

James Henley Thornwell: An American Theologian

By C. N. Willborn

INTRODUCTION TO LIFE

On Wednesday, December 9, 1812 James Henley Thornwell was born to James Thornwell (of English descent) and Martha Terrell (a Welsh Baptist). The Thornwell home was located in what was then known as the Marlborough District of South Carolina, near present day Bennettsville in the northeastern part of the Palmetto State.¹ This district of the colony known as Carolina was originally settled by Welsh Baptist and soon thereafter by Scots and Scots-Irish.²

In his eighth year, James lost his father. His mother valiantly assumed all the duties associated with rearing James and his five living siblings. With the aid of kinsmen like Captain John Terrell, Martha Terrell Thornwell labored for the welfare of her children. “It must have been during the first portion of the year A.D. 1821,” wrote B. M. Palmer, “that this widowed mother found herself at Level Green, in the new home provided by her generous kinsman; and here it was that young Thornwell received the rudiments of an English education” (LLJHT, 16). In time, young Thornwell’s intellectual reputation and character gained the attention of wealthy leaders in the region who took a special interest in his financial situation and future education. General James Gillespie, a wealthy planter, and William H. Robbins, Esq., a young and rising lawyer in the nearby town of Cheraw, “became henceforth the joint patrons of our young friend” (LLJHT, 21). Their support provided for his education, including a baccalaureate degree from South Carolina College (now University of South Carolina). Their intent was to educate the young man for civic service as a legal mind and so he pursued the study of law in the college. The end was that he became a Christian, became convinced he should pursue a vocation in academics and the church, and so was made the brilliant young James Henley Thornwell.

Although this scion of South Carolina did not live

to celebrate his fiftieth birthday, his life was a full and active one, as this timeline suggests.

Timeline

- December 1812: born in South Carolina
- December 1831: highest honors graduate of South Carolina College
- January 1832: graduate studies at South Carolina College and private tutor
- January 1833–34: Principal of Academy at Cheraw
- Fall 1834: Andover Seminary and Harvard University for studies
- November 1834: licensed to preach by Presbytery of Harmony
- June 1835: ordained and installed as pastor of Lancaster Presbyterian Church
- December 1835: married to Nancy White Witherspoon
- November 1837: South Carolina College Faculty in Metaphysics
- January 1840: pastor [First] Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC
- January 1841: Professor of Sacred Literature and Evidences of Christianity, South Carolina College
- May–September 1841: travels in Europe
- June 1847: Moderator of PCUSA General Assembly at 34

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1. For a biographical treatment see B. M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* [hereafter LLJHT] (1875; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986). For a more recent intellectual treatment of Thornwell’s life and thought see James O. Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986).

2. A recent history of South Carolina provides much of the early history. See Walter Edgar, *South Carolina: A History* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

June 1847: founding editor and contributor to *Southern Presbyterian Review*
 May 1851: pastor Glebe Street Presbyterian Church, Charleston, SC
 January 1852: returned to South Carolina College as President
 1855: publication of *Discourses on Truth*
 January 1856: Professor of Theology Columbia Seminary (Synod of South Carolina and Georgia)
 May–September 1860: second trip to British Isles and Europe
 August 1862: died in Charlotte, NC and buried in Elmwood Cemetery, Columbia, SC

Thornwell's literary contributions certainly do not match in volume those of his famous contemporary Charles Hodge, but they were nevertheless significant and highly prized. Much of his writing appeared in the form of academic articles and polemical efforts ranging from theology to ecclesiology to philosophy to ethics. His first monograph appeared in 1855 from the New York publisher Robert Carter & Brothers.³ *Discourses on Truth* originated as chapel addresses delivered in the Rutledge Chapel of the South Carolina College in the spring of 1851. Praise for the content of this volume came from as far away as Sir William Hamilton of Scotland.

INTRODUCTION TO THOUGHT

In a previous paper, we considered the ecclesiastical debates that involved Thornwell and his Princeton Contemporary, Charles Hodge.⁴ While ecclesiology is certainly a *loci* associated with Thornwell's name, there was much more to Thornwell. Thornwell was highly philosophic in his thinking and theological rhetoric. For

many readers it would be very easy to become caught up in the highly philosophical nature of his endeavors or so distracted that the basics were missed. Indeed, Thornton Whaling wrote "that he was one of the most *philosophic* of theologians. He thought there was more laziness than piety, more stupidity than consecration in refusing to use the human reason up to the full limits of its power in every region of thought and of faith."⁵

B. M. Palmer described Thornwell's utilization of philosophy in the theological enterprise: "Dr. Thornwell's studies in philosophy were not lost upon him as a Theologian. If he sought to ascertain the bounds of reason in the one, he was not likely to transcend them in the other. Penetrated with the conviction that God can be known only so far as He has been pleased to reveal Himself, he bowed with perfect docility before the dogmatic authority of the Scriptures" (*LLJHT*, 545).

It is probably important for us to illustrate further the commitment of Thornwell to the Holy Scriptures as the *principium theologiae*. This is especially true since he was an advocate of natural realism and stood in the line of the Scottish school of Realism.⁶ Many in our own day express skepticism in this philosophical school and question the emphasis upon human reason associated therewith. It is important to understand that Thornwell's commitments to Calvinistic anthropology and soteriology, a robust covenantal theology, and the divine authority and inspiration of Scripture answer many concerns. Take for example this conversation with Thornwell as recollected by B. M. Palmer: "I have been cogitating upon such and such a subject, and can see no flaw in my reasoning, but I am grieved with one verse in the Bible;" and then he would add, with inexpressible simplicity, "You know, [Palmer], that if there is but one passage of Scripture against us, our speculations must go to the winds" (in *LLJHT*, 545). From this we see that Scripture was for Thornwell the guide and ultimate interpreter of human reason.

Here it might well be helpful to press a point on his commitment to Scottish Realism or what is commonly called Common Sense Philosophy. As suggested above, this school has often been painted with the Enlightenment brush so as to tint it with a heavy hue of rationalism. Any reader of Thornwell's words above, or his work in general, or even Hodge or Warfield, will quickly note that he and men of similar convictions did not let their philosophical realism subvert their devotion to divine revelation and the doctrines taught therein. How can it be, one may ask, that a philosophical tradition that was used by Unitarians, Arminians, and secularists in general could be used alongside the historical creeds,

3. James Henley Thornwell, *Discourses on Truth* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1855). This volume is presently in print as *Whatever Things are True* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2005).

4. C. N. Willborn, "Hodge and Thornwell: 'Princes in Israel,'" in *The Confessional Presbyterian*, vol. 8 (2012): 44–54.

5. Thornton Whaling, "Dr. Thornwell as a Theologian," in *Centennial Addresses: Commemorating the Birth of the Reverend James Henley Thornwell, D.D., LL.D.* (Spartanburg, SC: Band & White, Printers, 1913), 21. The reader will also find this volume printed in its entirety in this edition of *The Confessional Presbyterian* due to the generous labors of Dr. Barry Waugh who re-typeset the entire document for this occasion.

6. Seminal and representative Scottish Realists included Thomas Reid (1710–96), Dugald Stewart (1753–1828), and William Hamilton (1788–1856). Prominent Presbyterians who utilized Scottish Realism would include Archibald Alexander, Thomas Chalmers, William Cunningham, R. L. Dabney, Charles Hodge, John L. Girardeau, and B. B. Warfield.

confessions, and divine revelation to promote and defend Reformed theology? John L. Girardeau, a spiritual descendent of Thornwell and philosophical theologian in his own right, offers some insight to this question and to his predecessor in the theology chair at Columbia: “He divides the class of Common Sense Philosophers into two schools: that of the Rationalists, who not only make the fundamental laws of belief independent of experience for existence, but also for development; and that of those philosophers who, admitting that these primary principles are independent of experience for their existence, ground their development in experience alone. This latter school he designates as the School of Experience. He definitely claimed to belong to this school. He utterly repudiates the view of the Rationalists” (in Palmer, LLJHT, 541).

Rationalists and rationalism then can be summarized as those who depend upon the human reason for the source of fundamental laws *and* the development of those fundamental laws of knowledge. There were men who utilized Scottish Realism in this rationalistic manner according to both Thornwell and Girardeau. Thornwell did believe that the primary principles or fundamental laws are endowed by man’s Creator independent of human experience. However, these fundamental laws or “first principles”⁷ are not *developed* independent of experience. In other words, human reason alone is not sufficient for the epistemological enterprise. There is a subjective element, namely, faith that is necessary for the development of knowledge.

Now listen again as Girardeau defended Thornwell (and himself at the same time) from the accusation of being Kantian in his acknowledgement of the subjective: “Dr. Thornwell, however, was not a disciple of Kant in reference to the office discharged by the fundamental laws of belief. Kant was a pure subjectivist. The certainty of existence for which he contended was altogether subjective. The Scottish school, on the other hand, found in the fundamental laws of belief vouchers and guarantees for the real existence of the external world; they grounded the objective certainty of knowledge in the subjective necessity of believing” (in LLJHT, 542).

The conclusion one should draw from this brief explanation of Thornwell’s philosophical commitments is that he was *not* a rationalist. He did maintain stoutly that man, possessing the *imago Dei*, was a rational being. The Fall did not eradicate the divine image in man, but corrupted it, leaving one “dead in the trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1 ESV). Therefore, reason could not be the beginning and end of knowledge for Thornwell. Faith had to play into the epistemological enterprise.

Knowledge for Thornwell then came from a union of reason and faith.

From this brief introduction, we move to his basic conception of theology and open to the readers some of the contributions of this American theologian. Our starting point will be our subject’s fundamental commitments and approach to theology. We shall follow Thornwell’s own outline “as delivered on the evening of the 13th of Oct., 1857, at the Presbyterian Church of Columbia, S.C.”⁸

THEOLOGY AS AN ECCLESIASTICAL PURSUIT

Although Thornwell was highly philosophic, he understood that he was not a speculative theologian.⁹ He was a man under authority. He was under the authority of the Church, but ultimately he rested under the authority of God’s Word. As the theologian, Thornwell understood his work to be hedged in by the Presbyterian Church’s theological commitments as set forth in the Westminster Standards, which included the Confession and Catechism. In his inaugural address as Professor of Polemic and Didactic Theology, he said,

The security which you have exacted from me, that I shall not indulge a licentious liberty of speculation, nor teach for doctrines the commandments of men; the restraints which you have put upon the excursions of philosophy or the conjectures of fancy; the limits within which you have wisely and righteously bound me,—are no oppression to my spirit. The pledge which I have solemnly given, that I shall neither directly nor indirectly teach any doctrine contrary to the venerable Standards which I have just subscribed, I mean faithfully to redeem (CWJHT, 1:575).

7. “First principles” was a term used by Thomas Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind, on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764; rpt. Bristol, UK: Thoemmes Antiquarian Books, 1990) for those foundations or preconditions of knowledge. See also Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

8. John B. Adger, “Prefatory Note to Appendixes,” in James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell* [hereafter CWJHT], ed. John B. Adger (1871; rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 571.

9. One cannot help but recall R. L. Dabney’s suggestion that Jonathan Edwards’ occasionally indulged in the speculative enterprise. See Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871; 1878; rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 100–104; 338, 339 and *The Practical Philosophy* (1897; rpt. Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1984), 222. It is not in the purview of this article to defend Dabney’s claim, but we raise his claim as a contrast to Thornwell. While philosophical and sometimes dense, Thornwell seems harnessed to the church and the Scriptures in a way that tempered any temptation to speculation.

How could he make such a commitment, a commitment to “neither directly nor indirectly teach any doctrine contrary to the venerable Standards” of the Presbyterian church? One can imagine an objection: shouldn’t he vow not to teach contrary to the Holy Scriptures? Wasn’t he claiming too much for the Westminster Standards? Wasn’t he claiming, therefore, too little for the Bible? For Thornwell the Westminster Standards were a true distillation of the major teachings of the Holy Scriptures. He believed, based upon his study of Holy Scriptures, that the Westminster Confession and Catechisms gave a faithful presentation of the Scriptures themselves. So, there was for him no discord between fealty to the Standards and fealty to the Bible. Indeed, it could be said that it was his high view of Holy Scripture that allowed him confidence in the confessional standards of his church. Because Scripture was sufficient and perspicuous, and that because of its divine nature, it could be faithfully summarized and confessed.¹⁰

So then what was his view of the Bible? In his classroom lectures he established his course upon this bedrock principle: “the true principle, the only infallible source and measure of religious truth, is the Word of God—such a revelation being necessary to a full and perfect development of the laws which determine all our spiritual exercises, and absolutely indispensable to furnish the objects out of which most of them spring” (CWJHT 1:48). The “Word of God” and the “revelation” he delineates clearly: it is the Protestant Bible as detailed in the first chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith. “Writings are the only permanent records of truth,” argued Thornwell, “and God has illustrated His infinite goodness in giving us a perfect and infallible rule of religious truth in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, which are His Word. The Bible, therefore, is the Religion of Protestants—the supreme standard of faith and duty” (Ibid).

This leads the curious reader to the question of “inspiration.” How is the Bible the “perfect and infallible rule of religious truth”? Paul Leslie Garber represented Thornwell as an adherent to “the verbal dictation theory of inspiration.”¹¹ However, this interpretation is shown to be untenable in the light of Thornwell’s own notes:

10. For further exposition of this relation of Scripture to Confession see C.N. Willborn, “Southern Presbyterianism: The Character of a Tradition,” in *Confessing our Hope*, ed. Joseph Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn (Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2004), 316–22.

11. Paul Leslie Garber, “The Religious Thought of James Henley Thornwell” (PhD diss., Duke University, 1939), 166.

12. Thornwell’s unpublished notes quoted in Morton H. Smith, *Studies in Southern Presbyterian Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1962), 129.

“[Inspiration], therefore, is to make the teaching of the inspired person the teaching of God. If it fails to do this, it is nothing. We may therefore define [inspiration], as that influence of the Holy Ghost by which what is said or written becomes the Word of God. What the influence is, we are unable to determine. The effect to us, so far as the ground of faith is concerned, is just the same, as if no human instrument had been employed at all. The Divine authority is just as complete.” First, we should note that Thornwell is emphasizing the Divine side of *θεόπνευστος*. The Holy Spirit is deemed the author of Scripture; thus Scripture is “the Word of God.” Second, it is interesting to note that Thornwell decries any speculation on “how” the Holy Spirit does this work—“What the influence is, we are unable to determine.” Third, he concludes that the “God-breathed” nature of Scripture is complete, although we do not know how the Spirit worked upon the human instrument.¹²

He then concludes that the dictation theory fails in that it ignores the human element of the *θεόπνευστος* process by making human instruments passive. Inspiration “includes both [i.e., divine and human]—without explaining either. It makes the Scriptures an incarnate Word” (Ibid). The divine *and* human elements are there in the production of the Bible.

Thus, for Thornwell the Bible is a God-given collection of sixty-six “perfect and infallible” books that provide “the supreme standard of faith and duty.” “It is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

The Bible, then, is the source of theology because it is from God through men to man. It is the true and clear testimony, so that man illumined by the Spirit may appropriate and digest it. As Thornwell put it: “The Spirit educates and unfolds a Divine life under the regulative guidance of the Word. The Bible and the Spirit are therefore equally essential to a Protestant theology” (CWJHT, 1:49). Here the Carolinian is standing in the Confessional tradition of Westminster as seen in the following citations. First, “...our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is the inward work of the Holy Spirit, bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts” (WCF 1.5); second, “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory ... is either expressly set down in scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture: ... Nevertheless, we acknowledge the inward illumination of the Spirit of God to be necessary for the saving understanding of such things as

are revealed in the word” (WCF 1.6); and, finally, “The supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the scripture” (WCF 1.10).

THE SCIENCE OF THEOLOGY

Having established the Holy Scriptures as the source book of theology, Thornwell moves to define the discipline. It will surprise no one familiar with nineteenth century theology that Thornwell describes theology as a science. “If *science*,” argued Thornwell, “is taken in the subjective sense for habitual knowledge, Theology is pre-eminently a science.... If *science* is objectively taken for a mere logical and systematic arrangement of dependent and connected truths ... If by *science* is meant the highest certainty of reflective knowledge, then we have it here in a pre-eminent degree” (CWJHT, 1:578–79). Theology is the systemizing of dependent and connected truths, truths that may not share “unity of matter,” but are nevertheless united in “relation.” Theology is science in that it is highly reflective. That is, the content before the theologian is subjected to the highest degree of scrutiny in determining the proper relation and subsequent distribution.

But shouldn’t faith be a part of the definition of theology, since it is about God? Indeed, faith is essential. Yet, Thornwell would argue that all science involves faith. Listen to this negative statement of “science” from his 1857 Address: “But if by science is meant a deduction from principles intuitively given, and a demonstration from the nature and properties of its matter, then there is no science of God, but at the same time there is no science of anything else. All knowledge begins in faith.” Why does he say this? “Principles,” he argued, “must be accepted, not proved, and it matters not whether you call them principles of faith or reason” (CWJHT, 579).

The theological enterprise is a science. Indeed, “It is the *queen science*.” The reader may have heard this term used before and wondered what exactly it means. Thornwell fleshes it out when he says, “[Theology] makes all other sciences ministers to God, and draws a Divine life from them. It quickens knowledge and converts speculation into life” (Ibid.). You might say, theology is the queen mother of science drawing the family of truth together around the Giver of truth. Elsewhere he refers to the “object of theology” and concludes that the object of all theological work is God. You see, for Thornwell theology is science, indeed “the science of

religion.” As such “it is the system of doctrine in its logical connection and dependence, which, when spiritually discerned, produces true piety” (Ibid., 1:36). Once again we have theology presented as the highest of sciences, contemplating “the knowledge of God ... as a manifested object” (Ibid., 40). The science of religion, which theology is, “contemplates its object [God] as the infinite and the absolutely perfect. It is this quality of the object which determines the peculiar character of our religious energies” (Ibid., 41).

As a science, theology involves, as we have seen, distribution of the data, particularly that drawn from God’s revelation to man. Many readers of this article will no doubt be familiar with various distributions within theological disciplines. Within the discipline of biblical theology distribution varies. Sometimes a biblical-theological approach is distributed along a covenantal or **redemptive-historical** line. This biblical-theological approach is represented in the well-known *Biblical Theology* (1948) of Geerhardus Vos. Sometimes a biblical-theological approach is offered which is distributed **thematically**, as in J. Barton Payne’s *The Theology of the Older Testament* (1962). We should mention as well Paul House, *Old Testament Theology* (1998) and Bruce Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (2007) whose distribution is driven by the *canonical* (inclusive of thematic) approach.

Consideration should also be given to the discipline of systematic theology. In late modern and postmodern church history, there is a distribution scheme familiar to many readers of systematic theology. In the 19th century it is found in Charles Hodge’s encyclopedic *Systematic Theology* and W. G. T. Shedd’s eloquent *Dogmatic Theology*. The same distribution is largely followed in the 20th century works of Louis Berkhof, Wayne Grudem, and Robert Reymond. And more recently Michael Horton and Douglas Kelly have introduced their contributions to systematic theology following the same general lines of distribution, which run something like this: God, Man and Sin, Christology, Soteriology, Ecclesiology, and Eschatology.

If, however, one has read Medieval or early Modern theologies one will realize that this scheme of distribution has not always been followed. Calvin, for instance, in his *Institutes* distributes his system quite differently. This is all to say that it should not be a big surprise to the theological student to learn that the “distribution” question has been debated rather strongly at times. After all, there is no example given in the Bible. There is no explicit, detailed direction for distributing theological *loci* for systematians, like there was for building the

Tabernacle or Temple, for example. Perhaps, however, a plan of distribution “by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from scripture” (Westminster Confession of Faith 1.6).

James Henley Thornwell was of the mind that the divisions of theology were set forth in Scripture, albeit in a general fashion. His scheme hinges on this: “Religion never contemplates its object absolutely, but in relation to us” (CWJHT, 1:42). Here he has in mind God in relation to man as the contemplation of the theologian. With this as a foundational point, Thornwell then looks to the Scriptures and sees three relational periods: 1) God in relation to man in the prelapsarian epoch. “The development of those essential relations: betwixt God and man out of which arises a moral government, together with an exposition of the fundamental principles of such a government. This part, embracing the being and character of God, the original state of man, and his natural duties and obligations, might be called Preliminary, or Introductory.” 2) God in relation to man under the Covenant of Works. “This part might be called Natural Religion, as it treats of the form in which man became related to God immediately upon his creation.” 3) God in relation to man in under the Covenant of Grace. “This part may be called Supernatural Religion, or the Religion of Grace, and embraces all that is peculiar to Christianity” (Ibid., 42). Thornwell summarized these divisions in a helpful manner when he wrote: “The first part treats of God and of moral government in its essential principles; the second part treats of moral government as modified by the Covenant of Works; the third part treats of moral government as modified by the Covenant of Grace” (Ibid.).

Given the novelty of Thornwell’s distribution when contrasted with that familiar to many present-day readers, perhaps a bit of critique may be useful. A contemporary of both Thornwell and Hodge, John L. Girardeau provides a helpful evaluation of distributive schemes. Of Charles Hodge’s distribution—God, Man, Christology, etc.—he applauds it for being convenient. However, he concludes that it lacks “a comprehensive and generic character.”¹³ The divisions sometime “interpenetrate one another,” while lacking “such quality which brings into unity all the parts” (DTQ, 52, 53). On the other hand, Thornwell’s “distribution has the merit of being free from the defect which marks [Hodge’s]” because “it collects the members of the division into unity upon the principle of moral government” (Ibid., 55).

13. John L. Girardeau, *Discussions of Theological Questions* (hereafter DTQ), George A. Blackburn, ed. (Richmond: The Presbyterian Committee of Publications, 1905), 52.

While Girardeau goes on to offer suggestions as to how Thornwell’s threefold approach to theology might be improved, it is not of importance for our purposes. It is enough to know his divisions—moral government, moral government amended by the covenant of works, and moral government amended by the covenant of grace. Thornwell’s commitment to examine God in relation to man emanated from Holy Scripture, the source of theology.

SUMMARY OF THORNWELL’S COMMITMENTS AND FUNDAMENTALS OF THEOLOGY

Thus far we have considered Thornwell’s philosophical commitment, which he shared with many 19th century Presbyterian peers as well as others. He was a Scottish Realist who qualified his realism to avoid the charge and the pitfalls of rationalism. His realism was one moored to this truth: “The Bible and the Spirit are therefore equally essential to a Protestant theology” (CWJHT, 1:49). The Spirit is the active agent who enlightens and rectifies the human reason so that the Bible is understood and God is known by faith. So the theologian, in order to rightly do his “scientific” work, must apply both reason and faith to the divine revelatory source. The goal of the theologian’s work is to summarize his findings in a manner consistent with the Scriptural data. Thus, for Thornwell the Word-Spirit product of the reasoned faith may fall under three heads: 1) God’s relation to man in his original state as a moral being; 2) God’s relation to man as a moral being under the Covenant of Works; and, 3) God’s relation to man as a moral being under the Covenant of Grace. The work of the theologian is to be done, according to Thornwell, under the auspices of the church and for the welfare of the church. Theology is an ecclesiastical exercise.

DISTINCTIVES OF A THORNWELLIAN THEOLOGY

With Thornwell’s foundational commitments established, we shall consider some of the distinctives of his theology. As we undertake this section it should be noted that Thornwell was “intensely Presbyterian.” He intimated this strongly in his 1857 Inaugural Address upon his election to the Professorship at the Columbia Seminary. “I was not born in your department of the kingdom of God [remember his mother was Welsh Baptist]; it was that Confession which first drew me to you. Your noble testimony for God and His truth brought me into your communion, and the same love to your doctrines which first induced me to cast in my lot among you continues to burn in my bosom, and to inspire me with zeal for the propagation of those

doctrines in all wise and proper methods” (CWJHT, 1:575). He was not a Presbyterian because of birth or convenience, but by biblical conviction. He was zealous for his adopted church. He loved her. He declared his passion for Presbyterianism outright in the historic “Address to All Churches of Christ,” delivered at the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America when he said, “We are not ashamed to confess that we are intensely Presbyterian” (CWJHT, 4:463).

ECCLESIOLOGY

So, when one thinks of James Henley Thornwell, his Presbyterian ecclesiology is usually the first *loci* considered. In 1931 William Childs Robinson published his 1928 PhD dissertation written for the faculty at Harvard.¹⁴ A major figure in that dissertation was James Henley Thornwell and his contributions to the work and legacy of Columbia Theological Seminary. Not surprisingly Dr. Robbie (as he was known to his students) developed first the Seminary’s commitment to certain “Thornwellian” principles, and number one in that list was ecclesiology. From the strong Thornwellian stress upon the headship of Christ over His church, to the church’s form of government, to the biblical offices of the church, to the sacraments of the church, Robinson traces out the commitment of Thornwell and the Southern Presbyterian Church.¹⁵

In every area of church life and thought Thornwell was committed to the *jure divino* or *jus divinum* principle. Later in this same journal this distinctive will be set forth at some length, but for now let us understand the principle as summarized by Thornwell’s theological successor at Columbia: “...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 no new forms of government, and invent no new modes of worship. This is but a statement of a fundamental principle of Protestantism, contra-distinguishing it from rationalism on the one hand, and Romanism on the other, that the Scriptures as the word of Christ, are the complete and ultimate rule of faith and duty.”¹⁶ This was not only Thornwell’s perspective on the church and her government and thought, as expressed by John Girardeau, but it was that of men of the caliber of R. L. Dabney, Thomas E. Peck, John B. Adger, B. M. Palmer, Stuart Robinson, and R. J. Breckenridge. As E. T. Thompson explains, “The Southern Presbyterian Church was committed

from its initial organization in 1861 to a theory of the church advanced by Thomas Cartwright in England in the latter part of the 16th century, embodied in the Scottish Second Book of Discipline (1581) and championed by James Henley Thornwell and other Southern Presbyterian divines as over against Charles Hodge of Princeton in the 1850’s.”¹⁷

Then in 1879, with the revision of the Book of Church Order, *jure divino* Presbyterianism was embedded in the very constitution of the PCUS.¹⁸ “One advantage claimed for the new book,” according to E. T. Thompson, “was its inclusion of a clear statement of *jure divino* Presbyterianism, as set forth in the old Scottish Second Book of Discipline, but dropped from the Westminster Standards by an act of the Long Parliament which had called the Westminster Assembly into being. Acceptance of the scriptural form of church government, however, was not said to be essential to the being of the church, but only to its perfection” (Thompson, PS, 2:415). The aim of Thornwell before his death (1862) and the fathers of the PCUS in the revised Book of Church Order was to set forth a more scriptural Presbyterianism. In so doing they returned to the teaching of their Scottish fathers, especially as it was set forth by Andrew Melville (and others) in the Second Book of Discipline.

Office of Deacon

Attention to both the Scottish Book and the Scriptures would manifest itself in a number of ways, but chiefly in relation to the office of deacon. “Neither Calvin nor Knox had made provision for the ordinations of elders and deacons by the laying on of hands, holding that such ceremony perpetuated Romish superstition. The Scottish Second Book of Discipline, however, provided for the imposition of hands in every ordination as being both scriptural and necessary. But though this had become customary in the case of ministers, it had not for elders

14. William Childs Robinson, *Columbia Theological Seminary and the Southern Presbyterian Church* (Decatur, GA: Dennis Lindsley Printing Co., 1931).

15. The Southern Presbyterian Church is the common name for the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (1861–65) and then The Presbyterian Church in the United States (1865–82).

16. John L. Girardeau, “The Discretionary Power of the Church,” in *Sermons on Important Subjects*, George A. Blackburn, ed. (Columbia, SC: The State Co., 1907), 370. This was Girardeau’s Moderator’s Address before the General Assembly of the PCUS in 1875.

17. Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* [hereafter PS], 3 vols. (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1973), 2:414.

18. Many would be willing to argue that this *jure divino* emphasis was the cornerstone of the Book of Church Order brought in from the PCUS and adapted for use by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) in 1973.

or deacons” (PS, 2:417). Later, in the first half of the 19th century, it was acknowledged that the office of deacon had been neglected in the church. Men like Chalmers of Scotland and Thomas Peck and James Henley Thornwell in the US made motions to remedy what they saw as a low view of the offices and corresponding unscriptural recognition of deacons and ruling elders in particular. The Revised Book of Church Order (1879) of the PCUS gave correctives for both practice in ordination and expanded duties of the deacons and ruling elders. With the clear emphases of the new Book and continued support from Dabney and Peck of Union (VA) Seminary and Girardeau of Columbia, “[t]he office of the deacon was now found in most of the churches” (PS, 2:420).¹⁹

Thornwell’s attention to ecclesiology and commitment to *jure divino* Presbyterianism led opponents like Charles Hodge to charge him with “hyper-hyper-hyper High Church Presbyterianism” (CWJHT, 4:228). Yet, his emphases produced some very practical results. For example, a more active diaconate resulted. It was no longer an office relegated to a sub-station of church life and no longer a stepping stone to the office of elder. No longer would the deacon simply count money or set up tables; now his work covered the entire scope of temporal affairs in the local church and “the higher courts” of the church.²⁰ The office of deacon became a complementary office rather than a subservient office. Indeed, Thornwell’s contribution at this point helps curb the tendency to hierarchism in Presbyterianism.

19. For an examination of the office of deacon, which deals with its obscurity and its renaissance in Scotland and the United States see C. N. Willborn, “The Diaconate: God’s Office of Temporal Affairs,” in *Confessing Our Hope*, Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and C. N. Willborn, eds. (Taylors, SC: The Presbyterian Press, 2004), 153–180.

20. See C. N. Willborn, “The Deacon: A Divine Right Office with Divine Right Uses,” in *The Confessional Presbyterian*, 5, (2009): 185–98. Following the revisions to the Book of Church in the PCUS that continued through 1938, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) enshrined the same high view of the office and work of the diaconate in its Book of Church Order 9 and 9–5 in particular.

21. There is a notable exception to the great omission: Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., “The Debate On The Administration of Missions Led By James Henley Thornwell In The Presbyterian Church, 1839–1861,” Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1977.

22. In his reflections on the tenth anniversary of the Old School-New School division of the PCUSA, Robert J. Breckinridge characterized the New School Assembly as Semi-Pelagian. See Robert J. Breckinridge, “Some Thoughts on the Development of the Presbyterian Church In The U.S.A.,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 2, no. 3 (December 1848): 319. For a recent discussion of the events surrounding the Plan of Union see D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2007), 109–27. For an older treatment of the Plan of Union with a Congregational flavor see Williston Walker, *A History of the Congregational Churches in the United States*, American Church History Series (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1894), 316ff.

MISSIOLOGY

In relation to the utility of the deacon in the work of the church, beyond the bounds of the local congregation, Thornwell offered another distinguishing feature to his ecclesiological reformation and that concerns **missiology**. It is a detail that is most often missing from a Thornwellian discussion, and is one about which he expressed great interest and into which he provided marvelous insight. His high view of Biblical ecclesiology and the church’s unique role in worldwide discipleship may well be one of the great contributions he made to the church. Yet, the missionary enterprise of the church, as a Thornwellian distinctive, has been all but overlooked, even by those most fond of the great man of the South.²¹

In this section we will provide an overview of Thornwell’s missiological ruminations and a survey of the principal structure undergirding his approach to the church’s missionary extension. Due to space, discussion is limited to “the facts,” with little exposition. The principles are, however, practical by their very nature, providing *an analytical and helpful Biblical structure for local churches and presbyteries in their international and domestic outreach*. It may be helpful for the author at this point to simply warn the reader that this aspect of Thornwell’s thought has never been applied in a broadly ecclesiastical context and so will sound “radical” for many who encounter it for the first time. With that warning, we proceed.

In order to better understand the unique contribution of James Henley Thornwell to missiology one must understand **the historical context** in which he labored. In 1801, the Presbyterian Church had entered into a cooperative agreement with the New England based Congregational Churches. The arrangement, labeled the Plan of Union, was promoted by Jonathan Edwards, Jr. and proposed to extend the evangelization of the western frontier (New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania) through the efforts of the two ecclesiastical bodies in an amalgamated form.

By the late 1820s this mongrelized ecclesiology was serving as a conduit for theological infection from New England into the Presbyterian Church. The New England Theology was a distorted Calvinism at best; more often a Semi-Pelagianism; and, on occasion, nothing less than ancient Pelagianism.²² As a result of this downgrade of theology within the PCUSA, the church found itself embroiled in several judicial cases concerning heresy. Notable ministers—George Duffield, Lyman Beecher, and Albert Barnes—were espousing views contrary to the Westminster Confession on doctrines such as regeneration, imputation of Adam’s sin, and conversion. Because

of the theological desensitizing that had emerged within the church, she was not able to properly deal with these fundamental errors that opposed and undercut the covenant theology of the Westminster Confession. Owing to the inability and unwillingness of the church to determine and eradicate heresy, a doctrinally-sensitive portion of the church became convinced that radical measures were required. In 1837, the two factions in the church—labeled Old School and New School—divided, and the result was two separate churches, each claiming to be the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. From 1838 to 1869 the two churches existed as the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (OS) and Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (NS), respectively.

James Henley Thornwell was of the Old School (OS) branch of the church and his history as a churchman is a testimony to his efforts to defend and preserve a Presbyterianism set free from the compromises propagated by the mongrelized Plan of Union Church. After the purging of the church in 1837, the Old School branch formed a Board for carrying out the foreign missionary enterprise of the church. Unfortunately, the church had become so accustomed to the use of the “Board” model during the years of cooperation with the Congregationalists, they adopted a similar model without critical analysis. Thornwell’s concern was not so much with the church having an executive body (i.e., General Assembly) for facilitating the missionary work, but with the virtual removal of the missionary work from the immediate control of the church courts and, particularly, the lower church courts—sessions and presbyteries. B. M. Palmer explained that Thornwell “was not opposed to combined or united action on the part of the Church, but insisted that the central agency should be simply executive: the mere instrument by which the Assembly acts, and not an agent standing in the place of the Assembly, and acting for it.”²³

John L. Girardeau, a friend and adherent of Thornwell’s ecclesiology, reminded the church of the same during the diaconal debates of the 1870s.²⁴ Here we are reminded that Thornwellians were not interested in an irrelevant or dismantled General Assembly where the highest court was relegated to pomp and circumstance. Thornwellians desired an Assembly that was really authoritative and accountable, not a court in name only. He was after all, a realist, not a nominalist.

PRINCIPLES FOR CONDUCTING MISSIONS

From 1841 to 1860, Thornwell engaged leading men of the church in debate over the biblical warrant of church

boards.²⁵ He insisted that there was no warrant for such institutions to exist as agents of the church, but only as an executive or national instrument of the church. A number of principles for conducting the missionary enterprise of the church were espoused by Thornwell that continue to have great implications for the church today. The overarching principle for Thornwell was that the missionary enterprise is to be conducted by the Church in her ecclesiastical capacity. Biblical warrant was of supreme importance for Thornwell. *The Bible makes no provision for any institution to make disciples, baptizing in the name of the triune God, and instructing in His most holy law, except the organized, visible church.* From this foundational truth of Scripture, Thornwell set forth vital positive and negative principles.

The *first and vital principle* of Thornwell’s missionary model is that already established above, *jure divino* Presbyterianism. God loved His Church, the bride of His only begotten Son, and left her not to her own devices, but to those of heavenly form as articulated in Holy Scriptures. In the negative, we have no warrant to organize a church according to the dictates or imaginations of man—*jure humano*. Positively stated, the Bible provides the bride of Christ with a clear articulation of the proper structure and design for the visible church. Thornwell believed in a *jure divino*, not a *jure humano*, Presbyterianism.

Our Head gave good gifts to His Church and chief among those gifts are permanent officers—Elders and Deacons. The only courts are Sessions, Presbyteries, Synods, and General Assembly. “These officers and these courts are treated in our Constitution,” wrote Thornwell, “as abundantly adequate to meet all the exigencies of the Church, and to do all that God requires her to

23. Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 222. For Thornwell’s assessment of missionary boards see James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, ed. John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication; New York: Robert Carter & Bros.; and Philadelphia: Alfred Martien, 1873), 4: 148 where he said: “These are objections ... not so much against the system itself as against partial and accidental abuses.”

24. Girardeau summarizes Thornwell’s position most succinctly in Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 4:144. Girardeau explains his and Thornwell’s opposition to boards, but reminded his readers that Thornwell “did not object on principle to the Assembly’s undertaking the management of that work, provided that its control was *direct* through a mere Executive Committee. No man had more to do than he with the organization of our present Executive Committees.”

25. For an introduction to the debates, which pitted Thornwell against Charles Hodge, see *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4. The fourth volume includes articles from Hodge and Thomas Smyth.

do in her ecclesiastical capacity” (CWJHT, 4:148, 149). The church possesses neither divine right nor human reason to add to the good gifts God has bestowed upon the church in the offices of elder and deacon. When she does so, she declares her independence from her Sovereign Head. Departure from the Savior’s commandments was far too frightful a proposition for Thornwell. He delighted in God’s law as being “holy and righteous and good,” (Rom 7:12), and endeavored to steer clear of man’s vain imaginations.

The *second principle* one may draw from Thornwell flows logically from the first—the Bible knows of no such ecclesiastical offices as Administrator, Coordinator, or Secretary for the Church.²⁶ When the church moves beyond the prescribed offices she has no authority for and, thus, no right to do what she does. Placing oversight of the missionary work of the church in the hands of an agency other than a court of the church is overstepping the warrantable bounds of Holy Scripture. Now it may be objected that the Secretary or Coordinator is an ordained minister of the gospel and, so, a proper instrument for administering the missionary endeavors of the church. Thornwell reminded his readers, and we remind objectors: “The duties, and not the name, make the office. You may call them *Ministers*, and ordain them as such, but if they do not constantly and faithfully discharge the duties of Ministers, God assuredly does not regard them in that light, and man should not” (CWJHT, 4:149). The key here is “the duties of *Ministers*.” Thornwell is simply pleading with the church not to take from or add to the duties given men by God. The Scriptures, not pragmatism, must determine how we administer the activities of the church, and this is certainly true for the missionary enterprise of the church.

The *third Thornwellian principle* connects the office of deacon, with its God-given fiscal responsibilities

26. It is not within the purview of this article to deal with the many abuses of this principle. The present topic would have us deal with the creation of extra-biblical offices for the administration of the missionary work of the church. The principle, however, would also lead us to recognize the human origin of extra-biblical offices far too often utilized within the local church, such as Church Administrators, Ministers of Music, and Ministers of Education. It is our plan to deal with such novel innovations in a future article. Along a similar vein, we plan a future discussion of the Assistant Pastor as utilized in the Presbyterian Church in America.

27. BCO is a reference to *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America*, 6th edition (Atlanta: Stated Clerks Office, 2013).

28. One of the truly monumental contributions Southern Presbyterians made to the church was in the area of ecclesiology, including the office of deacon. A quick survey of the Table of Contents for the Southern Presbyterian Review between 1848 and 1888 will reveal a number of articles dealing with this spiritual office of the church.

for the church, to the missionary enterprise of the church. When the church steps outside the courts of the church to execute its work it traduces not only the proper courts, but certainly also the office of deacon. The Scriptures know of no other persons for handling the financial affairs of the church and for caring for the poor and needy (and who is poorer or more needy than the lost?) than the diaconate. Thornwell provided a moderating tone and good direction for this discussion when he said: “If all our Boards were converted into mere benches of Deacons, commissioned only to disburse funds under the direction of the spiritual courts, there would be no serious ground of objection to them; but in their present form they [missionary boards] are lords and masters of the whole Church” (CWJHT, 4:155).

In sympathy with Thornwell, the Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) states that “it is their [i.e., deacons] duty also to develop the grace of liberality in the members of the church, to devise effective methods of collecting the gifts of the people, and to distribute these gifts among the object to which they are contributed” (BCO 9–2).²⁷

The Constitution of the PCA rightly recognizes the role deacons may play in the higher courts of the church (BCO 9–5). The most natural place to begin implementation and utilization of the diaconate is in their capacity as financial and temporal agents of the church. In so doing we extol the spiritual nature of the office and clearly express the inseparable relationship of the local, regional, and national church to global missionary activity.²⁸

The *fourth principle* of a Thornwellian approach to the missionary enterprise concerns the missionary and accountability. Thornwell was consistent with the Constitution of his church and ours in his insistence that a candidate for the ministry must be known to the church. It is the sole prerogative of the Presbytery to examine a man for ordination to the gospel ministry and install him to the stated call and this requires a thorough knowledge of his character, confession, and credentials. He then is responsible primarily to the Presbytery and the Presbytery is responsible to him. His relation to the General Assembly and Session is founded in his Presbytery relations and not vice versa.

The missionary, for Thornwell, was not a *tertium quid* or third office of the church. The Church has divine warrant for only two offices—elder and deacon. Here one may squabble over a distinction between pastor and elder or teaching elder and ruling elder, but the question of a “missionary” as an office of the church remains. We have no additional set of qualifications for a “missionary” in God’s Word. We would have no Biblical warrant

for examining a man for “missionary” service, except those given for elders and deacons. The missionary, then, is an ordained man of the church whose call is to minister the gospel, make disciples of all nations, baptize them in the name of the Triune God, declare and do all that our benevolent Head has commanded us, and administer the temporal affairs of the church as God adds to her numbers in any given spot on the globe. Thus, the term missionary was and is a word convenient for describing an ordained man whose personal and ecclesial calling is to labor in a foreign field. The ordained man is sent forth by his local church and presbytery to labor in a foreign field, having met the same high standards of ordination as any other ordained man. His ministerial relationship to the higher courts of the church (Synod and General Assembly) is through his local church and presbytery, not a board or committee. His accountability to the higher courts is through his local church and presbytery, not a board or committee. His support—in the case of the preaching missionary—then comes from the fiduciary of the church, namely the diaconate, not a board or committee.²⁹

Luke, the historian of the apostolic church, provides us with a biblical precedent for this point (and the entire Thornwellian concept) in Acts 13 and 14. The Church in Antioch separated Paul and Barnabas for foreign labors and “sent them off” (Acts 13:1–3). After their initial labors, both men returned to Antioch “where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work that they had fulfilled” (Acts 14:26). These ordained men of the church returned to the local church(es) in Antioch that sent them and there they remained “no little time” (Acts 14:28). Antioch was their point of origination, their sending body, apparently their supporting body, and their furlough destination. Notice that Jerusalem plays no role in the missionary enterprise, except for adjudication of cases from lower courts (Acts 15). The simple Presbyterianism for which Thornwell pleaded is seen in this principle as exemplified in these accounts from Luke.

The *fifth principle* is the primary and active involvement of local sessions and presbyteries in the missionary enterprise—elders in examining, ordaining, installing to and overseeing men in their place of ministry and deacons in administering the temporal affairs of the missionary work at home and on the foreign field—*promotes a vital godliness in every court of our Church and throughout our congregations*. Thornwell aimed at this when he wrote: “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 own 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” (CWJHT, 4:171).

In the book of Acts the gospel produced heightened results locally and abroad when the church functioned as prescribed. We have an instance of this truth in Acts 6 with the appointment of those primitive deacons. The needs were met; the gospel flourished, the kingdom was extended.

The *last principle* involved in the missionary enterprise of Thornwell is *the spirituality of the church*. “Our courts,” pleaded Thornwell, “must be roused up to a just sense of their true relation to our dying race; they must be brought to feel the spiritual nature of their vocation, and to appreciate the work which they are required to do in the vineyard of the Lord” (LLJHT, 230). The Church is a *kingdom* and not an agency or committee. The Church is not a corporation, but a covenantal community. The Church is a community or kingdom with ways and means woven into the very fabric of its society.

Thornwell v. the Corporate Model

A cursory look at the current state of the administrative affairs in conservative Presbyterian denominations reveals, too often, a very complex organizational structure. The corporate model is evident at every turn. Thornwell recognized the same in 1841 and labored arduously against “mere corporations for secular [i.e., financial] business” (CWJHT, 4:155).

In conclusion,” wrote Thornwell, “all that we ask is Presbyterianism, simple, pure, unadulterated Presbyterianism—the regular, uniform, healthful action of our noble system. We oppose no good work, but we cannot go out against the foe unless the Lord go with us, and we can have no reason to expect His assistance when we have trampled His institutions in the dust. When the law goes forth, it must go forth from Zion; and because we have told her towers, and marked her bulwarks, and

29. It is expected that this paragraph will conjure the greatest reaction. The accusation (or compliment) will, no doubt be that this view is “radical.” It is radical only in the sense that many of us “have never done it this way before.” It is also realized that it raises questions about many women who have gone out of the church as “missionaries.” Were they or were they not “missionaries”? They were *not* in the sense of an office of the church. The church has no divine right to send women to do the work of ordained men. This does not mean that they did not serve in some fruitful auxiliary capacity, laboring under the headship of ordained men and fulfilling their God-ordained function. The church has created much confusion by using the term missionary and applying it *carte blanche* to men and women, ordained and non-ordained, indiscriminately.

considered her palaces, and have been fully assured that she is the city of the Lord of hosts, the city of our God,—we are resolved neither to rest nor to hold our peace till out of Zion shall go forth the law and the Word of the Lord from Jerusalem (CWJHT, 4:172).

To recap the previous section, Thornwell was a passionate Presbyterian, so much so that he was accused of being thrice-hyper a Presbyterian. His Presbyterianism was, however, not one of a sectarian brand or of an inherited zeal. He was Presbyterian because he found this system laid out in the fiber of the Holy Scriptures. The same commitment to the Bible led him to think long and hard on the offices of the church, their calling and duties, and the spiritual mission of the church.

FEDERAL THEOLOGY, JUSTIFICATION, ADOPTION

This same excitement for the teaching of the Scriptures brought him to stress three more doctrinal themes: federal theology, justification, and adoption. William Childs Robinson concluded his treatment of the Columbia Theological Seminary by saying, “Justification, federal theology, Adoption, have all found prominent places in the Columbia Theology” (*Columbia Theological Seminary and the Southern Presbyterian Church*, 228). One would not be overstepping the bounds of interpretation to say that the Columbia theology, to which Robinson alludes, was very much the theology of Thornwell. The same themes were acknowledged by Thornton Whaling when he wrote “Dr. Thornwell as a Theologian” in 1912.³⁰

In Thornwell’s distribution or division of theology, the covenant or federal theme is stressed. He summarized this theme when he wrote: “It must not be forgotten that although blood, or unity of race, is the ground of federal representation, yet federal representation is the ground of either benefit or injury from the success or failure of our head” (Ibid., 1:273). Adam as the first created image bearer stood for his progeny. “Had Adam stood, we should all have been justified and confirmed in glory by the imputation of his obedience; that imputation would have proceeded immediately upon the federal and not upon the natural unity” (Ibid., 1:272). This federal theme unfolds as divine revelation is given man in history and culminates in the fullness of time with Christ Jesus as the second Adam.³¹

As we have shown above, the covenant of works marked out the second division of theology for

Thornwell as God modified his relation to man. In the original created state man stood in relation to God as a moral being with natural duties and obligations. These natural duties and obligations are set forth in Genesis 1:26–31 and summarized in v. 28—And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

According to Thornwell, “God in justice might have left man to the operation of a pure moral government, conducted by the rule of distributive justice, and might have forever retained him in the attitude of a servant” (CWJHT, 1:264). However, “It was always God’s purpose to turn the servant into a son” (Ibid.). Therefore, God *immediately* established with his creaturely image-bearer a “modification of moral government in its principle and application, as realized in the Covenant of Works” (Ibid., 1:42). For Thornwell the covenant of works, being a modification of the original relation in nature, introduced two new principles—the principle of justification and the principle of imputation. “They are the very key-notes both of the legal and evangelical covenants.... They are principles grounded in grace, springing from the free and spontaneous goodness of God” (Ibid., 1:274). Herein man is considered “able to obey and fulfill the will of the Creator” (Ibid.) Had man fulfilled the covenant of works he would have been adopted into God’s family. The story line is, of course, not that simple. Man did not fulfill the covenant of works and so was left a servant, but now one who was condemned by his treasonous act against his Maker.

The third division of theology for Thornwell is owing to man’s fall into sin. With man “incapable of propitiating the favor of God” (Ibid., 1:42), God modified moral government with the covenant of grace. “Surely our God is grace,” wrote Thornwell, “the first covenant proves it as truly as the second” (Ibid., 1:266). Again, he stresses his point when he says, “The ruling motive which induced the modification was grace” (Ibid., 1:272). This grace was designed to confirm man in his right standing or his justification with God and by God.

Upon the ground of justification follows the legal declaration of adoption. “The state of a son in which man is placed in such relations to God as to secure himself from the possibility of defection is founded upon that limitation of obedience which gathers up the whole immortality in its probationary character into a brief compass, and then makes its real complexion depend upon the fidelity or infidelity displayed in trial. Adoption, in other words, depends upon justification” (Ibid., 1:267).³²

30. See Whaling’s article in this issue.

31. See James Henley Thornwell, “Christ Tempted as the Second Adam,” in CWJHT, 2:293–98.

32. For a development of Thornwell (and Girardeau) in the area

Adoption was termed the “apex of redemptive grace” by Professor John Murray.³³ For Thornwell adoption was not only the apex of the gospel, but the very intention of federal solidarity. The elect being in solidarity with/in Christ from “before the foundation of the world,” they were “predestined . . . for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:4, 5). The adopting love of God the Father was at the very heart of his eternal electing choice.

Over the past several years and to the present a debate has continued within the discipline of biblical theology about the proper “center” of theology, with many theological articles and books having been written on the topic. Various biblical theologians claim various *loci* as “the center” around which the Scriptures are united and are to be studied, organized, and the like. Not a few have argued for the covenant motif as the center of the biblical theological enterprise.³⁴ While the federal or covenantal theme was important to Thornwell for his distribution of theology, it is important to note that he did not view it as the center of theology. For Thornwell any number of methods may serve well to connect truths to one another, however, “to connect them is not to unite them.” The South Carolinian wrote,

There must be a ground of unity somewhere for truth is one as well as connected. This unity must be sought in the doctrines themselves, and not in their accidents and adjuncts. It is easy to connect Divine truths by the idea of the Covenants; or by the correlation of disease and remedy, the fall and redemption; or by the order of the Divine decrees as manifested in creation and providence; or by the idea of the Mediator or the incarnation; but to connect them is not to unite them (CWJHT, 1:484).

THE CENTER OF THORNWELL’S THEOLOGY

So what was the unifying theme of all Divine truth? What was the center of theology for Thornwell? What was the “corner-stone which holds the building together”? Thornwell insisted upon “some central principle which embraces equally the religion of nature and the religion of grace” (Ibid.). His answer for this sought-after “central principle” is set out in the following argument.

It seems to us—and we make the suggestion with all proper diffidence—that such a principle is found in the great doctrine of justification, which, in more respects than one, deserves the commendation of Calvin, “*præcipuum esse sustinendæ religionis cardinem*”—[Inst. Lib. Iii., c. xi., § 1.] The only systems of religion which God has ever revealed to man consist of the answers

which Divine Wisdom has given to the question, How shall a subject of moral government be justified? When that subject is considered simply as a creature in a state of innocence and blessed with the image of God, the answer is, The religion of nature; if that subject is considered as a fallen being, as a sinner, the answer is, The religion of grace. All the provisions of either covenant are subordinated to the idea of justification. They are directed to it as their immediate end, and find their respective places in the system according to their tendency to contribute to its accomplishment. This is the centre around which every other doctrine revolves, and none can be understood fully and adequately apart from their relations to it (CWJHT, 484, 485).

Here we see that Thornwell’s center of theology, his cornerstone upon which his theology was united, was justification. He called upon none other than Calvin and that famous quote, above in Latin, where justification is claimed as “the main hinge on which religion turns” (Ford Lewis Battles translation, *Institutes*, 1:726). The Palmetto professor was eloquent when he explained: “God has never been willing to sustain only legal relations to His moral and intelligent creatures. . . . His love has always proposed to raise them higher, to bring them nearer to Himself, to make them children and heirs. . . . Instead of an empire of subjects, Infinite Goodness has aimed at a vast family of holy, loving, obedient children. . . . The doctrine of justification has been grafted upon the fundamental principles of moral government, in order to provide the way by which a being that exists necessarily at first in a legal, may be promoted to a filial, relation” (CWJHT, 1:486). Justification united all divine truth from the historical context of the covenant

of justification and adoption see Craig Sheppard, “A Theological Evaluation and Comparison of the Atonement and Justification in the Writings of James Henley Thornwell (1812–1862) and John Lafayette Girardeau (1825–1898)” (PhD dissertation, University of Wales, 2008).

33. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray*, 4 vols. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1976), 2:228, 233. For a biblical-theological development upon Thornwell’s treatment of adoption see John L. Girardeau, “The Doctrine of Adoption,” in *Discussions of Theological Questions* (Richmond, VA: The Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1905), 428–521. For a brief historical-theological treatment of the doctrine of adoption see C. N. Willborn, “Adoption: An Historical Perspective with Evangelical Implications,” in *Sanctification: Growing in Grace*, Joseph A. Pipa, Jr. and Andrew Wortman, eds. (Taylors, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 2001), 43–69.

34. The recent books on this topic alone would form a considerable bibliography, but one will suffice as representative and as a resource for further investigation of this topic. Scott J. Hafemann and Paul R. House, eds., *Central Themes in Biblical Theology: Mapping Unity in Diversity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

of works to the outworking of the covenant of grace, and it did so to bring about the eternal predestinating goal of adoption for the elect of God. Indeed, “[Justification] is the expedient of Heaven for making a servant a son” (Ibid.).

The federal scheme—covenant of works and covenant of grace—whereby man could be confirmed in sonship was united by the doctrine of justification. Thus, all of redemptive history is unified by it—“It is the bow which spans the whole hemisphere of grace.” Thornwell concludes his presentation with two expedients of this unifying principle: “It also has the advantage of cutting up by the roots false systems of divinity. . . . It throws off Arminianism, Pelagianism, and every theology which leaves life contingent and resolves acceptance into mere pardon. . . . It plants the feet of the saints upon a rock, and in itself and its adjuncts it may well be styled the glorious Gospel of the blessed God” (Ibid., 488).

THE HOLINESS OF GOD

While the logical center of Thornwell’s theology was justification, there is another theme that stands out in Columbia theology and which could almost be considered central. Indeed, William Childs Robinson says the holiness of God was “the most distinctive and most vital doctrine of the Columbia Theology.” Now, Robinson was thoroughly acquainted with Thornwell and his arguments for justification as the central theme of the theology, so he was not arguing against the man himself. Rather he distinguished the themes this way: justification was the logical center and the holiness of God was “the vital center of the Thornwellian theology” (*Columbia Theological Seminary*, 219). Further, Dr. Robbie wrote: “Dr. Thornwell laid hold of the beauty of holiness, the supreme vision of God, to bow souls in adoration, humility, and absolute dependence upon Him. In emphasizing this element as the very life of God, Dr. Thornwell is standing in the line between Charnock and B. B. Warfield, both of whom make God’s holiness His crown and His glory” (Ibid., 220).³⁵

A search through his *Collected Writings* reveals a remarkable number of references to the holiness of God and man as *imago Dei*. “Thornwell followed Charnock,” explained Robinson, “in making holiness the glory of all of God’s other perfections,” (*Columbia Theological*

Seminary, 221). In so doing, Thornwell seems to have defined the very nature of God, not just His will, as holy. “Holiness,” wrote the gentleman theologian, “is represented in the Scriptures as the very life of God. In all other beings it is an accident separable from the essence; in God it is His very self. It pervades all His other attributes and perfections and makes them to be preeminently Divine” (CWJHT, 1:357).

Holiness, for Thornwell, was “styled a transcendental attribute, that, as it were, runs through the rest and cast a glory upon every one; it is an attribute of attributes. . . . And so it is the very lustre and glory of His other perfections” (Ibid., 1:367). Perhaps the pervasive or transcendental nature of holiness is nowhere better comprehended than in his brilliant *Discourses on Truth*. At the end of the first Discourse—“The Ethical System of the Bible”—he said, “I have now completed what I had to say upon the ethical system of the Bible. The true light in which redemption should be habitually contemplated is that of a Divine institute of Holiness” (Ibid., 2:474). After all, redemption’s end is to “restore the union between ourselves and God which sin has broken” (Ibid.). God’s holiness demands the breach be healed. Redemption then finds its life in His glorious holiness. How often do twenty-first century Christians contemplate the redemptive story in general or one’s personal redemption from sin in the light of God’s stupendous holiness? Not enough, according to Thornwell. Holiness is the vital center of Thornwell’s system.

THE LORD’S SUPPER

One final element of James Henley Thornwell’s theology will conclude our brief visit upon the memory of this father of the faith. When one sets out to study a subject it involves the practice of contrast. As was shown in a previous article by this author, Thornwell is often contrasted to his venerable Northern brother, Charles Hodge of Princeton.³⁶ A notable difference between the two scholar-ecclesiastics was in the area of the sacraments. Baptism was considered in our previous article because of the notable ink that both men spilled in debating the topic, especially in relation to the validity of Roman Catholic baptism. While the Lord’s Supper is also a topic of difference between the two titans, it was never one in which Thornwell actively engaged. Thornwell’s hand-picked colleague, John Bailey Adger, on the other hand, did put his pen to the point of disagreement.

Concerning Thornwell’s personal view, the conclusion is simply stated by Adger: “We can also give our personal testimony to Dr. Thornwell’s having averred that he agreed with Calvin’s doctrine of the Lord’s

35. References are made to Stephen Charnock, “On the Holiness of God,” in *The Existence and Attributes of God* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1987), 2:108–208; and, Benjamin B. Warfield, “God’s Holiness and Ours,” in *Faith and Life* (1916; rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1990), 440–47.

36. See *The Confessional Presbyterian*, vol. 8 (2012).

Supper.”³⁷ While Adger’s article, from which the immediate quote was taken, is titled “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper,” there is a sizeable portion of it dealing with his perceived weakness/superficiality of Charles Hodge’s view of the sacrament.³⁸ Therefore, it is obvious that he is taking up a surrogate’s role in what he believed to be another disputed topic between his friend and Charles Hodge. That he is performing this role seems all the more true when one looks at an earlier article that appeared before Hodge’s death in 1878.³⁹

So, what is Calvin’s view that Thornwell averred? We shall summarize Adger’s distillation of Calvin under four points, drawing largely on Adger’s words (“Calvin defended against Drs. Cunningham and Hodge”).

1. “Life then, for us, depends on our being in communion with the flesh of Christ and not simply on our having his spirit. He could never have reached us by his Spirit had he not first taken upon him our flesh and in that flesh made atonement and purchased grace for us. Those are, therefore, not empty words,—not mere figurative words without any real or substantial meaning,—which our Saviour spoke, ‘Except ye eat my flesh, ye have no life in you.’ There is some deep and true sense in which we are ‘members of his body, his flesh, and of his bones.’ But ‘this is a great mystery.’ And we speak very properly of the union betwixt Christ and his people as ‘the mystical union.’ This mystery is above our comprehension, like many other of the revealed things of God. Faith must apprehend what reason does not enable us to grasp intellectually. And the communion in the flesh of Christ is itself only by faith” (147).

2. “Now this communion with the flesh of the Son of God, which becomes ours when we believe in him, is signified and also sealed or confirmed to us in the Sacred Supper. The presence of Christ at that Supper is not in the bread, nor is it a physical presence of his body which is in the upper sanctuary. Yet it is a real presence by his Spirit to our faith, and we have in the sacrament especial communion with his flesh or human nature through the elements of bread and wine. In them we do after a peculiar manner apprehend our incarnate Lord and Saviour. Bread and wine set forth to our spiritual apprehension his body broken and his blood shed for us” (147).

3. We might add to this for further consideration what Adger had earlier set forth from Calvin: “The principal object of the sacrament, then, is not simply by signs to set forth the body of Christ, but rather to seal and confirm the promise that his flesh is meat indeed, and his blood is drink indeed, nourishing us unto life eternal, and that he is the Bread of Life, of which whosoever eats shall live

forever;—and to seal and confirm that promise it sends us to the cross of Christ where that promise was performed and fulfilled in all its parts” (138, 139).

4. Through faith then we “have Christ dwelling in us.” The Lord’s Supper then is about “Christ dwelling in us.” That is *the effect of faith*—“a real communication of himself to us, so that his life passes into us and becomes ours, not otherwise than as bread taken for food administers vigor to the body” (141, 142). The *extent* to which this “real communication of himself” takes place in the sacrament is also considered by Calvin. Adger summarizes thusly: “He declares that it is not sufficient to say that our communion with Christ makes us partakers of his Spirit, omitting all mention of flesh and blood, as if all were nothing which is said by Christ, of his ‘flesh being meat indeed, and his blood drink indeed,’ and that we ‘have no life unless we eat that flesh and drink that blood,’ and others words of the same tenor.... Wherefore he exhorts his readers not to confine their apprehensions within those too narrow mental conceptions of his, but to seek to rise higher than he is able himself to lift them” (142).

When one reads Adger and considers 1) his presentation of Calvin’s view; and 2) his critique of Hodge and Cunningham, it becomes clear that he believes he and Thornwell to be in the line of the Genevan reformer. He further believes the Columbia Seminary theology of the sacrament was that of Calvin and that of the Presbyterian Church when rightly understood and administered. Interestingly, Adger also demurred with the findings of Hodge and Cunningham (and we might add John Dick and R. L. Dabney) that Calvin’s view of the sacramental table was “about as unintelligible as Luther’s consubstantiation.”⁴⁰ Whether one agrees with the Southerner’s reading of Calvin, it is clear that Adger did not find the

37. John B. Adger, “Calvin’s Doctrine of the Lord’s Supper,” in *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, vol. 36 (October 1885): 799. This article was reproduced in Adger’s autobiography, which is presently available: John B. Adger, *My Life and Times, 1810–1899* (1899; repr., Stoke-on-Trent, UK: Tentmaker Publications, 2007).

38. One can read Hodge on this topic in Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (repr., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1986): 3:61ff. and “Review of *The Mystical Presence ...* by the Rev. John W. Nevin,” in *The Biblical Repertory* (April 1848): 227–78.

39. John B. Adger, “Calvin defended against Drs. Cunningham and Hodge,” in *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, vol. 27, no. 1 (January 1876): 133–66.

40. See William B. Cunningham, *The Reformers and the Theology of the Reformation* (1862; rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 240 and Robert L. Dabney, *Systematic Theology* (1871; rpt. Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1985), 809–13. Dabney refers to Calvin’s “real presence” view as “not only incomprehensible, but impossible” (811).

view of Calvin to be a mystery—incomprehensible and unintelligible—as did his worthy opponents.⁴¹

CONCLUSION

When John B. Adger moved to Columbia from his beloved low country of South Carolina to teach in the theological seminary, he was given some marching orders by James Henley Thornwell. The historical records provide those orders and may suggest a good deal to us for understanding Thornwell. “Some three or four years,” wrote John Adger, “before Principal Cunningham thus expressed himself, Dr. Thornwell had said to a colleague [Adger] about to take the chair of Ecclesiastical History and Polity in the Seminary at Columbia, ‘I hope you will make the Fourth Book of Calvin’s Institutes your text-book in church government, for I in my department, carry our students through the first three books so that they learn Calvin’s theology, and it would be well for them to go with you over the Fourth Book that they may get his views of church government’” (Adger, “Calvin Defended Against Drs. Cunningham and Hodge,” 134).

There is in Thornwell, like Calvin, a stress upon the federal nature of God’s relation to man. When it comes to the doctrine of adoption, considered above, there is a distinct break with contemporaries like Dabney and Hodge, men who, by the way, followed Turretin in their lectures and system. Adoption was a doctrinal emphasis of Calvin and so it was in Thornwell. And, of course, as suggested in the quote from Adger about the “Fourth Book” of the *Institutes*, ecclesiology was a central doctrine for both Calvin and Thornwell.

Years ago now it was suggested to this writer, by his PhD advisor, that you could sum up the differences between old Princeton and Columbia rather easily—“Princeton followed Turretin and Columbia followed Calvin.” However simplistic that may sound, it is an interesting insight and one which often circles back around in studying Thornwell and the Columbia theology. It is noteworthy that one can find Thornwell’s “Analysis of Calvin’s Institutes” and his “Questions on Calvin” at the end of his *Collected Writings*, vol. 1. Calvin’s influence upon Thornwell can be seen also in his

41. For a comparison of the divergent views of Calvin among American Theologians in the 19th century see E. Brooks Holifield, “Mercersburg, Princeton, and the South: The Sacramental Controversy in the Nineteenth Century,” in *The Journal Presbyterian History*, vol. 54, no. 2 (Summer 1976): 238–57.

42. Thornton Whaling, “The Theologian,” in *The Life Work of John L. Girardeau* (Columbia, SC: The State Company, 1916), 307.

43. Douglas Kelly, *Preachers with Power* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1992), 73.

theological successor John L. Girardeau. Thornton Whaling said of Girardeau, “There was no other theologian with whom he had greater mental and spiritual affinities than with John Calvin himself, and the great Genevan has never had one who more thoroughly and carefully mastered his Institutes and other books than our Columbia professor.... No theologian of our day has studied Calvin more, lived with him longer or understood him better.”⁴²

Thornwell’s preaching has been described by J. W. Alexander as “logic in ignition,” and another hearer described it as “logical and eloquent.” His theology was highly philosophic and logical. He was in his theology and his homiletics “solidly biblical.”⁴³ His preaching was much like his theology, it worked toward the exaltation of the Triune God and the glorious Head of the Church, King Jesus. “The glory of Christianity is its Savior, and his power to save is in the blood by which He extinguished the fires of the curse, and the righteousness by which He bought life for all His followers. Jesus made our curse, Jesus made our righteousness, this, this is the Gospel! All else is philosophy and vain deceit. This it is which gives Christianity its power” (CWJHT, 2:97).■

In Brief: Thornwell: The Sacrifice of Christ

The glory of His nature might have been content with those exhibitions of its power which nature and providence unfold when they reveal the ever-blessed God. His virtue might have reposed in undisturbed beatitude. There was no claim upon Him to empty Himself of His Divine glory, and to be found in fashion as a man. He was master of Himself. Nothing but the sublimity of His principles, the godlike greatness of His heart, brought Him to the earth, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief. Neither, again, was it a momentary enthusiasm or sudden ebullition of heroic ardour. The principles from which He acted were the settled principles of His soul; they were the life of His life. Had they failed or suffered abatement at any stage in the progress of His work, the worship would have been adulterated and the victim blemished. His zeal for God never cooled, His charity for man never lessened. What grandeur do these considerations throw around the character of Jesus! Can there be a loftier height of virtue, an intenser energy of holiness? All creatures here, with their superficial trials, retire into the shade. Jesus stands unrivalled and alone the possessor of a virtue which none can understand, and none can adequately love, but He who can fathom the deep things of God. [From “The Sacrifice of Christ: The Type and Model of Missionary Effort,” a sermon on John 10:17, 18... *The Collected Works of James Henley Thornwell*, 2:422, 23].■