

# The Spirituality Of The Church, The Westminster Standards, And Nineteenth-Century American Presbyterianism

D. G. Hart

*Professor of Church History  
Westminster Seminary, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania*

---

It has become a commonplace in the literature on Protestantism that the Reformed and Lutheran traditions differ on the relations between the ecclesiastical and civil realms. One of the classic statements of this difference comes in H. Richard Niebuhr's *Christ and Culture* where he distinguishes the Lutheran view, "Christ and Culture in Paradox," with the Calvinist outlook, "Christ the Transformer of Culture." Unlike Luther who made sharp distinctions between "the temporal and spiritual life, or between what is external and internal, between body and soul, between the reign of Christ and the world of human works or culture" and who contended that there should be "no confusion of these distinctions," Calvin, according to Niebuhr, had a more "dynamic conception of the vocations of men." The earthly callings of this life became for Calvinism activities in which believers could express their faith and love and glorify God. Niebuhr also detected this difference in Lutheran and Calvinistic understandings of the state. While Luther sharply distinguished the kingdom of grace from the kingdom of the world, Calvin insisted that "the state is God's minister not only in a negative fashion as a restrainer of evil," but also a means positively for promoting human welfare. Thus Calvin, like Luther, hoped for the conversion of humankind in its inward or spiritual aspects, but went farther in arguing that the gospel of Christ would also transform this world "in all its nature and culture into a kingdom of God."<sup>1</sup>

Niebuhr's understanding is not only one of the classic expressions of the difference between Lutheranism and Calvinism, but it has also become standard fare among mainline and evangelical American Protestants. For instance, in one of the articles on the Reformed tradition in the Scribners Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience, the authors, both mainline Presbyterians, write that in contrast to Lutherans who regarded the state as a "temporary expedient for maintaining order until Christ's second coming," Calvinists perceived the state as an "agent for bringing the Kingdom of God on earth by enforcing divine law through its civil code."<sup>2</sup> Evangelicals have also found the Reformed understanding of Christ and culture to be a liberating respite from older fundamentalist ideas about full-time Christian service and worldliness. The Reformed world and life view now frees evangelicals from having to affirm that evangelism and missions are the only

---

<sup>1</sup> (New York, 1951), 171, 217, 218. For similar estimates of the Reformed tradition's activism, see Christopher Dawson, *The Judgement of the Nations* (New York, 1942), 44-46; Michael Walzer, *The Revolution of the Saints: A Study in the Origins of Radical Politics* (Cambridge, 1966), esp. ch. 2; John T. McNeill, *The History and Character of Calvinism* (New York, 1954), ch. 24; and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Until Justice and Peace Embrace* (Grand Rapids, 1983), esp. ch. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Milton J. Coalter, Jr., and John M. Mulder, "Dutch and German Reformed Churches," in *Encyclopedia of the American Religious Experience*, vol. 1, eds., Charles H. Lippy and Peter W. Williams, (New York, 1987), 511.

Christian endeavors; artistic expression, scholarship and politics have become legitimate vocations in which believers may serve God every bit as much as a pastor or missionary. While at many evangelical liberal arts colleges the Reformed understanding of culture has a great deal of appeal precisely because it provides a religious rationale for what used to be considered worldly endeavors, one suspects that the resurgence of political activism among evangelicals is another factor in the Reformed tradition's attraction. Indeed, the rise of the religious right and evangelical appeals to Reformed political and cultural categories appears to be more than coincidental.<sup>3</sup>

While American Presbyterians naturally take a certain amount of pride in their tradition and their contribution to various political initiatives in the history of the United States,<sup>4</sup> the mention of the religious right in connection with a Reformed understanding of politics should prompt some misgivings if not about the Reformed tradition per se at least about evangelicals' appropriation of it.<sup>5</sup> One evangelical historian who has expressed misgivings about what he calls "The American Christian Heritage as a 'Reformed Tradition'" is Mark Noll. Perhaps because he teaches at Wheaton College and sees the excesses of evangelical politics daily and also because he resides in the most Republican county in the United States, Noll recognizes the value of the Lutheran understanding of the two kingdoms. The dominant pattern of American political involvement is one of "direct, aggressive action modelled on Reformed theories of life in the world." From the seventeenth-century Puritan experiment in New England to nineteenth-century evangelical social reforms, Reformed theories, according to Noll, have "assumed the necessity of moving directly from passion for God and the Bible to passion for the renovation of society." Absent in American politics has been a Lutheran conception of public life, one which recognizes the tension between religious intentions and public consequences. Here Noll points to the Lutheran sense of irony, a sense which accepts that "precisely when Christians mount their most valiant public efforts for God, they run the greatest risk of substituting their righteousness for the righteousness of Christ." In the end, Noll is uncomfortable with embracing strictly either Reformed or Lutheran approaches to public life, but he does believe that a little Lutheran leaven would provide a healthy alternative to

---

<sup>3</sup>For examples of the increasing sophistication of evangelicals about cultural and political matters, see the essays in *Evangelicals and Modern America*, ed., George Marsden, (Grand Rapids, 1984); and *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, eds., Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells, (Grand Rapids, 1988). The literature on evangelicals and politics is immense. For a useful introduction, see Lyman A. Kellstedt and Mark A. Noll, "Religion, Voting for President, and Party Identification, 1948-1984," in *Religion and American Politics: From the Colonial Period to the 1980s*, ed., Mark A. Noll, (New York, 1990), ch. 16.

<sup>4</sup>Perhaps because of the psychology of a Christian America, sectarian Presbyterians (e.g., the PCA and OPC) are now as interested in demonstrating the Christian origins of the United States as mainline Presbyterians were during the initial phase of the Cold War.

<sup>5</sup>Signs of Protestant ambivalence about using politics for religious ends is evident in recent scholarship on fundamentalism. When fundamentalists were known for criticizing the social gospel and stressing evangelism and missions scholars criticized them for their otherworldliness and failure to pursue political and economic justice. See for instance, Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire* (New York, 1970), ch. 20 where fundamentalists receive some criticism for neglecting America's serious social problems. But now that fundamentalists are involved in politics recent scholarship has faulted them for failing to accept modernity and live with our time's dichotomy between public and private life. See, for instance, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, "Conclusion: An Interim Report on a Hypothetical Family," in *Fundamentalisms Observed*, eds., Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, (Chicago, 1991), ch. 15.

dominant Reformed impulses because of Luther's recognition of the "incongruity between private and public spheres."<sup>6</sup>

Whatever the merits of Noll's argument, is his understanding of Reformed teaching about the relation between religion and politics correct? To be sure, Noll differs little from Niebuhr or other interpreters of Reformed and Lutheran differences. And it would be foolish to dispute the higher degree of Presbyterians as opposed to Lutherans involved in American politics (though numbers and time of migration might be as pivotal as theological differences). Still, is this distinction between Reformed and Lutheran ideas about church and state the last word on the matter? I want to suggest that it is not, that the nineteenth-century American Presbyterian doctrine of the spirituality of the church offers another perspective on what constitutes a Reformed understanding of religion and politics, and that the spirituality of the church was not as novel as critics then and historians now allege.<sup>7</sup> What I propose to do, then, is describe what nineteenth-century Presbyterian divines did and did not mean by this doctrine, explore their appeals to the Westminster Standards for justification of their views, and evaluate the plausibility of their appeals to the Westminster divines specifically and the Reformed tradition more generally. While I don't suppose that I will win any converts today to the spirituality of the church, I do hope, in the words of Professor Leith, to give the doctrine the proper "attention it deserve[s] as one way of relating church and culture."<sup>8</sup> And perhaps more important, I propose to show that Reformed believers need not look to Lutherans for a sense of incongruity between the kingdom of Christ and the kingdoms of this world.

Historians have not been overly inclined to appreciate the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. However they have described the spirituality doctrine—from a belief in a "complete divorce of religion from politics,"<sup>9</sup> to social justice being an illegitimate "goal" of the church,<sup>10</sup> to

---

<sup>6</sup>Noll, "Ethnic, American or Lutheran? Dilemmas for a Historic Confession in the New World," *Lutheran Theological Seminary Bulletin* 77 (Winter 1991), 29, 30, 31. See also Noll's *One Nation Under God? Christian Faith and Political Action in America* (New York, 1988), esp. ch. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Works I have found useful for assessing the spirituality of the church are the following: Ernest Trice Thompson, *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, 1961); idem, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, 1963), vol. 1, 550-560; Jack P. Maddex, "From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State," *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (1976), 438-457; James Oscar Farmer, Jr., *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA, 1986); John H. Leith, "James Henley Thornwell and the Shaping of the Reformed Tradition in the South," in *Probing the Reformed Tradition: Historical Studies in Honor of Edward A. Dowey, Jr.*, eds., Elsie Anne McKee and Brian G. Armstrong, (Louisville, 1988), 424-447; Louis Weeks, "Faith and Political Action in American Presbyterianism, 1776-1918," in *Reformed Faith and Politics*, ed., Ronald H. Stone, (Lanham, MD, 1983), 101-120; idem, *Kentucky Presbyterians* (Atlanta, 1983), chs. 4 and 5; Preston Don Graham, Jr., "The True Presbyterian: A Case Study of Border State Dissent During the American Civil War," (master's thesis, Yale University, 1995); John Lloyd Vance, *The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell: An Old South Presbyterian Theologian* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1990); and Brian T. Wingard, "As the Lord Puts Words in Her Mouth: The Supremacy of Scripture in the Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell and Its Influence upon the Presbyterian Churches of the South" (Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992).

<sup>8</sup>John H. Leith, "Spirituality of the Church," in *Encyclopedia of Religion in the South*, ed., Samuel S. Hill, (Macon, GA, 1984), 731.

<sup>9</sup>Maddex, "From Theocracy," 447.

<sup>10</sup>Farmer, *Metaphysical Confederacy*, 257.

the church following “the Bible and the Bible only,”<sup>11</sup> to the church’s abstaining from all “social comment,”<sup>12</sup> to the church’s abandonment of secular causes,<sup>13</sup>—students of American Presbyterianism have generally associated it with a clever or devious (depending on your perspective) way to escape the less than noble motives of Southern white Christians during the sectional crisis and debates over slavery. Ernest Trice Thompson was one of the first to criticize the teaching when he argued that it was the “distinctive” doctrine of the Southern Presbyterian Church and had caused the PCUS to abandon “totally” its Calvinistic heritage in the field of social ethics.<sup>14</sup> No less critical have been Jack P. Maddex and James Oscar Farmer who saw duplicity in the doctrine because of inconsistencies in Southern Presbyterian application of it. Maddex, for instance, argues that proponents of the spirituality doctrine were actually theocrats who found the teaching convenient only when the Confederacy and slavery were vanquished.<sup>15</sup> Farmer is more even handed; unlike Maddex he concedes that James Henley Thornwell was a proponent of the teaching and that Thornwell’s articulation of it cannot be ignored easily. Nevertheless, Farmer concludes that “Old South Presbyterians” applied the doctrine inconsistently and wonders if Thornwell would have argued as he did had he been in a position, like Calvin in Geneva, to influence government directly.<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, Mark Noll contends that the spirituality of the church was a “stultifying” doctrine, preventing Southern Presbyterians from recognizing differences between biblical times and the eighteenth century, while it also, in the case of Robert Louis Dabney’s argument about the ordination of blacks, proved to be a “thoroughly unreliable guide to exegesis”<sup>17</sup>

Having cleared the air somewhat of criticisms, a brief exposition of the spirituality doctrine might be useful. Though he is rarely cited as an exponent of the teaching—in fact, historians regularly quote his claim that the spirituality of the church was a novelty<sup>18</sup>—the Yankee, Charles Hodge, in response to the Spring Resolutions of 1861, articulated a view of the church’s spiritual purpose and means that, though shorter, rivaled anything Thornwell could have written. Hodge asserted,

The doctrine of our church on this subject is, that the state has no authority in matters purely spiritual and that the church no authority in matters purely secular or civil. That their

---

<sup>11</sup>Mark A. Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” paper delivered at the conference on Religion and the Civil War, Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary, October 14, 1994, 34.

<sup>12</sup>E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795- 1860* (Durham, 1978), 154.

<sup>13</sup>Leith, “Spirituality,” 731.

<sup>14</sup>*Spirituality of the Church*, 25, 41.

<sup>15</sup>Maddex, “From Theocracy,” 449.

<sup>16</sup>*Metaphysical Confederacy*, 256, 260.

<sup>17</sup>“The Bible and Slavery,” 29, 34. For a more positive exposition of the spirituality doctrine, see Graham, “*The True Presbyterian*.”

<sup>18</sup>Maddex, “From Theocracy,” 441.

provinces in some cases overlie each other... is indeed true.... Nevertheless, the two institutions are distinct, and their respective duties are different.<sup>19</sup>

Hodge then went on to quote from the Confession of Faith (pre-1903 revisions), chapter 31 regarding synods and councils, a point to which I will return. Later in the article Hodge adds a statement which again differed little from the point that various southern Presbyterians tried to make. He wrote,

The church can only exercise her power in enforcing the word of God, in approving what it commands, and condemning what it forbids. A man, in the exercise of his liberty as to things indifferent, may be justly amenable to the laws of the land; and he may incur great guilt in the sight of God, but he cannot be brought under the censure of the church.<sup>20</sup>

Hodge's understanding of the spirituality of the church meant that in the case of the Spring Resolutions the 1861 General Assembly had overstepped its proper bounds in declaring its obligation to "promote and perpetuate" the integrity of the United States and the federal government.<sup>21</sup> The church, he believed, had no right to decide the political question of which government Presbyterians should pledge allegiance to and make that decision a condition of membership. Though Hodge clearly sided with the Union, he recognized there was some political question as to whether the federal government or the states were ultimately sovereign. The church, in its moral capacity, had every obligation to compel its members to be obedient to the government. This was clearly the teaching of Scripture. But the Bible did not settle, according to Hodge, this matter of the states versus the federal government. "*The question,*" he wrote, "*is, whether the allegiance of our citizens is primarily to the State or to the Union?* However clear our own convictions of the correctness of this decision may be, or however deeply we may be impressed with its importance, yet it is not a question which this Assembly has a right to decide." For the church to adopt the Spring Resolutions was tantamount to singing the "Star Spangled Banner" at the Lord's table.<sup>22</sup>

Lest I give the wrong impression of complete harmony between Hodge and Thornwell, I should add that in the course of declaring opposition to the Spring Resolutions, the Princeton theologian also called Thornwell's position "extreme," and four years later, "new."<sup>23</sup> Hodge, as you may recall, criticized Thornwell's opposition to a recommendation to the 1859 General Assembly to support the American Colonization Society. The South Carolinian had objected to the recommendation on the grounds that the Assembly, as a "court of the Lord Jesus Christ," not as a "body of Christian gentlemen," had no authority to support directly such an organization. Indeed, this distinction between what ministers did as citizens and what they did in their calling, a distinction crucial to apologists for the spirituality doctrine, has usually been lost on many

---

<sup>19</sup>"The General Assembly," *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (hereinafter, BRPR) 33 (1861), 557.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, 561.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 546.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 549, 544, italics his.

<sup>23</sup>"The Princeton Review on the State of the Country and of the Church," BRPR 37 (1865), 645.

historians.<sup>24</sup> No minister, Thornwell argued, could say that Christ had given him “a commission to attend to the colonization of the races.” The church, he added, was not in the business of building asylums but rather dealt with “men as men, as fallen sinners standing in need of salvation; not as citizens of the Commonwealth, or philanthropists, or members of society.”<sup>25</sup> Hodge rejected Thornwell’s logic, though apparently very similar to his own statement on the nature of the church, because it seemed to separate the “method of salvation” from the broad and ultimate claims of God’s law. Because the church was bound to witness against all sin and error, Hodge argued, Thornwell seemed to be guilty of cowardice if not inconsistency by preventing the church from declaring God’s will on colonization.<sup>26</sup>

Unfortunately, neither man addressed the merits of colonization, showing why he thought it a political or moral matter. Nor did Hodge or Thornwell acknowledge that their differences concerning church polity contributed to their disagreements about the spirituality of the church. In fact, Hodge’s and Thornwell’s debate about church boards versus committees, which occurred during these same years, that is, 1859 to 1861, go along way toward explaining their differences over the spiritual mission of the church. Thornwell favored a circumscribed understanding of Presbyterian government while Hodge balked at such a restricted view of ordination, special office and ecclesiastical assemblies.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, Thornwell’s fastidious case for conducting missions through committees of the General Assembly as opposed to boards, an argument with few advantages for the sectional crisis or slavery, adds greater weight to Farmer’s claim that the Southern Presbyterian’s view of the church cannot be dismissed lightly as a justification merely of Southern politics.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, for all of their differences about church polity, Hodge agreed in the main with Thornwell about the spiritual aims and methods of the church. As Hodge wrote in his report on the 1865 General Assembly,

The limits assigned to the power of church courts are all determined directly or indirectly by the word of God. Deriving all their authority from that source, they can rightly claim nothing but what is therein granted. As they are church courts ... [t]hey have nothing to do with matters of commerce, agriculture, or the fine arts, nor with the affairs of the state. They can only expound and apply the word of God.... They may make orders for the conduct of public worship and the administration of God’s house, but they have nothing to do with secular affairs.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>Graham, “*The True Presbyterian*,” esp. ch. 3, makes this point effectively.

<sup>25</sup>Thornwell, “Speech on African Colonization,” in *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell Volume 4, Ecclesiastical* (Edinburgh, 1974 [1875]), 472, 473.

<sup>26</sup>*The Princeton Review* 645, 646.

<sup>27</sup>A. C. Troxel, “Charles Hodge on Church Boards: A Case Study in Ecclesiology,” *Westminster Theological Journal* (forthcoming), makes helpful comparisons of Hodge’s and Thornwell’s views of Presbyterian polity, comparisons which help to explain their different expressions of the spirituality of the church.

<sup>28</sup>Farmer, *Metaphysical Confederacy*, 256. This is not to suggest that a strict versus a loose construction of church powers do not have a bearing on a strict versus a loose construction of the United States Constitution. For interesting suggestions about these hermeneutical parallels, Farmer, ch. 6, 266-283; and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* (Cambridge, 1994), ch. 2, esp. 64.

<sup>29</sup>*The Princeton Review*, 642-3.

In other words, as Thornwell argued as early as 1851, the church “has a fixed and unalterable Constitution; and that Constitution is the Word of God.... The power of the Church, accordingly, is only ministerial and declarative. The Bible, and the Bible alone, is her rule of faith and practice.”<sup>30</sup>

Defined in this way by Hodge and Thornwell, the doctrine of the spirituality of the church appears to be little more than a way of articulating the Reformed tradition’s understanding of sola scriptura. As Thomas F. Torrance argued in the 1958 introduction to Calvin’s *Tracts and Treatises*, “the formal principle which Calvin brought to [his] task was the reformation of the Church according to the Word of God as revealed in the canonical Scriptures,” where Christ himself utters “His own mind” and issues “His own commands” so that the church is “begotten of incorruptible seed.”<sup>31</sup> Though nineteenth-century American Presbyterians may have applied the formal principle of the Reformation poorly, their concern to limit the authority of the church to spiritual matters appears to be little more than what the Westminster Confession of Faith says in chapter 1, that “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 Scripture.” Or as the Shorter Catechism puts it, “The Word of God, which is contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him.” Now the rub, of course, is determining just what it is that the Bible reveals, a difficulty, which providentially I am not required to resolve here.

The mention of the Westminster Standards—yes, it has taken me too long to get to our topic and for that I apologize—leads to the question of whether advocates of the spirituality doctrine made a case for it on the basis of the Westminster divines’ teaching. One of the reasons why I may have taken so long to arrive at this question is that I did not find as much reference to the Westminster Confession and Catechisms as I had thought I might. Nevertheless, Hodge, Thornwell and other nineteenth-century Presbyterians appealed to the Westminster Standards, believing that the confessional benchmark for their communion legitimated their understanding of the church, its nature and its mission.

Charles Hodge provides an example of where nineteenth-century Presbyterians looked in the Westminster Standards for support of the church’s spirituality. In his report on the 1861 General Assembly and the debate surrounding the Spring Resolutions Hodge immediately appealed to chapter 31 of the Confession of Faith on Synods and Councils which reads that the church is to handle nothing but that which is ecclesiastical; and [is] not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth, conscience, if [it] be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.<sup>32</sup>

Hodge used this paragraph from the Confession to buttress his conviction that even though the question of deciding where the power of the state ends and that of the church begins may be “difficult,” still the two institutions were, in his view, “distinct” and their respective duties

---

<sup>30</sup>Thornwell, “Relation of the Church to Slavery,” in *Collected Writings*, 383-384.

<sup>31</sup>“Introduction,” to *John Calvin: Tracts and Treatises on the Reformation of the Church*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, 1958 [1844]), viii.

<sup>32</sup>Quoted in “The General Assembly,” 557.

“different.”<sup>33</sup> Hodge also cited paragraph 2 of the same chapter of the Confession to support his contention that the political disputes at the heart of the Civil War were properly matters of private judgment and therefore beyond the church’s power or authority. For that reason he believed it “undeserved” for him to be censured for dissenting from the Northern church’s official support for the Union. The only standard for judging matters before the church was Scripture and the Confession taught, Hodge believed, that “the decrees and determinations of councils are to be received only when ‘consonant to the word of God.’” This was only to say what chapter 31 of the Confession also says that the deliverances of ecclesiastical bodies are not infallible and need to be judged by the word of God. Thus, Hodge regarded the spirituality of the church, as he understood it, as being fully compatible with the Confession of Faith because this doctrine simply affirmed that the church could only bind the consciences of men and women on the basis of scriptural teaching.<sup>34</sup>

Though developing the spirituality doctrine more frequently than Hodge, Thornwell made fewer direct appeals to the Westminster Standards. One example of how he did use the Confession of Faith comes from his speech on African Colonization, the one that Hodge regarded as an extreme expression of the church’s spirituality. Like Hodge, Thornwell went straight to the chapter on Synods and Councils with its prohibition against the church meddling with politics. Determining whether a particular issue was ecclesiastical or political was, of course, in some cases a tough call. But Thornwell had no hesitation in regarding the society for African colonization as obviously a civil matter. “The relation of its classes and races, their respective rights and privileges, the position of woman, the equality or inequality of citizens,” Thornwell wrote, “these are questions which belong to the State.” As long as the state did not violate the law of God, then the church “has nothing to do but to accept society as given, and labour to make all its parts work harmoniously.”<sup>35</sup>

Stuart Robinson and Thomas Peck went beyond the occasional references of Hodge and Thornwell to the Westminster Standards in arguing that the spirituality of the church was the genius of Presbyterianism and therefore in complete harmony with the theology of the Westminster divines. To make this case, Robinson, who was professor of church history and polity at Danville Theological Seminary before pastoring Louisville’s Second Church, wrote the book, *The Church of God an Essential Element of the Gospel*, published in 1858. His exposition of the spirituality of the church differed little from the outlines produced by Hodge and Thornwell, though more elaborate. Robinson drew a series of contrasts between the ecclesiastical and the political spheres which fleshed out the doctrine: 1) the state’s authority stemmed from God as creator, the church’s from Jesus as mediator; 2) the state’s rule for guidance was the light of nature, the church’s the light “which, as the Prophet of the Church, Jesus Christ has revealed in his word”; 3) the state’s scope extended to “things seen and temporal,” the church’s to the “unseen and spiritual”; 4) the state’s symbol was the sword, the church’s the keys. For Robinson these distinctions were not arbitrary or accidental but flowed directly from the purposes for which God ordained the state and the church. The former, as he explained, was designed to restrain the consequences of human

---

<sup>33</sup>Ibid.

<sup>34</sup>*The Princeton Review*, 648.

<sup>35</sup>“Speech on African Colonization,” 476; see also 474-475.



depravity and “furnish a platform, as it were, on which to carry on another and more amazing scheme of mercy toward a part of mankind.” The latter’s purpose was to form “a nation of priests, a peculiar nation, not reckoned among the nations, of whom Jehovah is the God and they are his people.” Such detail may explain why Jack Maddex has attributed the spirituality of the church to Robinson rather than Thornwell.<sup>36</sup>

Whether Robinson deserves credit or blame is not as important for our purposes as his claim that the church’s spirituality was not a “novelty” but followed directly from the “early symbols of Presbyterianism.” In the appendix of his book Robinson provided excerpts from the Scottish Kirk’s first and second books of discipline, a letter of one of the Scottish commissioners to Westminster Assembly, Robert Baillie, extracts from Gillespie’s notes at the Assembly regarding decisions on church polity and government, and finally pieces from Westminster’s Second Book of Discipline. While Robinson appealed to the Westminster Standards he was particularly self-conscious about showing the dependence of American Presbyterianism upon the Scottish reformation. One of the distinctive contributions of the Scots, according to Robinson, was the strict separation of church and state, a separation that lay at the heart of the church’s spiritual mission and character. He believed that God’s providence had uniquely positioned American Presbyterians “(for the first time, perhaps, since the apostles) to actualize fully and without hinderance her true nature and functions as a spiritual commonwealth.”<sup>37</sup> But while Robinson believed the spirituality doctrine owed a great debt to the Scottish reformation, his exposition of church power depended heavily on the three-fold office of Christ as taught in the Reformed tradition and elaborated in the Westminster Standards. As Preston Graham has recently written in a thesis on Robinson, the Kentucky Presbyterian’s rationale “was that Christ no less fills the office of King as He does the offices of Prophet and Priest—the doctrines of the church, especially her government [sic], are derived from Christ’s office as King.”<sup>38</sup>

Thomas Peck, Robert Louis Dabney’s successor at Union Seminary (VA), continued the tradition of the spirituality doctrine almost to the close of the nineteenth century with the publication in 1893 of his *Notes on Ecclesiology*. In the chapter on the relations of church and state Peck gave an overview of the history of Christian teaching on the subject and credited the Reformation with discovering the genius of the church’s spirituality, with Luther having “some glimpses of the grand truth” and Calvin having “a much clearer conception of the church’s autonomy than Luther.” Like Robinson, Peck argued that the Scottish reformers went the farthest in developing the “autonomy of the spiritual commonwealth.” In addition, Peck claimed that the spirituality doctrine found in the confessional standards of the Presbyterian Church lay at the heart of American understandings of the separation of church and state and was “universally received by all other [American] denominations, if not expressly taught in their public formularies and symbols.” Like Robinson, Peck also defined the spirituality doctrine not merely negatively by contrasting the church and the state, but positively derived this teaching from the Lordship of Christ. “The church,” he wrote, “is called to testify for the rights of her only head and king, Jesus Christ, and for the freedom and independence which he has conferred upon herself as the purchase of his most precious blood.”

<sup>36</sup>*Church of God* (Philadelphia, 1858), 85-86, 87; Maddex, “From Theocracy,” 446-448.

<sup>37</sup>*Ibid.*, 10, ii-xcvi, 28.

<sup>38</sup>“*True Presbyterian Idea*,” 38. See also Robinson’s appeal to the Westminster Confession, *Church of God*, ch. 25, 73-74.

For this reason, Peck concluded, "The church has no legislative power, properly so called, but only a power to declare and obey the law of Christ's kingdom."<sup>39</sup>

Articulated in this manner, the spirituality doctrine, no matter how successful, was an effort to describe the scope of the church's power. Stated negatively it established a fairly clear boundary between the purpose and means of the church and the state, though of course the claims of the moral law made some overlap necessary. Still, for the Presbyterians surveyed here, both Northern and Southern, the spirituality doctrine required the church to stay out of political matters, strictly defined. To justify the church's apolitical character they appealed consistently to chapter 31 of the Confession. Stated positively the spirituality doctrine taught that the church was only to declare and minister the word of God and that its means for doing this were the spiritual ones implied in the symbol of the keys of the kingdom. In those areas where Scripture was not clear or were not chiefly spiritual the church, as a corporate body, had to be silent and permit freedom for individual Christians. Thus, the spirituality of the church was closely connected to the doctrines of the Lordship of Christ over individual conscience and Christian liberty. Southern Presbyterian advocates of the spirituality doctrine were more likely than their Northern peers to articulate it in positive rather than negative terms. For that reason, in addition to appealing to chapter 31 of the Confession, they also cited the Westminster Standards' broader teaching about Christ as the king of the church and Lord of conscience, the spiritual character of church ordinances, and Christian liberty. Still, in elaborating the spirituality of the church both Northern and Southern Presbyterians found support in the teachings of the Westminster divines.

The question that remains is just how successful nineteenth-century Presbyterians were in claiming support for the spirituality doctrine from the Westminster Standards. The fact that they appealed to the Standards does not settle the issue of whether they interpreted the Confession and Catechisms aright. This is a question which providentially I am not competent to settle. Here I plead ignorance as a provincial Americanist and the product of a educational system that produces authorities on the narrowest of periods, places and subjects of human endeavor. I am not so specialized, however, to know that church-state relations were markedly different between seventeenth century England and nineteenth-century United States and that this difference would have some bearing on determining whether the spirituality doctrine can be attributed properly to the Westminster divines. Indeed, the differences between the Old and New Worlds more generally which forced eighteenth-century American Presbyterians to revise the Westminster Confession's teaching on the duties of the magistrate would suggest that nineteenth-century and seventeenth-century Presbyterians differed in their understanding of the state. Thus, that Parliament called for the Westminster Assembly, an instance of Erastianism if there ever was one, is at least an irony worthy of some notice to those who would appeal to the Westminster Standards to defend the apolitical character of the church.<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>39</sup>T. E. Peck, *Notes on Ecclesiology* (2nd ed., Richmond, 1892), 140, 141, 144, 151.

<sup>40</sup>I have been helped a great deal by William S. Barker, "Lord of Lords and King of Commoners: The Westminster Confession and the Relationship of Church and State," in *The Westminster Confession into the Twenty-First Century*, eds., Ligon Duncan and Duncan Rankin, (forthcoming). Also important for understanding church and state in the Westminster Assembly are Robert S. Paul, *The Assembly of the Lord: Politics and Religion in the Westminster Assembly and the "Grand Debate"* (Edinburgh, 1985); and John Richard DeWitt, *Jus Divinum: The Westminster Assembly and the Divine Right of Church Government* (Kampen, 1969).

Still, the spirituality doctrine as elaborated by some of its staunchest advocates was not merely a way of arguing for the separation of church and state. Positively, the doctrine meant that the church was a spiritual institution with a spiritual task and spiritual means for executing that task. Despite my narrow range of historiographical competence, I am not so specialized to be ignorant of the ever growing literature on the differences between John Calvin and the Westminster divines. Nevertheless, Calvin describes the church and the Lordship and kingdom of Christ in ways that give some justification for recognizing links between the spirituality doctrine and the Reformed tradition. (And since this is the Calvin Colloquium it might be appropriate to mention some of Calvin's teaching on this matter.)

First, I want to cite briefly two examples from the *Institutes* that may remind us that Calvin was no stranger to the kind of dichotomies implied by the spirituality doctrine and to the view of culture contained in it. The first comes at the beginning of the section in Book IV where he writes about the state and distinguishes clearly between the civil and ecclesiastical spheres, not unlike chapter 31 of the Confession. He says that the former is concerned with "merely civil or external justice" while the latter "rules over the soul or the inner man, and concerns itself with eternal life." Calvin also asserts that it is a "Judaic folly" not to recognize that "the spiritual kingdom of Christ and civil government are things far removed from one another" (IV.xx.1). While this section in book four looks like a negative statement of the spirituality doctrine, Calvin appears to articulate it positively in book two when he describes Christ's kingship as being strictly "spiritual in nature" (II.xv.3). He adds that Christ's kingdom is "not earthly or carnal and hence subject to corruption, but spiritual" and because of that "lifts us up even to eternal life" (II.xv.4).

Now, of course, critics of the spirituality doctrine can go to those sections in the *Institutes* where Calvin describes the positive role of the magistrate in the life of the church.<sup>41</sup> In addition, opponents of the spirituality of the church may argue that it seems to deny all of the sociological observations beginning with Max Weber that point to the powerful influence of Calvinism's worldly spirituality in shaping the cultures of various Protestant nations. But even here I would want to suggest that sociologists have only read half of Calvin's piety and ignored that portion of the *Institutes*, repackaged as the *Golden Booklet of the Christian Life*, where the French reformer sounds as otherworldly as any pietist or fundamentalist.<sup>42</sup> In other words, nineteenth-century Presbyterians who articulated the spirituality of the church may not have been betrayers of Calvin, and the Westminster divines, if they saw a fairly sizeable chasm between things civil and ecclesiastical or between matters temporal and eternal.

Nevertheless, showing some precedent for the spirituality doctrine in Calvin and the Westminster standards does not automatically make the teaching more attractive. Of course, the spirituality of the church is still associated with the Southern church's defense of slavery and more generally with the fundamentalist abdication of social responsibility. Still, it must not be forgotten

---

<sup>41</sup>See, for instance, the essays in *Articles on Calvin and Calvinism*. vol. 11: *Calvin's Thought on Economic and Social Issues and the Relationship of Church and State*, ed., Richard C. Gamble, (New York, 1992).

<sup>42</sup>For instance, Calvin writes in III.ix.2 "there is no middle ground between these two: either the world must become worthless to us or hold us bound by intemperate love of it." Of course, statements like these need to be put into context. But my sense is that they are generally ignored in discussions of a Calvinistic understanding of culture, or as some modern day Calvinists put it, "a Reformed world and life view."

that the other side in nineteenth-century Presbyterianism, those who opposed the spirituality doctrine do not in hindsight look a whole lot better in their politics or a Christian understanding of it.<sup>43</sup> Their use of Christian teaching about the magistrate to support the Union and to baptize the agenda of the Republican Party may suffer just as much from self-interest and partisan politics as did the advocates of the spirituality doctrine. So while the spirituality of the church has been a doctrine subject to abuse, so has the notion of an activist Reformed-world-and-life view, which some have used to advocate in Christ's name specific politics or actions that appear to be no more than the preference of a particular interest group. Indeed, many of Abraham Lincoln's successors in the Republican Party today would like to lay claim to Christ's kingdom for their political initiatives. At times like this the spirituality doctrine looks especially attractive.

One example from my own work on J. Gresham Machen, the well-known Presbyterian fundamentalist and Southern sympathizer, demonstrates the usefulness of the spirituality doctrine. In 1926 he voted in his own presbytery, the Presbytery of New Brunswick, against a motion advocating the church's continuing support for Prohibition. Because his voice vote was used by his opponents to discredit him -- sort of like accusing a minister today of child abuse -- Machen had to explain his vote. He did so in language remarkably reminiscent of Hodge and Thornwell's. He quoted from the Westminster Confession on Synods and Councils and argued that those, like himself, who thought Prohibition unwise "have a perfect right to their opinion, so far as the law of our Church is concerned, and should not be coerced in any way by ecclesiastical authority." Even though his failure to support the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act was a big factor in the 1926 General Assembly's failure to sustain Machen's promotion to the chair of apologetics at Princeton Seminary, in hindsight his logic appears to have some merit. Not only was Prohibition fairly ineffective as social policy, but the PCUSA now recognizes at least in informal ways how unholy its alliance with the Republican Party was. But not only were the politics of Presbyterians unwise, as Machen pointed out, the church had lost sight of its chief duty, namely, to bring "to bear upon human souls the sweet and gracious influences of the gospel."<sup>44</sup>

Thus, for the same reason that Mark Noll finds Lutheran teaching on the two kingdoms to be attractive, so the Reformed doctrine of the spirituality of the church may provide welcome relief from various efforts to politicize the faith. Only in this case, the spirituality doctrine shows that Presbyterians and Reformed do not have to go to Lutheran sources to justify a restrained and transcendent understanding of the nature and work of the institutional church. In other words, the spirituality of the church is the Reformed way of keeping religion and politics separate and of letting the church be the church. As Peter Berger has written, neither the left's nor the right's political agenda "belongs in the pulpit, in the liturgy, or in any statements that claim to have the authority of the Gospel. Any cultural or political agenda is a manifestation of 'works-

---

<sup>43</sup>I am reminded here of Floyd V. Filson's interesting observation about the quiescence of fundamentalists. "In retrospect it is clear that something essential was represented by such militant conservatives as J. G. Machen. He was not infallible in critical questions, he had no proper sense of the social problems of our time, and he was not winsome in theological debate. But his . . . contention that classic Christian theology is the necessary outcome of faithfulness to the New Testament, [was] far truer to fact than much shallow theology which often marked the social gospel." "The Study of the New Testament," in *Protestant Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed., Arnold S. Nash, (New York, 1951), 60

<sup>44</sup>Machen, "Statement on the Eighteenth Amendment," unpublished manuscript, Machen Archives, Westminster Seminary (PA). For a discussion of this incident, see D. G. Hart, *Defending the Faith: J. Gresham Machen and the Crisis of Conservative Protestantism in Modern America* (Baltimore, 1994), 120-121, and for Machen's politics, ch. 6.

righteousness' and ipso facto an act of apostasy."<sup>45</sup> But Reformed believers did not need a Lutheran sociologist to tell them that. In some small way, as the Presbyterian divines surveyed here show, they already knew it.

---

<sup>45</sup>Berger, "Different Gospels: The Social Sources of Apostasy," *This World* no. 17 (1987), 13.