 1812 in the Marlborough District of upcountry South Carolina, he was the son of James and Martha Thornwell. His parents were of English and Welsh ancestry, respectively. The family struggled in relative poverty, as his father died in 1820 and his Baptist mother raised her four children. She raised the children in a Christian home, enlightening young James with the message he spent most of his life

proclaiming. Educated as a child through a combination of his mother's diligence and outside tutoring in the classical tradition, Thornwell eventually graduated

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1. *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. I-IV. ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (1875; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 4:216, 174. Hereafter *Collected Writings*.

2. For an introduction to the Southern Presbyterian tradition, see Morton Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1962); C. N. Willborn, "Southern Presbyterianism: the Character of a Tradition," in *Confessing Our Hope: Essays in Honor of Morton Howison Smith on his Eightieth Birthday*, ed. Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn (Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2004); Douglas Kelly, *Preachers with Power: Four Stalwarts of the South* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1992); Henry Alexander White, *Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 1683–1911* (New York: Neale Publishing Company, 1911; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000). For a sketch of the influence of religion on antebellum Southern culture, see E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentleman Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795–1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978); Erskine Clarke, *Our Southern Zion: A History of Calvinism in the South Carolina Low Country, 1690–1990* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1996); James Oscar Famer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986); Drew Gilpin Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1988). For an introduction to the Southern intellectual tradition, see Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Front: History and Politics in the Culture War* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1995); Eugene Genovese, *A Consuming Fire: The Fall of the Confederacy in the Mind of the White Christian South* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1988); Eugene Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); *A Defender of Southern Conservatism: M.E. Bradford and His Achievements*, ed. Clyde Wilson (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1999). A reading of Wilson's edited work and consulting the works cited will lead one to the treasures of the Southern intellectual tradition.

from South Carolina College in 1831 at the head of his class. Having felt the experience of the new birth and having sought his Master's will, Thornwell decided to enroll in seminary. After spending some time in New England seminaries at Harvard and Andover, Thornwell returned home to finish training at Columbia Theological Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina. The Presbytery of Harmony (South Carolina) ordained young Thornwell to the Gospel ministry in 1834. He helped found the *Southern Presbyterian Review* in 1847, a journal devoted to conservative, Old School Presbyterianism. The General Assembly recognized his young talent and elected him moderator that same year at the age of 34. Thornwell left a pastoral charge and assumed the presidency of South Carolina College in January 1852. E.T. Thompson, historian of the Southern Presbyterian Church from the mid-20th century, wrote that

... Thornwell was the dominant influence in the early history of South Carolina College. He determined its educational policy (classicism rather than utilitarianism), set its religious tone, won its popularity, brought it to its highest peak of influence, and trained a generation of college students as stalwart defenders of the status quo on South Carolina.³

Thornwell served as a pastor, college president, and Professor of Systematic Theology from 1856–62 at Columbia Theological Seminary. He managed an ecclesiastical journal and exercised a leading hand in the formation of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America in 1861. A man of deep affections, he expressed heartfelt love for his wife and children. He died in 1862 at the age of 49 in Charlotte, North Carolina, still hoping for the Confederacy's preservation.

Thornwell harvested some of his most fruitful and lasting work in the field of ecclesiology. Studying his line of thought is important for us because every generation must return to first principles. While the 19th century witnessed a ripening of ecclesiastical thought, 21st century Reformed and Presbyterian denominations are not immune from ecclesiastical apathy. Dr. Guy Prentiss Waters suggests two reasons for this contemporary indifference to church government in his recent

work, *How Jesus Runs the Church*.⁴ He suggests that one source of relaxed attention to polity and denominational structures is the sour experience of the 20th century. Many Christians faced their options of either staying with unfaithful denominations or looking outside traditional church life for fellowship and mission. Thus, the second half of the 20th century witnessed the divorce of discipleship and evangelism from the local church.

Another reason for this doctrinal indifference to church polity, Waters continues, is the increased individualism and distrust of authority rampant in American society. "American evangelicals often exhibit distrust of institutions and authority, including that of the church" (Waters, xxii). One need not be blessed with astute skills of observation to see that this distrust has bled into the rising pastoral leadership.⁵ Compare the current ecclesiastical slippage to this 19th century celebration of Presbyterianism:

I love the whole catholic Church; but I love the Presbyterian Church with a fervour and a devotion which I cannot utter, and I do desire to see her put in that position that I believe she must occupy in order to the accomplishment of her mission in pouring the blessings of peace and salvation upon our whole land and upon the nations. I want the Church to come up to this mission in her own proper organization, with her own assemblies, with her own officers, and in her own power, executing her commissions herself, without delegating to any outside organism those functions and duties to perform which is her highest glory (*Collected Writings*, 4:239).

Here the Southern Presbyterian James Henley Thornwell voiced his love and devotion to pure, simple, unadorned Presbyterianism. Notice that the spring of this affection was zeal for missions. Here, a precise presbyter passionately promoted the expansion and growth of the church.

Some of our brethren distance themselves from the title "presbyterian" for the sake of evangelism and church growth. The apparent concern is that the mere word will stiff-arm potential church members. The operating assumption seems to be that a concern for mission and the gospel (however the term "gospel" is defined) trumps our devotion to church polity and denominational titles. But refer back to Thornwell's statement: what was his goal? The missionary advance of the church. How did he suggest the church execute her mission? By employing "her own assemblies, with her own officers, and in her own power..." (*Collected Writings*, 4:239).

3. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. I (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 498.

4. Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), xxii.

5. I recently heard a church planter state in a public report: "No one cares about being Presbyterian. They don't! But the Gospel! That's what matters!"

Thornwell believed that Jesus, as the King and Head of the Church, had provided His bride with everything she needed to preach the Gospel to every creature. All she needed to do was trust and obey. He indefatigably espoused *jus divinum*, or *divine right* Presbyterianism. Why did the Southern Presbyterian hoist this banner? For the sake of obedience to Christ and the missionary advance of the church.

I will explain in this paper that Thornwell's advocacy of *jus divinum* grew from the roots of classic Reformed teaching, and that these principles were vigorously debated in 19th century discussions. As Thornwell served as an instructor at Columbia Theological Seminary, I will show that students such as Thomas E. Peck and John L. Girardeau successfully articulated this tradition for a new generation. The paper will conclude with a few applications for church life today.

ROOTS OF THE *JUS DIVINUM* TRADITION

As we begin tracing Thornwell's thought on these issues, we can identify his place in historical theology. Professor Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary charged that by means of his teachings on church polity, Thornwell introduced a new legalism which the Presbyterian fathers would not have imagined or countenanced (*Collected Writings*, 228–229). Careful review of history, however, proves that Thornwell's convictions were not a novel program for the church. By insisting on the execution of the Great Commission by graded courts rather than semi-independent Boards, the Carolinian simply took up the mantle of his spiritual fathers in advocating a *jus divinum* Presbyterianism. The "great man of the South" simply advocated the application of the regulative principle to church polity.

Thornwell's advocacy of a divine warrant for ecclesiastical faith and practice was the fruitful ripening of historic Reformed teaching. For example, John Calvin, the preeminent 16th century reformer, expounded this doctrine of the Church in Book IV of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.⁶ The illustrious Genevan reformer composed the *Institutes* as a manual for individual and corporate piety. As he stated in Book I, "I call 'piety' that reverence joined with love of God which the knowledge of his benefits induces" (Calvin, 41). For the Christian, Calvin explains in Book IV, the Father has led us to the Son with the instruction, "Hear Him" (Matthew 17:5). This principle of hearing and obeying the Son extends to all of life.

For it is as if, leading us away from all doctrines of men,

he should conduct us to his Son alone; bid us seek all teaching of salvation from him alone; depend upon him, cleave to him; in short (as the words themselves pronounce), hearken to his voice alone (Calvin, 1155).

No other word is authorized as an unerring standard for the church. Teachers are to expound what the Word contains. They are not to go beyond this prescription. The Bible, Calvin urged, is the only rule of faith and practice, not only for individuals, but also for the corporate body.

We therefore teach that faithful ministers are now not permitted to coin any new doctrine, but that they are simply to cleave to that doctrine to which God has subjected all men without exception. When I say this, I mean to show what is permitted not only to individual men but to the whole church as well. . . . For he thus spared no one, and subjected the authority of all to the judgment of God's Word. . . . This rule pertains as much to the whole church as to individual believers (Calvin, 1157–1158).

Thus we observe that as early as the 16th century, Reformed thinking applied the regulative principle to the church.

In the 17th century, a number of ministers in London composed *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici*, or *The Divine Right of Church Government*, one of the great classic treatments of Biblical Presbyterianism. Written during the time of the Westminster Assembly, this work provides a logical, Biblical argument for a divinely ordained structure for church government. This structure is precisely drawn in the Scriptures, and a government by graded courts is how Jesus arranged His church to be led. One of the main propositions laid down in this work is this: "The Scriptures declare that there is a Government *jure divino* in the visible church of Christ now under the New Testament."⁷ What is meant by *jure divino* or *jus divinum*? Simply, a divine right. Has God given a mandate for particular form(s) of church government? Hear these ministers of Sion College explain the phrase:

So that *Jus Divinum*, *divine Right* (according to this interpretation of the terms) is that which is either *justum*,

6. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeil, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1977, 8th ed.), 1011–1521.

7. *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici*, or *The Divine Right of Church Government*, originally asserted by the Ministers of Sion College, London, December 1646 (Dallas, TX: Naphtali Press, 1995), 2. Hereafter *Jus Divinum*.

just, meet, and equal; or jussum, commanded, enjoined by any divine warrant or authority. And generally, a thing may be said to be *jure divino*, which is in any way *divinitus justum, divinely just, equal, etc., or, divinitus jussum, divinely commanded* by any Law of God, or by that which is equivalent to a divine Law. And whatsoever matters in Church-Government can be proved by Scripture to have this stamp of divine warrant and authority set upon them, they may properly be said to be *jure divino*, and *by the will and appointment of Jesus Christ*, to whom God has delegated all power and authority for government of His Church {Matthew 28:18–20, Isaiah 9:6, John 5:22, Ephesians 1:22} (*Jus Divinum*, 6–7).

Hence, these men declare, there is such a thing as a divine blueprint for the church. This submission to the Law of God is extended to every area of the church's life. Worship, doctrine, as well as government are to be maintained according to the "law and the testimony."

Jus Divinum is the highest and best Tenure, whereby the Church can hold of Christ any Doctrine, Worship, or Government. Only God can stamp such a *jus divinum* upon any of these things, whereby conscience shall be obliged. All human inventions herein, whether devised of our own hearts, or derived as traditions from others, are incompatible and inconsistent herewith; vain in themselves, and to all that use them, and condemned of God {See 1 Kings 12:32–33, Isaiah 29:4, Matthew 15:6–9} (*Jus Divinum*, 7).

This work became a standard-bearer expounding and promoting the divine right of church government, hence the title, *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici*.

The commitment to and articulation of *jus divinum* Presbyterianism flourished and blossomed in the 19th century, the period in which Thornwell served. The

Southern ecclesiastical statesman was one of several vocal advocates for a pure, unadorned Presbyterianism. One such churchman was the Scottish theologian James Bannerman, who produced his two volume work, *The Church of Christ*, in 1869.⁸ This comprehensive treatise carried on the tradition of *jus divinum* of church government. Jesus the King of the church did not leave His people to wisdom, creativity and experience to work out ecclesiastical structures. Bannerman wrote of the defenders of *jus divinum*:

They believe that the Word of God embodies the general principles and outline of an ecclesiastical polity, fitted to be an authoritative model for all Churches, capable of adapting itself to the exigencies of all different times and countries, and, notwithstanding, exhibiting a unity of character and arrangement in harmony with the Scripture pattern. Church government, according to this view, is not a product of Christian discretion, nor a development of Christian consciousness; it has been shaped and settled, not by the wisdom of man, but by that of the Church's Head. It does not rest upon a ground of human expediency, but of Divine appointment (Bannerman, 204).

In America, the Old School Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America split from the New School presbyteries in 1837, in part over the very issue of *jus divinum*.⁹ Therefore we can say that there was a line of continuity carrying on this tradition of simple, divine right, Biblical Presbyterianism from the Reformation to the 19th century. The advocates of this tradition believed that the pattern for church government had been revealed in the Word, just as the articles of faith had been. What was the basis for such a high view of Presbyterianism? Was it merely the tradition of the fathers handed down from the Reformation? Why did they hold such an exalted view of church government?

The Old School *jus divinum* men contended for a pure Presbyterianism out of obedience to the Word. The question for them was very simple: what did the Bible teach about church government? For one thing, these men found that the Scriptures gave instructions for two ordinary, perpetual offices—elder and deacon. Consider Paul's calling of the Ephesian elders to come to him at Miletus: "Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him" (Acts 20:17 ESV). He exhorted these elders to "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the

8. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the nature, powers, ordinances, discipline and government of the Christian Church* (1869; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974).

9. See Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (1875; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 181–209. One of the principles of the Old School Assembly was that the church ought to carry out the work of missions, rather than hire the labor to well-meaning parachurch organizations. Thornwell noted during his debates with Charles Hodge in 1860 that "the Church, in her organized capacity, is a society for all spiritual purposes. Every church-court is a Board of Christ's appointment, and every Christian is a member of a Missionary Society. We assume this as our cardinal principle. This was the great point in dispute in the New School controversy" (*Collected Writings*, 4:224).

church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). Here, we have the *πρεσβυτεροι* (elders) of verse 17 referred to in verse 28 as *επισκοποι*, or "overseers." These *πρεσβυτεροι* and *επισκοποι* are two terms referring to the same body of men. They are furthermore to *ποιμαλινειν*, or care for, feed, and shepherd the church of God. To put these observations together, the elders of Ephesus are overseers and pastors of the congregation.

A second Biblical statement to consider is 1 Timothy 5:17: "Let the elders (*πρεσβυτεροι*) who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." Thomas Peck, a theological descendant of Thornwell, explains, "The obvious meaning of these words, that which would suggest itself to any unbiased reader, is, that there are two sorts of presbyters, one sort ruling only, the other laboring in the word and doctrine, as well as ruling."¹⁰ What makes a man a presbyter? Who is an elder in the church? Who are the church leaders? Is it just the preachers? No, a man is a presbyter because he is a ruler. "When applied to a preacher it must be on account of some function other than preaching, which he performs, and this function is explained to be that of ruling" (Peck, 173). As Thornwell explained, "Preachers, accordingly, are Elders, not because they preach or administer the sacraments, but because they are governors. He whose duty it is to be a grave, prudent, exemplary ruler in the house of God is a *presbyter*" (*Collected Writings*, 4:105). One principle of Biblical church government, according to the *jus divinum* men, was that "there is one order of presbyters or chosen rulers, that in this order there are two classes, like the genus and its co-ordinate species: 1, Presbyters who rule only; 2, Presbyters who not only rule, but also labor in the word and doctrine" (Peck, 177).

These presbyters gathered as a plurality in New Testament church life. For example, Acts 14:23: "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." Acts 15:2, 4, 6: "And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.... When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders.... The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter." Acts 16:4: "As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem." Philippians 1:1: "Paul and Timothy, servants

of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." Titus 1:5: "That is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you." 1 Peter 5:1: "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed." Peck explained that "the argument from these passages is this: A plurality of elders or bishops is spoken of as existing in the church of Jerusalem, the church of Ephesus, the church of Philippi, etc." (Peck, 179).

To continue the Biblical argument, we can say that these presbyters not only gathered, but also served as a parliament or court. They governed the church together, or jointly. Peck suggests that we consider Acts 15, where the joint deliberations and participation among the presbyters resolved an early doctrinal controversy. Consider also 1 Timothy 4:14—"Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you." When you compare this statement with Acts 22:5 and Luke 22:66, you can see that these bodies of elders met as a court, a governing body, and that this practice carried over from the Jewish church (Peck, 181). As we briefly sketch the Biblical statements, "note that our inquiries have led us to two fundamental principles of Presbyterianism: 1st, The principle of representative government—of government by parliamentary courts composed of presbyters duly appointed and ordained; 2nd, That these representatives must be of two classes, belonging to the one order of *presbyters*" (Peck, 184).

A third principle of Presbyterianism is found when considering the *unity of the church*. Is the visible church warranted in uniting two or more congregations under the same government? Peck answers in the affirmative. The nature and ends of church fellowship, concessions of the Independents, Scriptural testimony, and practice of the Jewish synagogues all point to the practice and necessity of congregations united under one government (Peck, 187–193). For the Biblical references, consider that the word "church" can refer to a single congregation or the collection of congregations in a city or region. Similar phrases in Acts 2:41, 2:47, 4:4, 5:14, 6:1, and 6:7 all describe a large number of believers in

10. Thomas E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1892; reprint, Taylors, SC: Presbyterian Press, 2005), 172. Peck studied at Columbia Theological Seminary under Thornwell and later filled the position vacated by Texas-bound Robert Lewis Dabney as professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary.

Jerusalem. The manner of meeting among these early Christians was “not in spacious halls built for the purpose, but in dwelling-houses, chambers, upper rooms, etc”¹¹ (Peck, 192). Still, the church is illustrated as one body in Ephesians 4:16—“from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” Peck explained that “it is just as natural to consider these ‘bands’ and ‘joints’ as designating the means by which different congregations are united in the same confederation, as it is to consider them the means of union to the individual members of the same church, particular or single” (Peck, 192). He continued:

This doctrine of the visible unity of the church seems to have been sanctioned by the practice of the apostles. See Acts 8:14, 11:22; also xv, where they are represented as acting in concert, although, from the very nature of the apostolic office, each was a governor of the whole church (Peck, 192).

By collecting these statements from Scripture, Thornwell, Peck, and the *jus divinum* men believed that the Bible gave clear details for church structure. “Presbyterianism, may, therefore, be thus defined: The government of the church by parliamentary assemblies, composed of two classes of presbyters, and of presbyters only, and so arranged as to realize the visible unity of the whole church.”¹² Jesus had provided a set of officers, courts, and unified parliamentary government in order to advance the Great Commission.

Jus Divinum Presbyterians believed that Jesus had equipped His church with the weapons of her warfare. King Jesus entrusted the leadership of the church with the charge to win the lost and mold strong disciples of conviction. A revival of operational *jus divinum* Presbyterianism would more completely conform their churches to the Word of God, and thus increase their effectiveness in obeying the Great Commission. James Henley Thornwell spoke with an effective voice in the ecclesiastical debates and movements of the 19th century. I will follow his line of thought in the debates that swirled around the Mission Boards of the Old School Presbyterian Assembly from the 1840’s through 1861. Much of this discussion was conducted by means of the printed word, and reached its apex at the Old School Assembly debates in 1860. Thornwell and many of the

Southern Presbyterian elders resisted and opposed the use of Mission Boards. These Boards had been utilized for much of the 19th century and were connected to General Assembly, but as we will see, they had their own officers, operating budget, and authority. They were the denominational versions of the independent missionary societies formed during the early 19th century. The Southern men opposed these Boards on the basis of *jus divinum*: there was simply no divine mandate to create new ecclesiastical structures. Thornwell and like-minded colleagues defended the courts of the session, presbytery, synod, and General Assembly as the divinely ordained missionary agencies. Charles Hodge, professor of systematic theology at Princeton Theological Seminary, asserted that the use of such boards did not undermine the general principles of Presbyterianism. My intent is to follow this 19th century debate, observe how Thornwell’s students and successors carried on the mantle of *jus divinum*, and make some concluding applications to 21st century church life.

THORNWELL, PRESBYTERIANISM, AND THE 19TH CENTURY DEBATES

Thornwell summarized his views in an 1842 letter to his lifelong friend, Rev. John Douglas, a gentleman who did not share his opinion about the Boards. Hear Thornwell’s summary statement:

I am satisfied that there is a dangerous departure, in the present age of bustle, activity, and vain-glorious enterprise, from the simplicity of the institutions which Christ has established for the legitimate action of the Church. He has appointed one set of instrumentalities, and ordained one kind of agency in His kingdom; but we have made void His commandments, in order to establish our own inventions. I believe that the entire system of voluntary societies and ecclesiastical Boards, for religious purposes, is fundamentally wrong. The Church, as organized by her Head, is competent to do all that He requires of her. He has furnished her with the necessary apparatus of means, officers, and institutions, in Sessions, Presbyteries, Elders, Pastors, and Evangelists. Let us take Presbyterianism as we have it described in our Form of Government, and let us carry it out in its true spirit... (Palmer, 225).

He believed that there ought to be Missions Committees established to serve these courts, and that these committees would be the “mere instrument by which the Assembly acts, and not an agent standing in the place of the

11. See Acts 1:13, Acts 2:46, 12:5, 12:12, and Romans 16:5.

12. Peck, 194. With this definition, the student took up the mantle of the teacher. See Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 4:267.

Assembly, and acting for it" (Palmer, 222). He explained that

a Committee, even when acting in the name of the body that appoints it, acts by particular direction; the body first determines what is to be done, and the Committee is nothing but the instrument of execution.... The difference, then, between Executive Committees and Boards is just the difference between an instrument and an agent—between acting in a particular way and having another to act for you (*Collected Writings*, 4:162).

For Thornwell, the issues at stake formed the backbone of the church's identity. The key to understanding Thornwell is his definition of Presbyterianism. Following the Biblical pattern, he explained Presbyterianism as church government by representative courts, consisting of ruling and teaching elders, giving concrete realization to the unity of the church (*Collected Writings*, 4:148–149, 234–235). He believed historic, healthy Presbyterianism operated through *courts*, and these courts were populated by elected representatives. This, Thornwell explained, is how Jesus designed His church to carry out the Great Commission as one united body. "It is only in these courts that we recognize the church as an organized body. Here, and here alone, do we find Presbyterianism" (*Collected Writings*, 4:149).

The crux of the debate for Thornwell was that "the system of Boards gives us a set of officers and a set of ecclesiastical courts entirely different from those of our Constitution" (*Collected Writings*, 4:149). The officers were permanent vocations distinct from the office of elder and deacon. Furthermore, these denominational Boards, despite having the appearance of oversight from the General Assembly, acted with discretion and power distinct from the court's authority. For example, the Boards had the ability to appoint missionaries, designate fields of labor, and authorize funds, all with the expected rubber stamp of presbytery. Far from being the leading agent in carrying out missionary activity, the presbyteries merely followed the lead of the denominational Mission Boards. Government by executive members of the Board had effectively replaced church government through elected courts" (*Collected Writings*, 4:152–154, 157–158). "This undue accumulation of power in a few hands must always be the practical result of this system. This single fact shows that it is rotten to the core and utterly alien from all our habits, feelings, and associations as Presbyterians" (*Collected Writings*, 4:158). Finally, the Boards carried out fundraising for missionaries. The operating assumption was that without these structures

there would be no money for missions. Thornwell replied, saying 1) the sending court ought to support any missionaries they send, and 2) Christ has given us the office of deacon "for the express purpose of attending to the temporal matters of the Church; and these Deacons might be made the collecting agents of the presbytery in every congregation, and through them the necessary funds could be easily obtained and without expense" (*Collected Writings*, 4:154).

In all of these points, Thornwell argued that the denominational Boards were subversive of Presbyterianism. A new order of officers and executive authority had stolen in among the Old School Assembly. He urged a return to the "great principle that it is the duty of the Church, as such, in her ecclesiastical capacity, to conduct every department of the work which the Savior has committed to her. To this principle the Presbyterian Church is pledged; for this principle she earnestly contended through years of darkness, anxiety and apprehension" (*Collected Writings*, 4:158–159). Remember Thornwell's definition of Presbyterianism: government by courts, consisting of elected representatives, tangibly realizing the unity of the church.

Are the Boards, in other words, the Church? Have they been constituted its authorized Rulers by its Glorious Head? Do they pretend to exercise dominion in the Lord's house by a Divine Warrant? Are they Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods, or Assemblies?—the only courts, according to our Constitution, in which we find the Church as a visible organization or 'in her appropriate character' or 'ecclesiastical capacity'? Unquestionably not. Then to act by or through them is not to act in our ecclesiastical capacity. It is to renounce the principle for which we have struggled for years just at the moment when complete and glorious victory is within our reach (*Collected Writings*, 4:159).

This controversy boiled to a fever pitch in 1860 during the famous Thornwell-Hodge debates at the General Assembly held in Rochester, New York. The conflict arose over the reorganization of the Board of Domestic Missions. Though some in the Assembly scoffed at the running friction, and eschewed stirring the fires of theological debate, Thornwell agreed with Hodge that the issues between them were not trivial. The discussion involved "vital and essential principles" (*Collected Writings*, 4:217). The Southern churchman declared his love for the truth and the honor of Christ's Church. "I am no party man, but I am thoroughly a Presbyterian, and, having come here to deliberate and vote for the

good of the Church, I wish to state the grounds upon which my vote will be cast" (*Collected Writings*, 4:218).

He explained that at its root, the conflict grew from a division of opinion about the church itself. One conviction stated that Jesus gave the church a distinct form of government, just as He gave the system of doctrine. The church had no more right to add to the one than to the other. He then fairly stated that "Others, as wise and good men as the first, believe no definite form of church-government is of divine origin, but God has left it to man to organize His Church . . . God gave only general principles, and man is to work out of them the best system he can" (*Collected Writings*, 4:218). He contrasted the two views with a concise statement: "Of one of these parties the motto is, 'you may do all that the Scriptures do not forbid;' of the other, 'you can do only what the Scriptures command'" (*Collected Writings*, 4:218). The one section believed, and Thornwell concurred, that "The General Assembly is, and ought to be held to be, the Board of Missions itself. Christ never authorized us to put this work into other hands" (*Collected Writings*, 4:219). Thus he compared and explained the two views, and sought to persuade the Assembly during the course of his debates with Dr. Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary, who represented the opposing conviction.

Perhaps some in the Assembly were simply unaware of how the Board of Domestic Missions functioned. To shed light on its nature and operations, Thornwell explained:

In the first place, it is an *organism* and not an *organ*. . . . It has a President for its head, with a body of many members; it has an Executive Committee for its hands. . . . Now take this body, thus organized and equipped, and wherein does it differ from a church court? Talk of it as a mere organ!—a mere hand to be directed and moved and used by the Church! It is a hand that has an arm of its own to move it, and a head of its own to direct it; and, as experience has lately shown, it moves more obediently to its own head than to the Assembly. . . . It stands up, side by side, along with the courts which Christ has ordained, and we have handed over to it the work we ourselves ought to do (*Collected Writings*, 4:220).

Here Thornwell wanted to make it crystal clear that the Board of Domestic Missions, despite appearing subservient to the General Assembly, in reality functioned as a separate organization. The supporters of the Boards claimed that they were lawful agencies, because they were necessary circumstantial details of administration.

"You say it is not forbidden, and is therefore allowed, because necessary. But have we not always boasted that our Church is adequate, *as organized in the Scriptures*, to do all the work required at its hands? Have we not gloried in our polity as complete, with all the muscles, veins and arteries of a perfect system of life and motion?" (*Collected Writings*, 4:221, emphasis in original). The question had to be asked: "Is our Church competent or is she not competent to do her work? Is she so organized, and so equipped, and so officered, that she can, in the use of her own courts and her own powers, do what the Master has bidden her to do?" (*Collected Writings*, 4:221). There could be no question after Thornwell's opening remarks: he contended that the Boards functioned as semi-independent organizations, and challenged the sufficiency of unadorned Presbyterianism.

Thornwell observed, secondly, that the General Assembly had appointed these Boards to act as its representative. Again, this challenged the doctrine of the church. The courts of Christ have a spiritual, ministerial, declarative power. They have no power to create an organization to act on their behalf. At stake, therefore, was the nature of church power. Could the church act apart from a specific divine warrant? Thornwell reminded the presbyters that this principle kindled the strife between the Puritans and the Church of England, and fired the zeal of the Scottish covenanting fathers. In contending for this conviction of church power, Thornwell asserted, "we are standing up for the only principle that can keep this Church of ours from flying off out of her orbit and dashing into the orbits of other stars—the principle that the Church has no right to act except as she has the authority of God for acting" (*Collected Writings*, 4:222).

A third observation concerned the goals and operations of these Boards. "The practical ends of the Boards have been two: 1st. They aim to awaken interest; 2ndly. To increase funds" (*Collected Writings*, 4:222). The first goal seemed inconsistent with the spirit of a Christian church—did they not believe that the church is the missionary society of heaven, and that every member is to be a supporter and participant in that mission? Why would churchmen need a special organization to awaken interest? The second goal of raising money proceeded through a paid membership, whereby members could serve as consultants for the Board. Funds were also raised by appointed agents of the Board, and Thornwell approvingly noted that supporters of the Boards had dispensed with this system. His summary review concluded that "It is safer to adhere to the Word, and the system we have derived from it, than to be ever consulting the suggestions of human wisdom and mere

expediency. While we stand by principle Christ is with us, but when we forsake our principles we desert Him" (*Collected Writings*, 4:224).

By way of contrast, Thornwell offered an alternative mode of operation. Rather than continue with the Boards to carry out the missionary cause, he urged a new system of General Assembly committees and commissions. This proposal consisted of four principles.

Its first principle is, that the Church, in her organized capacity, is a society for all spiritual purposes. Every church-court is a Board of Christ's appointment, and every Christian is a member of a Missionary Society. We assume this as our cardinal principle. This was the great point in dispute in the New School controversy.¹³

The second principle, Thornwell continued, was that "the Church being a Missionary Society, the measure of its power, in relation to the details of its action, is whatever is necessary to execute these functions" (*Collected Writings*, 4:224). Wisdom in council, efficiency of action, and accountability were necessary for the execution of the church's work. Thornwell proposed that these necessities were all met and fulfilled by a committee or commission appointed by the General Assembly. "The Committee unites deliberation, simplicity and direct and immediate responsibility to the Assembly. Every desirable end can be secured legitimately without delegating our work to another body, as our vicar in our stead" (*Collected Writings*, 4:224).

Pressing on with his proposed alternative, Thornwell stated a third principle: "But thirdly, the organization must of course look to the raising of funds, and here comes in the idea of systematic giving—of giving as worship—and completes the system" (*Collected Writings*, 4:224). In other words, Thornwell trusted the faithful ministry of the Word in local congregations to urge giving to missions as an act of worship.

We then contended that systematic giving is part of our religion, part of our worship, and a part which cannot be performed by proxy any more than can prayer or praise. So in reference to the Church's work of Evangelization. She is responsible for it herself, in her organized capacity, and may not undertake to do that work by vicar any more than she may pray by vicar. And the great need of the Church is a sense of her obligation to give, and her obligation to work, for her Lord.¹⁴

Fourth, Thornwell contended for a system of committees because of their direct relation to the church

courts. Drawing the comparison to a man using his own limbs, Thornwell urged the Assembly to adopt this system of carrying on her work by her own hand, not the agency of another. He saw this as an offshoot of the doctrine of the church. "I contend for this limitation of the powers of the Church as an essential principle. It is the legacy of our Puritan and Covenanting Fathers" (*Collected Writings*, 4:225).

To those who accused him of novelty and innovation in church operations, Thornwell answered: "Sir, we propose no innovation—only a return to Bible principles and Bible practice. Our doctrine is as old as the New Testament, our plan as old as the Acts of the Apostles" (*Collected Writings*, 4:225). In reply to the men who said, "Leave well enough alone," he declared:

Oh sir, when I think of eight hundred perishing millions abroad, and of the moral wastes of our own country, when I look at the power of the Gospel and the Master's blood to redeem and save, and then think how little progress has been made, I cannot say, 'Leave well enough alone.' I must put it to my brethren, *Is it well enough?* I must urge this Church to inquire if she be not neglecting some power God has given her. She is capable of far higher and more glorious things, and I want her to put forth her own *living hand* directly to this work (*Collected Writings*, 4:226, emphasis in the original).

So closed Thornwell's opening remarks, in full form pressing the missionary imperative upon the conscience of the Church. Note that for Thornwell, zeal for *jus divinum* Presbyterianism is a handmaiden to the Great Commission. In the words of the New York Observer, he spoke "with a thrilling appeal that moved all hearts, holding the Assembly and the thronged galleries in breathless attention, while he summoned the whole host of God's elect to come up to the great work of giving the Gospel to a lost world" (*Collected Writings*, 4:226).

Dr. Charles Hodge rose to reply. His responses to Thornwell indeed exposed a deep-running fault line in American Presbyterianism. What is Presbyterianism? How did the American Presbyterian leadership articulate the fundamentals of their system? Thornwell correctly noted at the beginning of his remarks

13. *Collected Writings*, 4:224. Note Thornwell's observation that the doctrine of the Church was a "great point in dispute" in the Old School-New School division. This doctrine has far-reaching implications for church fellowship and mission.

14. *Ibid.*, 225. For an extended treatment of giving as an act of worship, see also "Address on Systematic Benevolence," in *Writings of Thomas E. Peck* (1895–1897; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 1:130–145.

that “our differences about Boards spring legitimately from our differences as to the nature and constitution of the Church” (*Collected Writings*, 4:218). These were two men and two “parties” with vastly different notions of the Church.

Hodge compared Thornwell’s views to a “yoke” (*Collected Writings*, 228). He colorfully explained that “These are the green withes by which it is proposed to bind the limbs of our Church; or rather, this is the Delilah who is to cut the locks of our Samson, and send him shorn of his strength to be the sport of the Philistines” (*Collected Writings*, 4:228). One of Hodge’s primary convictions concerned the Holy Spirit’s presence in the church. “[A]ll the attributes and prerogatives of power in the Church arise from the indwelling of the Spirit, and where He dwells there is the Church, with authority to do its own work in the best way. . . . She must be free. She must breathe. The power of the Church is where the Holy Ghost is; but in externals He has given her *discretion*” (*Collected Writings*, 4:229, emphasis in original). Hodge believed his views correctly expounded Presbyterian principles. What were those principles? How did this illustrious 19th century theologian articulate Presbyterianism? There were three distinctives of Presbyterian polity, according to Hodge: 1) the parity of the clergy, 2) the rights of the people by means of popular election, and 3) the unity of the church. He thundered away at Thornwell’s “High-Church theory” as impractical and unscriptural.

Let any man open the New Testament and say if our Form of Government is there as our faith is there? . . . I cannot see how any man can say that all the details of our system are in the Bible . . . it is preposterous to expect that so heavy a yoke can be received by those whom Christ made free. . . . The Church has freedom of discretion in selecting the modes of her operation; and to sacrifice this freedom to the claims of a high *jure divino* churchism, which we do not believe to be scriptural, we cannot and will not consent (*Collected Writings*, 4:231).

Here were two visions of Biblical church government, one applying the regulative principle in classic Reformed fashion, the other emancipating the Church from what he called the “yoke” of *jure divino*, or *jus divinum*. Thornwell humorously but pointedly replied to Hodge: “Again, my brother has said that my principles are ‘hyper-hyper-HYPER-High Presbyterianism, and I must retort that his principles are no, no, NO Presbyterianism, no, no, NO Churchism!’” (*Collected Writings*, 4:232, emphasis in original). He marshalled the witness

of the “martyrs who laid down their lives rather than deny the Divine right of Presbytery. The great author of the Second Book of Discipline, and many others of the glorious men of Scotland, held the views we now maintain” (*Collected Writings*, 4:233). Hodge had mocked the notion that Paul would observe the particulars of Presbyterianism: “What would he care for our Book of Discipline, or our Form of Government? Who would want him to care for them? He would ordain whom he pleased, depose whom he pleased, deliver to Satan whom he pleased. . . . He would wait for no decisions of Assemblies” (*Collected Writings*, 4:230). Understandably, this collection of comments astonished the Carolinian. As Presbyterians, Thornwell replied, “we claim to be a true apostolic church. Paul is here. All the Apostles are here. We have the very principles they inculcated, and the very order they inaugurated; and would Paul condemn these?” (*Collected Writings*, 4:233). Thornwell urged and practiced Presbyterianism, in other words, out of obedience to the Bible and imitation of the apostolic church.

In an important section of remarks, Thornwell responded to Hodge’s principles of Presbyterianism. The Southern churchman asserted that this was the crux of the issue. What were the principles of the constitution, and how did they compare with the principles Dr. Hodge enunciated in his own words? “The good brother, in his account of Church government, has not signaled one principal element of this Presbyterianism” (*Collected Writings*, 4:234). Hodge’s Presbyterianism, Thornwell reviewed, consisted of 1) the parity of the clergy, 2) church power located with the people, and 3) unity of the church. Thornwell commented that all denominations believe in the parity of the clergy, except for the Episcopal system. Furthermore, locating church power with the people is more congregational than Presbyterian. Nor is the unity of the church, as explained by Dr. Hodge, a distinctive of Presbyterianism. Rome presses this doctrine by means of papal authority, while Presbyterianism secures the church’s unity through connected parliamentary courts. In sum, Thornwell later explained, “He defined Presbyterianism only by those attributes which it has in common with other systems” (*Collected Writings*, 4:263).

By contrast, Thornwell’s core principles of Presbyterianism boiled down to three convictions: 1) government by representative courts, 2) consisting of ruling and teaching presbyters, 3) securing the unity of the church through the parliamentary system. Biblical church government, Thornwell urged, was tangibly grounded in ecclesiastical courts. Dr. Hodge’s teaching on church

polity could not differ more widely from that of the Columbia professor. The Carolina ecclesiastical statesman had argued for a pure, unadorned Presbyterianism founded upon a divine right, or *jus divinum*. Thornwell closed his argument with a stirring appeal to the presbyters of the General Assembly. As part of his closing remarks, he asked:

“Why make so much ado about so small a matter? It is not a matter of small importance. Moses was as particular to see to every pin of the tabernacle as to the more important points. No point that God saw proper to order could safely be neglected; and we cannot rightly esteem anything a small matter which God has directed us to employ.

I love simplicity. I love simplicity of organization. God's works are simple; the organization of His Church is sublimely simple; her worship is simple; and just as we seek after complexity of schemes we depart from His example. I want to see this Church placed in such a position that every member may consider himself a member of a Society, part of whose *worship* and whose *work* it is to spread the Gospel. I want to see the entire energies of this Church called out in the Master's service, and I want to get clear of every encumbrance that will retard her progress or embarrass her energies” (*Collected Writings*, 4:238).

Thornwell shuddered at any policy which threatened to undermine the fundamental principles of Presbyterianism. Loyalty to Jesus as the King and Head of the church required nothing less.

TAKING UP THE MANTLE

Thornwell led the Old School with a clear voice. The passionate preacher and professor left a deep and lasting influence on his students and the Lower South. One such student was fellow South Carolinian Thomas E. Peck, whose argument I followed in sketching the Biblical argument for *jus divinum*. Another pupil and successor of Thornwell was John L. Girardeau. This Carolina Low-country native studied at Columbia Theological Seminary, where Thornwell gave instruction in systematic theology. Girardeau would later build up and pastor Zion Presbyterian Church in Charleston. Zion began as a mission of Charleston's Second Presbyterian Church, and operated under the authority and ministry of the Charleston Presbytery. “Zion quickly became the most prominent gathering place for the African American

community of the city” (Clarke, 108–109). Girardeau enjoyed a loving, fervent ministry among the slaves and freedmen of Charleston, and served as the chaplain for the 23rd South Carolina regiment during the War Between the States. He was later replaced at Zion with a Northern Presbyterian pastor shortly after the war by the Freedmen's Bureau.¹⁵ The young Girardeau ripened into one of the South's leading presbyters and passionate preachers, despite his deliberate choice to refuse other offers and serve his native South Carolina.

Girardeau took up and developed this doctrine of the church as Thornwell's student, colleague and successor at Columbia Theological Seminary. Dr. Girardeau preached a sermon before the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church (Presbyterian Church in the United States) on May 20, 1875. His text was Matthew 28:20, “Teaching them to observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you,” part of Jesus' final Great Commission to the church. Hear Girardeau as he warmly and fervently argued from this text for the regulative principle as applied to the church:

There are two supreme obligations which this final charge of the Lord Jesus lays upon the heart of the church. The first is the transcendent duty of universal evangelization. The second is the inculcation and maintenance of the truth which Christ, the prophet of the church, has taught, and the commands which Christ, the king of the church, has enjoined. . . . There are obviously a positive and a negative aspect of this charge to the church,—positive, in that she is directed to teach all that Christ has commanded; negative, in that she is implicitly prohibited from teaching anything which He has not commanded.¹⁶

Here, the Southern Presbyterian theologian, Confederate chaplain, and preacher to slaves expounded the Great Commission in its two parallel commands: to publish and preserve the truth. He continued: “Here, then, we have the principle tinged with the blood of our Puritan, Covenanter and Huguenot forefathers—that what is not commanded, either explicitly or implicitly in the Scriptures, is prohibited to the church. She can utter no new doctrine, make no new laws, ordain

15. *The Life Work of John L. Girardeau, D.D., LL.D., Late Professor in the Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Columbia, S.C.*, ed. George A. Blackburn (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1916; repr., Sprinkle Publications), 81–105, 133–137. Hereafter Blackburn, *Life of Girardeau*.

16. *Sermons by John L. Girardeau, D.D., LL.D., Late Professor in the Theological Seminary, Columbia, South Carolina*, ed. George A. Blackburn (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1907; repr., Sprinkle Publications), 370. Hereafter *Sermons*.

no new forms of government, and invent no new modes of worship” (*Sermons*, 370). The Scriptures, he stated, are a complete rule of faith and obedience,¹⁷ the church is to faithfully deliver her King’s commands, and so “the paramount duty of the church is absolute conformity to the written Word as it is expounded to faith by the divine Spirit” (*Sermons*, 374). King Jesus, in other words, issued the church’s mandate to trust, obey, and preach the Word.

Girardeau contrasted this view with that of the church’s discretionary power. This contrasting theory operated with at least one of the following propositions:

namely, that the statements of doctrine in the Scriptures are in the form of concise and comprehensive enunciations of principles, which need to be expanded and developed by additional deliverances; and that the rules laid down for government and worship are regulative, not constitutive—general provisions without the specification of particular modes and minute details; and their application to the varying circumstances and multiplied exigencies of the church demand from her supplementary legislation in a more specific shape. The church is endowed with wisdom for the discharge of these important offices; and so long as she does not positively contradict the Word, her exercise of this discretionary power is legitimate. She is not to be tied to the letter of Scripture—that would be a bondage inconsistent with the liberty wherewith Christ has made her free.... To require her to produce a divine warrant for all that she does, is to fetter her freedom and cripple her energies (*Sermons*, 378).

Here, Girardeau accurately and fairly stated the theory of discretionary power for the church, that “where the Scriptures are silent she may speak, and whatever measure they do not prohibit, and is, to her mind, consistent with their general scope and spirit, she is not precluded from adopting” (*Sermons*, 378). By comparison, note the similarities between this theory and that of Dr. Charles Hodge:

The Church must have freedom; and she cannot do her work, either at home or abroad, if you keep her thus hampered by a prescriptive system.... The Church has freedom of discretion in selecting the modes of her operation; and to sacrifice this freedom to the claims of a high *jure divino* churchism, which we do not believe to

be scriptural, we cannot and will not consent (*Collected Writings*, 4:230–231; Dr. Hodge’s words).

Girardeau resisted, as his mentor before him, the hypothesis that the church is free to carry out the Great Commission unhindered by a “prescriptive system.” First principles must be restated clearly and powerfully with every generation, and here Thornwell’s student and successor successfully took up the mantle.

Girardeau celebrated the sufficiency of Scripture to guide the corporate life of the church. Jesus had not left His church without a specific, concrete guide for her government. The King of the Church had graciously sketched the specific officers, courts, and laws to shepherd His flock.

If, therefore, Christ has, in His Word, ordained any government at all for His church, it must be one which is capable of being realized in a definite form. Has He done this? Has He revealed a government for His church? Is this among the all things which He commanded the apostles and which they were to teach the church to observe? This question will be settled by another. Has He revealed those component elements of a government the existence of which determines the existence of the government itself? The essential elements which enter into the composition of a government are laws, officers, and courts. Each of these elements is revealed in the New Testament—itsself embodies the laws, the officers are given under definite titles and with prescribed functions, and the courts are described. Presbyterians are sure that they find a particular sort of officers, courts peculiarly composed, and a specific principle which distinguishes the mode of administering the government from every other—the principle of government by Presbyters in representative assemblies, discriminating this polity from Prelacy on the one hand and Independency on the other. We have, then—so we firmly believe—a divinely revealed polity of definite form (*Sermons*, 394).

Girardeau possessed an infectious passion for seeing souls won for Jesus Christ. Still, he urged, zeal for evangelism should never trump zeal for purity. Girardeau exhorted the presbyters to guard against allowing enthusiasm for missions to overshadow delight in the divine commands:

Evangelism is the pervading spirit of the age, aggressiveness its dominant policy, and onward to the ends of the earth! its thrilling and inspiring battle-cry. This is the honor and glory of our times—it throws us back

17. See *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646; repr., Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, sixth edition, 2001), 21, 22, 89–90, 130, 287.

across the desert of medieval indifference into sympathy with the sublime genius of the apostolic age. The zeal of Paul is reproduced and incarnated in the burning heralds of the Cross. But the church is not only the divinely commissioned publisher, she is also the divinely commissioned conservator, of the truth (*Sermons*, 409).

Here, Thornwell's successor raised the red flag that the church could neglect her duty to *maintain* the truth in an effort to *propagate* the truth. In other words, if left unchecked, future generations of church planters would begin to build churches with no regard for pure, unadorned Biblical doctrine, worship, and government. He graciously warned and wisely counseled:

She will be more solicitous to preach the gospel in some form to the world than to guard the particular type of it which she impresses on the forming and infantile churches of converted heathen men. As surely as the mother imparts her features and habits to the daughter, so surely will the parent churches at home stamp their cast of doctrine, polity, and worship upon their children on heathen soil. In her onward march the church cannot afford to neglect her baseline (*Sermons*, 410).

CONCLUSION

Every generation must revisit first principles. The sons must own the faith of the fathers through personal study and appropriation. Sadly, after the passing of Girardeau, Peck, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, and Robert Lewis Dabney, the old Southern Presbyterian Church loosened her grip on the inherited traditions. By the mid-20th century, liberalism had stealthily slithered under the door and proclaimed a triumphant victory over the older conservatism. Now that the 21st century has dawned, we need a fresh commitment to *jus divinum*, to the conviction that Jesus is the King of the Church and has provided the sacramental host with everything necessary to execute the Great Commission. The question facing this generation of Presbyterians is the same posed by Thornwell and Girardeau: do we believe that Presbyterianism is sufficient? Certainly, there are flaws in our *execution*, but that does not equate to a flaw in our *system*. As confessional Presbyterians, we believe that our system is of divine origin. What is the future of *jus divinum* Presbyterianism, and how can these convictions answer the challenge of the modern era?

Meditation on James Henley Thornwell and *jus divinum* principles suggest several points of application.

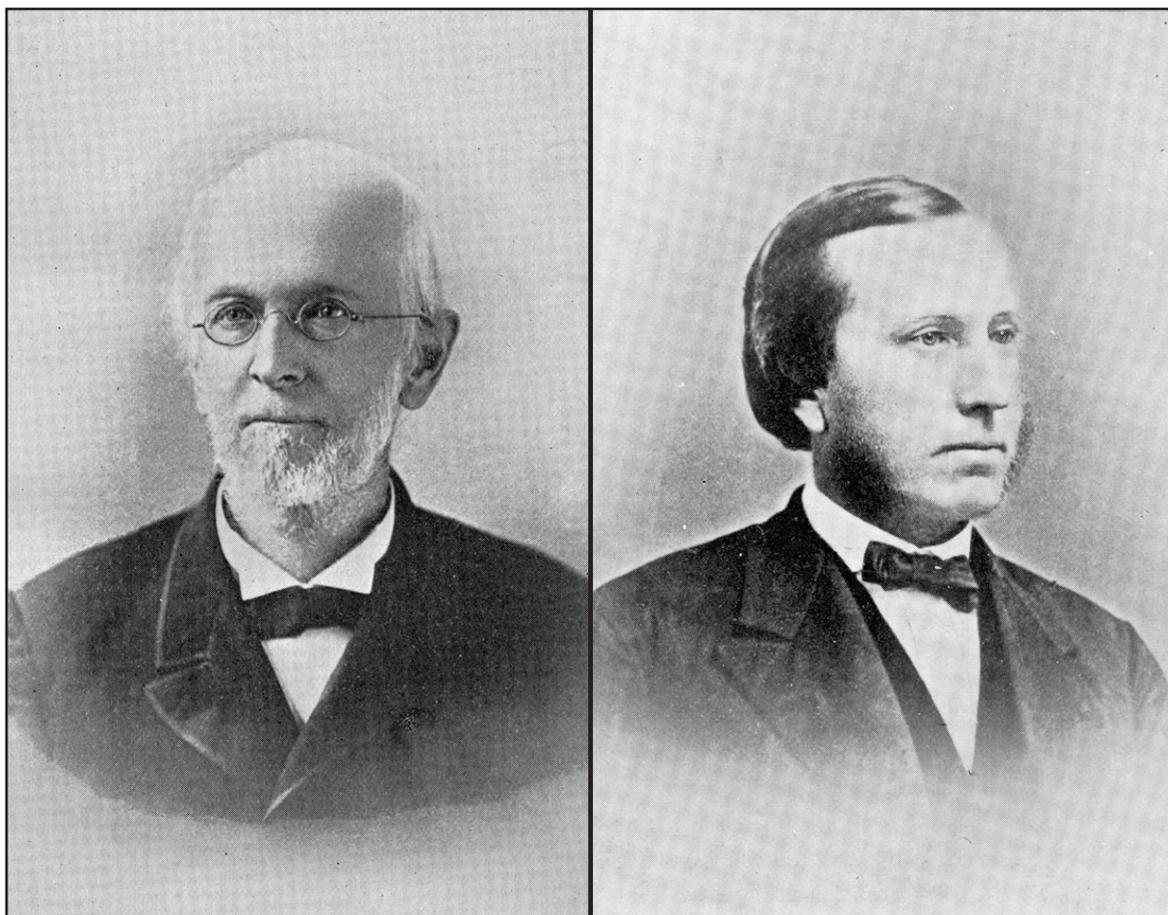
First, there is a great need for vital godliness. Thornwell urged this very point:

If the spirit of love and zeal does not exist among us, it is vain to offer unto the Lord any other oblation. He will not accept a substitute for the heart.... The Church, the whole Church—all the living members of the Redeemer's mystical body—must be awake and active in his service, each in his particular province; and if our congregations are now asleep, our first step should be to peal the trumpet in their ears, to break their carnal slumbers, and to tell them, in the name of God, that the Master has need of them. Let us take and propose no substitutes for vital piety and active godliness (*Collected Writings*, 4:171).

Secondly, we ought to cultivate a deeper faith and reliance on divine appointments. If we find apathy and indifference among our branches of Zion, we need not turn to new methods and machinery. We ought to fall on our knees, calling on the Lord of the Harvest to quicken the zeal of His people. We ought to walk by faith, reminding ourselves of the first things: that the preaching of the Gospel is still the power of God unto salvation, and the ordinary means of grace wield extraordinary, unchanging power. If we long for a new day of spiritual blessing, let us extend our hands for the mantle of our fathers. Let us press on in our preaching, praying, and pastoring. Let us learn anew the conviction that duty is ours, the consequences are God's.

Third, we ought to be ready to propose alternatives that align with the Word. Of course, we mourn when we see that the city of our God is being defaced by accommodation and the traditions of men. Yet we need a willingness to sacrifice comfort and propose an alternative solution. Is this not what Thornwell did over the course of his ministry? Certainly, we should proceed with caution, decorum, and love, but we should proceed nonetheless. It is far easier to complain about the mess of the church than to propose wise, Biblical solutions. Thornwell, ever the Southern gentleman, is a model of such warm, determined wisdom.

Finally, we need to pray for a sense of call. What has the King of the Church called us to do in our particular locales? We have the molding and shaping of a church in our hands. These souls entrusted to us are God's field, and He has sent us to sow, water, prune, and harvest. As confessional Presbyterians, what fruits do we wish to see from our ministries? Do we not long to see men and women of conviction? Are our hearts not burdened with petitions ascending to the throne,



Thomas E. Peck and John L. Girardeau. Images courtesy of the PCA Historical Center. Used by permission.

praying that our people will grow in grace and obedience to the Word? Would we settle for anything less than the satisfaction of knowing we did our Master's will? May it be said of us that we took up the mantle of a pure, unadorned Presbyterianism, bowing in submission to the Word in our worship, doctrine, and government. May it be said of us that our highest ambition was to walk in strict conformity to the law and the testimony. Hear the Southern Presbyterian Benjamin Morgan Palmer, Thornwell's friend and biographer, as he reflected on his call and that of the Southern Presbyterian Church:

The remainder of this life will be consecrated in the fear of God to the development, the perpetuation and exposition of the principles of Presbyterianism as I understand them, as they are summarily expressed in our

standards; and I am unwilling to run any ventures by which this Presbyterianism, which I desire to be more perfect in this Church of ours, shall be strangled.¹⁸

Here, in the corners of the world, let a pure Presbyterianism find a refuge—a Presbyterianism that I believe is on the eve of being strangled in the Northern Church, that cannot successfully, under present arrangements, be worked out elsewhere anywhere on the globe but here. Let us, in our isolation, in our obscurity, upon this plane, work out our mission, and the Lord will give us all the prominence that we deserve and all that we desire; and we shall speak out from this obscurity, from the chambers in which the Lord God has placed us for a time to hide us, a voice that will peal over the earth and whose echoes will ring until that trumpet sounds which shall wake the dead to judgment! (Johnson, 478).

Amen. May it be so. ■

18. Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer* (1906; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), 477.