Minds in Place: Thornwell, Palmer, Dabney, and Breckinridge in Fast Day Sermons: Or, The Pulpit on the State of the Country (1861)

Xaris A. Martinez
University of Mississippi, xaris.martinez@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd

Part of the History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://egrove.olemiss.edu/etd/1230

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at eGrove. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of eGrove. For more information, please contact egrove@olemiss.edu.
MINDS IN PLACE:
THORNWELL, PALMER, DABNEY, AND BRECKINRIDGE IN

FAST DAY SERMONS: OR, THE PULPIT ON THE STATE OF THE COUNTRY (1861)

A Thesis
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
in Southern Studies
The University of Mississippi

by

XARIS A. MARTÍNEZ

May 2011
This thesis provides a contextual description and analysis of four southern fast day
sermons delivered in the winter of 1860-61 by the following Presbyterian ministers: James
Henley Thornwell (South Carolina), Benjamin Morgan Palmer (Louisiana), Robert Lewis
Dabney (Virginia), and Robert Jefferson Breckinridge (Kentucky). The introduction provides a
short history of the practice of communal fasting, a brief review of sermon scholarship, and a
description of the book, *Fast Day Sermons* (1861), in which these four sermons were published.
Each chapter centers on a different sermon, providing information on the venue in which the
sermon was delivered, a biographical sketch of the specific minister, a description of the socio-
political context and events that led to a fast day proclamation, an analysis of the sermon text,
and an account of the media coverage the sermon received. The conclusion draws attention to
the need for further scholarly investigation of this particular sermon genre.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My sincerest thanks to Charles Reagan Wilson, Ted Ownby, and Kathryn B. McKee for challenging me to read broadly, think deeply, and write clearly. Additional recognition is due to Dr. McKee who, in her role as graduate student advisor, helped to guide me through the Southern Studies graduate program with her uncommonly good sense. Nancy Bercaw’s comments on the thesis prospectus challenged me to consider why this topic had captured my interest; conversations with Charles Eagles, Deirdre Cooper Owens, and Adrian Weimer helped to clarify my thoughts and cheer my spirits. Andrew C. Harper’s advice, encouragement, and sense of humor helped keep me focused on the tasks at hand and the goals ahead.

The two years spent in Oxford in pursuit of this graduate degree were made all the more memorable because of time spent with a great group of colleagues, particularly Rebecca Batey, Ross Brand, Jennifer “Bingo” Gunter, Kathryn McGaw, Douglas and Meg Porter, and Mary Amelia Taylor. Phone conversations with Crystal Cohagan and Jen Kane kept my spirits up, while encouragement and advice were dispensed in plentiful amounts by fellow participants in the NEH’s 2010 summer seminar on the American Civil War, especially Mary Duarte and my “sister” Lynne Niznik. Opportunities to sing regularly with southern Sacred Harp singers provided much-needed respites from academic endeavors. A heartfelt “¡gracias!” goes out to the many members of my family who cheered me on from hundreds of miles away, particularly my two abuelas, Duquelia “Kelo” González and Bertha Martínez. For never losing faith in their daughter, I owe Olga and Juan Martínez the greatest debt of all.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION: A WINTER OF CRISIS, 1860-61

CHAPTER I: THE SPIRIT, THE ERRAND, AND THE SIN

CHAPTER II: A PROVIDENTIAL DUTY

CHAPTER III: PATRIOTISM, PEACE, AND DUTY

CHAPTER IV: MODERATION AND RESOLVE

CONCLUSION: “THE BELIEF THAT THEY WILL HAVE A HISTORICAL INTEREST”

WORKS CITED

VITA
INTRODUCTION

A WINTER OF CRISIS, 1860-61

In the weeks leading up to the 1860 presidential election, American citizens throughout the nation speculated about what the results of the election would portend for their communities. Uncertain about the fate of the federal union, fearful over the possible outbreak of violence, and unsure of the effectiveness of their political leaders, many in the nation turned to their local pulpits in search of the comfort, direction, and explanations that their religious figures could provide. Ministers responded with the confidence and authority gained from years of articulating the consciousness of American society. Their collective message was that God had not forsaken the nation at its time of greatest need. That winter’s political turmoil was instead a direct consequence of sinful actions committed against the deity by individuals and the nation itself. The only way of regaining God’s favor and bringing an end to that season’s crisis was to humbly and collectively repent from those individual and national sins and thus elicit a favorable and providential intervention into their currently disheartening earthly circumstances.

2 See Noll, Civil War as a Theological Crisis, 1, and Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 6.
3 Richard E. Beringer, … [et al.], Why the South Lost the Civil War (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 92: “in the mid-nineteenth century Christians adhered to a widespread orthodox belief that had as a basic tenet the
winter of 1860-61, a number of national leaders, legislative bodies, and denominational
organizations set aside days during the week and called on their respective populaces to turn to
an age-old practice that antebellum Americans believed had mitigated a variety of other troubles
in the past. Throughout the nation, women and men gathered together for a day of communal
fasting, prayer, and humiliation, and prepared to hear a sermon by their local minister, a sermon
that sought to interpret what that winter’s political events meant and what the religious response
to the surrounding chaos should be.

THE PRACTICE OF COMMUNAL FASTING:
FROM OLD TESTAMENT DIRECTIVE TO NATIONAL RITUAL

The communal fasting practiced by these nineteenth-century Americans had its roots in
the occasional days of corporate humiliation and abstinence from eating and other activities that
were observed periodically by God’s “chosen” people. Throughout the span of Old Testament
history, the response of religious Jews to natural disasters and community misfortunes was to
gather together – at the command of God through one of His prophets – to fast, pray, and humbly
make atonement for the sinful thoughts and actions they believed had brought these conditions
about.4 Believing that present calamities had been brought about by actions that had offended
God and made Him turn away from them in displeasure, they hoped that this group practice in
fasting, prayer, and humiliation would cause God to once again look upon them with favor and

______________

notion that God enters and intervenes in human history. It also seemed axiomatic to most Americans that the hand
of God shaped all events because they implicitly believed that heavenly intervention in the Christian era occurred
not only in the manifested divine person of Jesus Christ two millennia before but also in day-to-day events of their
own time.” See also David B. Chesebrough, ed., “God Ordained This War”: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis,
1830-1865 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991), 5-6; Chesebrough, “No Sorrow Like Our
Sorrow”, 66; and Anne C. Loveland, Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860 (Baton Rouge:

“it was God alone who appointed fast days among the Jews in the Old Testament.” In subsequent manifestations of
fast day proclamations, religious and/or civic leaders appointed fast days.
mercifully restore the covenanted relationship they enjoyed with Him.⁵ Some of these days were yearly Jewish holy days established in the Hebrew calendar, such as the Day of Atonement (Yom Kippur), while others were occasional fasts proclaimed when deemed necessary by current events.⁶ In addition to abstaining from eating and drinking from one evening to the next, they observed a day of fasting as a Sabbath day of rest, which meant that those observing the fast were not allowed to do work of any kind. Rather, the covenanted community spent the day turning away from their sin and turning back to God.

Centuries after its first biblical manifestations, community fasting was embraced in the 1500s by English Puritans who were intent on reforming the Church of England. When members of this Protestant group gained power in the country, they abolished all of the lavish and highly ritualized holy days proclaimed by the Roman Catholic and Anglican churches, whose celebration they believed had relegated the Sabbath to secondary status in the life of the church and its members.⁷ Although this complete elimination “reasserted the primacy of the Lord’s Day,” it left no communal outlet by which Protestants could acknowledge the providential workings of God in their midst.⁸ Like the “chosen” people discussed above, Puritans also believed that they were in a “covenanted relationship with a demanding yet merciful God.”⁹ His favor towards them and their country could only be expected if they, the people of His covenant, would publicly acknowledge and repent from their individual,

---

community, and national faults. Consequently, from the early Elizabethan period on, these Protestants adopted the Israelite model of collective fasting, prayer, and humiliation when natural disasters struck their country. They saw these calamities as signs of God’s disapproval and punishment towards evildoers; the only way to avert God’s wrath was to proclaim a day of fasting. Much like their biblical counterparts, those who observed the English fast day gathered together for prayer and abstained from eating, drinking, and working from one evening to the next.

Beginning in 1581, authorities proclaimed fast days in response to national and political crises. Fearing that Roman Catholic powers in continental Europe were planning to wage war against England, Puritans prompted Parliament to propose the proclamation of a national fast, deeming it “an appropriate response to make to the perils confronting the nation.” In their zeal, they failed to ask and receive royal approval of their declaration from Elizabeth I, who demanded an apology that acknowledged a royal’s prerogative to proclaim a fast of any kind. Parliamentary and civil fasts ceased until James I approved of one in 1624 and, under Charles I, general fasts inaugurated the beginning of each parliamentary session. The public learned of the fast days decreed by kings and queens by means of officially printed proclamations, and observed the day by following the recommendations of the earliest Protestant treatises on the subject. As a way of ensuring the involvement of as many of the royal’s people as possible, “commercial establishments, courts of law, and places of entertainment were closed while the

---

10 See Hudson, “Fast Days and Civil Religion,” 6, 21-22: note 20. Love, Fast and Thanksgiving Days, 42: “Regarding all dire happenings as punishments, and all blessings as approvals, they [Puritans in England] seem to have thought that their moral status before God was thus written out in events. They connected every calamity or deliverance with their present sin or virtue.”
12 Ibid., 10.
13 Ibid., 11-12.
14 See, for example, Thomas Cartwright, The Holy Exercise of a True Fast (1580); Henry Holland, The Christian Exercise of Fasting, Private and Publicke (1596); and Nicholas Bownde, The Holy Exercise of Fasting: Described Largely and Plainly Out of the Word of God in Certaine Homilies or Sermons (Cambridge: John Legat, 1604).
churches and dissenter meeting houses welcomed worshipers” to gather together to avert the “divine wrath and impending judgment” of a jealous God.\textsuperscript{15}

The practice of communal fasting during times of distress reached colonial New England by way of Puritan migrants, men and women who drew upon the rich history of abstention that extended from Old Testament practices to the establishment of English civil fasts.\textsuperscript{16} Like their Jewish and English counterparts, these “chosen” people, busily creating “a city upon a hill” in their new surroundings, believed that God’s anger towards them for not living up to the expectations of His covenant with them manifested itself in the form of afflictions both natural and civic: drought, insect infestation, Native American conflict, disease, war, earthquakes, and political troubles both at home and abroad.\textsuperscript{17} These divine interventions in the daily life of colonists required an immediate communal, religious, and ritualistic response in the form of a day of fasting, prayer, and humiliation, a day in which God would recognize “the heartfelt desires of his people to repent and purify themselves through their fast-day activities” and could then respond by putting an end to what threatened the community, either from without or

\textsuperscript{15} Ippel, “Blow the Trumpet, Sanctify the Fast,” 52-53, first quote from 53; second quote from Hudson, “Fast Days and Civil Religion,” 6. Ippel argued that “although the attendance at divine services on the fast days may have been perfunctory, although not all entered into the spirit of the day as enthusiastically as the royal family, although more attention may have been given to the politics revealed than the contrition required – yet the sermon and the occasions upon which they were delivered must have been prominent in the minds of the king’s subjects” (“Blow the Trumpet,” 53).


Those who participated in the rituals distinguished themselves from non-participants in the community through both their activity and non-activity, reinforcing participants’ “sense of divine chosenness and exclusivity” and thus serving to create “feelings of social bonding” between those who took part. On appointed fast days, New England’s ministers organized special services in which they offered prayers and weekday sermons that “excoriated the population about its failings,” spending time “describing [the current] disasters, listing sins, and fixing blame” – all in hopes of bringing about an emotional transformation in faithful congregants and a spiritual one in those who had yet to profess their faith and unite with local houses of worship.

Beginning on July 16, 1623, the purpose of the fasting ritual and sermon was to maintain the covenant, “enact a reversal,” and “recover the blessing” that would aid the colonists in maintaining their precarious social order and “tenuous physical and moral existence” in the hostile American wilderness. At first, the call to observe a day of fasting arose from both civic and religious authorities, although gradually the authority to declare a day of fasting in the

---

18 Finch, *Dissenting Bodies*, 170. See also Finch, “Pinched with Hunger,” 36-37; Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 170-171; and Billy Laydon Harris, “The New England Fast Sermon, 1639-1763” (PhD diss., Florida State University, 1968), 33. According to Finch, the “outward activities of a fast ordained by God were fivefold” in their New England context. For twenty-four hours, colonists were to abstain from any source of nourishment, pray instead of sleep, wear humble clothing, go without sexual relations, and give up work (unless the work was some kind of service to God). See *Dissenting Bodies*, 171. While “abstaining from and indulging in food and other pleasures were fundamentally individual activities,” New England colonists felt that “the most effective kind of fast was public, when individuals acted in unison to heal the corporate body and regenerate the affective bonds within and protective boundaries around the godly community.” Only “corporate suffering” would effectively “elicit divine attention” (Finch, “Pinched with Hunger,” 43).

19 Finch, “Pinched with Hunger,” 37 and 38. Harris, “New England Fast Sermon,” 20: “Public humiliation was the only sure method of relieving public misfortune, not only because it sought for mercy, but because it translated misfortune into a common resolution to do something about it.”


21 According to Love, *Fast and Thanksgiving Days*, 85, July 16, 1623, was the first fast day to be ordered by the local governor in New England, in his role as a civil magistrate. First quote from Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 168; second quote from Harris, “New England Fast Sermon,” 19; third quote from Finch, “Pinched with Hunger,” 37.

northern colonies was ceded almost exclusively to the state, while in the middle and southern colonies the authority remained with church bodies and leaders.

Depending on the extent of the disaster affecting the colonies, the observance of a fast day could be restricted, according to historian Harry S. Stout, “to one particular town or church, or observed simultaneously in every church and town throughout the land.” Summoned to meeting houses by broadside proclamations, members of the community laid aside everyday activities on the chosen weekday in order to come together and, in the words of Perry Miller, “acknowledge their sins and promise reform” of their offending actions. As time progressed, colonists grew more assured of their ability to survive in their new surroundings; the dangers that afflicted them became more predictable and/or controllable. By 1695, days of fasting, rather than being timely responses to immediate threats, became established as annually observed events on local and state calendars. Times of widespread and unforeseen distress, however, continued to demand days of communal fasting as a response. As the colonies began the struggle that would serve to render their ties to England, the Continental Congress proclaimed July 20, 1775, as the day for the “Twelve United Colonies” to observe their first national fast. The Continental Congress would go on to proclaim at least sixteen such national ritual occasions during the American Revolution, calling on the newly constituted American community to head

23 See Love, Fast and Thanksgiving Days, [221]-223, 237-238, and 431.
25 Stout, New England Soul, 27.
to local churches and “repent of sins, seek forgiveness, and implore God to lift the affliction of their suffering from them.”

After the Revolutionary War, a number of presidents proclaimed national fast days: John Adams, on May 9, 1798, and April 25, 1799, concerning fears of war breaking out with France; James Madison, on August 20, 1812, September 9, 1813, and January 12, 1815, due to the ongoing war with Britain; John Tyler on May 14, 1841, owing to the death of William Henry Harrison; Zachary Taylor on August 3, 1849, as a consequence of an outbreak of cholera; James Buchanan on January 4, 1861, in response to the threatened secession of Southern states; Abraham Lincoln for September 26, 1861, April 30, 1863, and August 4, 1864, due to American Civil War events; and Andrew Johnson on June 1, 1865, owing to the assassination of Abraham Lincoln.

After the American Civil War, national days of prayer replaced the observance of national fast days, bringing to an end a communal practice and ritual – rooted in different historic times and geographic locations – that allowed individuals to demonstrate publicly “to themselves, each other, and sometimes outsiders” that they were committed to righting their wrongs and waiting for God to acknowledge their devotion and bless them anew.

**AMERICAN FAST DAY SERMONS:**

**RELIGION, HISTORY, AND POLITICS FROM THE PULPIT**

During designated days of communal fasting in the antebellum period, groups of people would gather to pray together and ensure that those who proclaimed a religious adherence were abstaining from eating, drinking, and working. They would also congregate to listen to the

---


words of their community’s religious leader, usually in the form of a sermon that served to remind the group of the causes of their problems, the purpose of their meeting together, and the actions required to avert further disaster and reaffirm their special covenantal relationship with God. Like a Sabbath day sermon, these fast day discourses were exhortations often based on biblical texts that could be used to provide religious comfort, direction, and chastisement.

Unlike their Sabbath counterparts, however, fast day sermons were only prepared in response to a significant and historic event affecting a particular community at a specific, current time. For a minister to remain silent on the natural, social, and political events that had brought the fast day about and instead limit his discourse to the religious topics deemed acceptable for a Sabbath day sermon would have been regarded as absurd and even offensive by the assembled and fasting multitude.32 The immediate and event-driven nature of the fast day thus created a unique opportunity for ministers to discuss worldly issues and offer political commentary from the weekday pulpit in ways that would have been improper on the Sabbath day.33 Their engagement with the issues of the day, along with their use of rhetoric and themes usually reserved for politicians, made fast day sermons of interest not only to the religious congregation, but also to the local women and men who were not members of the church.34 On the special and occasional days of fasting, prayer, and humiliation, ministers could address the concerns of the society-at-large from the pulpit, momentarily forsaking Christ in order to tackle mundane political topics.35

In the Old Testament, prophets and priests used days of fasting to chastise the leaders of the Jewish people, calling them to repent from their sins and forecasting the evil they would bring to their kingdoms if they failed to do so. In the English parliamentary setting, fast day

---

33 See Kerr, “Politics and Religion,” 374 and 382.
sermons were often used to transmit “party propaganda” to royal subjects and inform them of the controlling faction’s “long-term aims and … temporary shifts of policy.”

In the American context, ministers combined and further developed aspects of these two previous fast day expressions to produce a sermon genre – a “jeremiad” – that addressed political issues and often identified political solutions to civic problems. These discourses, heavily based on Old Testament texts, usually consisted of three different parts: first, the “doctrine,” which was the minister’s explanation of the biblical text on which he based the sermon; then the “reasons,” in which the minister provided a number of arguments demonstrating the soundness and truthfulness of the doctrine; and finally, the “uses” or “applications,” in which the minister “enumerated, in as much detail as he had courage for, the provocations to vengeance, proposed a scheme of reformation, and let his imagination glow over the still more exquisite judgments yet in store unless his listeners acted upon his recommendations.” Throughout the sermon, the minister articulated the fears and hopes of his congregants. He cataloged the ways in which the specific community of “chosen” people had turned away from God in the past and how those actions had led to the present turmoil. The hope, based on a belief in divine Providence, was

---

36 H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The Crisis of the Seventeenth Century: Religion, the Reformation and Social Change* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 309, 294. According to Ippel, the English pulpit “could be used or ‘profaned’ for political purposes” and churches could often be used as “the engine of the [political] state” (“Blow the Trumpet,” 44 and 51).

37 Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation*, xx: “the term ‘jeremiad,’ … literally refers to a literary work or speech modeled on the Hebrew Bible books of Jeremiah and Lamentations that expresses a bitter lament or prophecy of doom.” Love characterized the three different stages of fast day delivery (Old Testament, English Puritan, and New England colonist) as being “successively religious, historical, and political” (*Fast and Thanksgiving Days*, [362]).

38 Miller, *New England Mind: Colony to Province*, 29. See also Harris, “New England Fast Sermon,” 45, and Hudson, “Fast Days and Civil Religion,” 13. According to Love, New England ministers were often “seduced into political discussions” when delivering fast day sermons. “The political parties grew up around them, and they were found partisans from the circumstances of the time” (*Fast and Thanksgiving Days*, 363)

39 Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 172: it is important to remember that “fast days and the events they were keyed to were open to alternative interpretations.”
that a day of fasting, prayer, and humiliation, followed by future community action and reform, could bring about a change in their situation.\textsuperscript{40}

\textbf{THE STUDY OF SERMONS: A BRIEF SCHOLARSHIP REVIEW}

American jeremiads combined religious language and political rhetoric to address historical issues of concern to a particular social group. Historians, speech analysts, and other scholars have studied these sermons to examine aspects of the intellectual, cultural, and socio-political context of these texts, as well as produce religious portraits of clergymen and their congregations and states. Historian and American Baptist pastor David B. Chesebrough argued that sermons were important and valuable historical documents because they revealed the “current thinking, problems, and issues” that occupied the “attention and emotions” of a society and culture at a particular place and time. Preachers, as “people of their times,” were “shaped and influenced by the events and ideas of their generation and environment.” The sermons they produced thus “reflected” the concerns and sentiments they held in common with their congregants. This was particularly true with popular preachers, who earned that status in their community by mirroring “the opinions, hopes, fears, prejudices, likes, and dislikes of a large number of people.” Rather than shaping or otherwise challenging the public’s thoughts on certain issues, pastors, Chesebrough claimed, were more likely to reflect and reinforce the popular ideas and beliefs of their particular context.\textsuperscript{41} Jeffrey J. Auer believed that the foremost function of public speaking was “to give form to economic, social, and political problems, and to establish alternative solutions.” For that reason, “the immediate and the long-range audiences, the specific occasions for speechmaking, and the total historical context” had to be considered.


when examining speeches, particularly those “persuasive appeals” that hoped to impel audience members “to act in one way or another.”

Speech analyst and rhetorician DeWitte T. Holland emphasized the importance of a sermon’s social and cultural context to its creation: “Sermons are not preached in general, but for particular people with particular needs in particular places. Preparation for preaching must include … a knowledge of and a concern for the elements in society that affect the listeners.” An awareness of the issues of the day, and how they were impacting listeners and readers, would inform the preacher on the words that congregants and a wider readership would “comprehend and/or accept.” The sermons that communities praised and accepted were those that were deemed relevant by those who listened and/or read them, the kind of sermon that “took on something of the character of the time of its being.”

English literature scholar Mary Morrissey called on both historians and literary critics to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to the study of sermons, including paying particular attention to the sermon’s “immediate historical moment.” Only this kind of approach would reveal that sermons were historical documents that recorded events as well as rhetorical texts “written to influence events.” Studying sermons as “both texts and events” required further investigation on “the importance of place and circumstance in preaching”; if a sermon’s context was not fully taken into consideration, historians would use the

---

43 DeWitte T. Holland, The Preaching Tradition: A Brief History (Nashville: Abingdon, 1980), 113, 11, and DeWitte T. Holland, ed. Sermons in American History: Selected Issues in the American Pulpit, 1630-1967 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 13. In his introduction to Holland’s Preaching Tradition, William D. Thompson noted how important it was to “understand preaching in its historical setting; to examine its biblical and theological underpinnings; to explore its spiritual, relational, and liturgical dimensions; and to develop insights into its craftsmanship” (7).
documents as “sources or subjects” for “crude ‘source mining’” and rhetoricians would focus only on the text’s “bare axioms rather than the elements within.”

Rhetorician Lloyd Bitzer argued that genuine understanding of any kind of public speech was contingent on “understanding the context of meaning in which the speech is located,” since public speaking involved a complex “interaction of speaker, audience, subject, and communicative purpose.” Rhetoric was “situational,” brought into being at a particular moment and place and inviting the rhetor to provide a response that fit the specific moment while at the same time dictating “the purpose, theme, matter, and style of the response.” A “rhetorical situation” was thus shaped by several factors, including the exigent circumstances that led someone to speak, the audience that was being addressed, and any and all constraints that influenced the speaker, including his or her beliefs, attitudes, and cultural and social traditions, as well as the location and background of the audience.

In order for a speech to be persuasive, speech historian Karen E. Fritz maintained that it had to not only provide “an appropriate response” to the “rhetorical situation” described by Bitzer, but that it had to “interact properly” with the intended audience. Fritz believed speeches were “persuasive devices,” a collection of “specific forms of argument, figures of speech, stories, and planned digressions through which the speaker establishes the tone of his discourse and develops his ideas and arguments” to best effect. A thorough study of any kind of speech thus required an examination of “the contents of contemporary speeches” as well as “the popular reception” of the particular audience.

Studies of fast day and other sermons delivered in colonial New England have analyzed these primary sources in order to gain insight into the social, cultural, intellectual, and political

45 Ibid., 1121, 1112, 1116, 1113, and 1117.
history of the region. The groundbreaking work of intellectual historian Perry Miller traced how New England colonists altered the Puritan typologies prevalent in English fast day sermons in order to have this sermon genre address the particular needs of their New World society. These jeremiads and their accompanying rituals became “an engine of Americanization,” ways of publicly “recognizing, if not quite of becoming reconciled to, the actualities of American life,” with all of its unpredictability and uncertainty.48 Literary theorist Sacvan Bercovitch also highlighted how the theological language and political rhetoric of this particular sermon genre reflected the “particular psychic, social, and historical needs” of New England colonists. The structure and text of these American jeremiads described what was important to these Puritans of the New World and aided colonial communities in defining who they were as religious people and as Americans.49

Although scholars have yet to write a book or article specifically on southern fast day sermons, a number of historians have provided brief accounts of the history of the fast day ritual and sermon genre in the southern region. James Silver, Drew Gilpin Faust, and Harry S. Stout make mention of both the ritual and the sermons – in their southern manifestations during the Confederacy – in their studies on the role of clergymen in creating Confederate propaganda, the creation of nationalistic feelings in the Confederacy, and the moral justifications for Civil War violence, respectively.50 Mitchell Snay argued that, because “rhetoric imposes structure and meaning on the world,” some of the most important elements in a fast day sermon were “the

50 See Silver, Confederate Morale; Drew Gilpin Faust, The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988); and Stout, Upon the Altar of the Nation.
words and concepts chosen to explain the meaning of events, language that would quickly hit home in a time of deep crisis."  After studying some forty fast day sermons, Snay found similarities in the structure of this sermon genre in the southern region:

(1) Acknowledgement of a providential design in human affairs.  (2) The conception of the nation as having a relationship with God, just as an individual does.  (3) The conclusion that God blesses and punishes nations based on the collective behavior of their people.  (4) Recognition of the sin of America.  (5) Characterization of this sin as the neglect and perversion of religion.  (6) Designation of the main sinner as New England, and the secondary sinner as the Southern slaveowner.  (7) Proposal of the solution: secede to avoid further contamination, and then reform Southern society.

His study of the particular religious rhetoric in southern fast day sermons led him to believe that a rhetorical analysis and “close explication” of these texts could “shed light on ‘the deepest values of southern society on the eve of the war’” by revealing the religious logic that southern antebellum ministers used to explain and justify separation from the federal government.  This brief review of the pertinent scholarship on American fast day and other sermons confirms that the southern fast day sermons delivered in the winter of 1860-61 can prove to be incredibly useful in producing nuanced understandings of antebellum clergymen, their congregations, and their states at a particular time and place.

SERMONS AS TEXTUAL SOURCES:
FROM EVANESCENT ORATION TO PRINTED TEXT

Several of the fast day sermons delivered in the antebellum period were printed and read by local congregants and the larger literate public. Although the process by which an antebellum sermon made its way into print varied from location to location, it usually involved some variation of the following, as described by historian David B. Chesebrough:

Soon after the sermon was delivered, a delegation of men (always and only men) would either write or visit the minister, telling him how impressive his sermon was and asking him to allow them the privilege of putting the discourse into print. After proper protestations of modesty and unworthiness, the preacher acceded to the request.  

Once permission to publish the sermon had been granted, changes were often made to the manuscript of the original oration before the minister submitted it for publication. The minister, the editor/publisher, or both would change words, clarify opinions, remove paragraphs, correct grammatical mistakes, add new material, or change the order of points. Although the aim of such revisions was probably to improve the manuscript before it was made available to a reading audience, the process could substantially alter the substance of the sermon as initially delivered. Those ministers who chose to deliver their sermons without the aid of a written manuscript or notes could encounter the same problem, as they were unlikely to remember verbatim what they had said from the pulpit. Thus, the printed rendition of a sermon, including those delivered on fast days, should never be assumed to be an exact replica of its orally presented form; they are, in fact, a completely “separate genre” whose target audience was “other than the man in the pew.”

It is also important to keep in mind that preparing a sermon for print and getting it published required a certain expenditure of capital. Consequently, many of the printed sermons that are now available for historians and other scholars to analyze were those delivered by urban ministers in larger and more affluent churches. These types of congregations were usually overseen by university and/or seminary-educated clergymen, who were perhaps more likely to

---

54 Chesebrough, “No Sorrow Like Our Sorrow”, xvi. See also Fritz, Voices in the Storm, 10-11. James Silver described a similar process of publication for Confederate sermons. See Silver, Confederate Morale, [42].
56 Melody Dittmar Seymour, “The Pulpit in the Prow: The Voice of the Sermon in the Fiction and Culture of the United States” (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1990), 145. See also Fritz, Voices in the Storm, 19 and 22.
produce sermons of higher quality, both in their coherence and erudition.\textsuperscript{57} City clergymen, who were usually well-known figures in their community, were also much more successful in garnering local and state newspaper coverage of their sermons, particularly the often politically themed sermons delivered on fast days. Longhand manuscripts of rural and urban sermons, available in archived collections of ministers’ papers, help to offset the possible changes to content and the bias towards urban sermons. Summaries of sermons can also be found in the journals, letters, and other miscellaneous papers of individuals of the era who either heard or read the discourse.\textsuperscript{58}

A number of print mediums were available for the publication of antebellum sermons. The most common of these forms for fast day sermons was the pamphlet, a booklet whose small size and low production cost made it conducive to wide distribution by interested individuals and groups, either in person or through the mail. This kind of printed circulation allowed the clergymen’s words and opinions to not only reach his local congregants anew, but also members of the press, public officials, other religious and denominational leaders, and the larger civic community.\textsuperscript{59} During times of political crisis, political figures and campaigns used pamphlets to distribute their ideas and calls to action to the American masses.\textsuperscript{60} The winter of 1860-61 was no exception to this historical trend; “torrents” of these publications “erupted from the presses” and helped to influence public discussion of the political issues facing the nation. Ministers who

\textsuperscript{57} See Chesebrough, “God Ordained This War”, 12, and Chesebrough, “No Sorrow Like Our Sorrow”, xvi. E. Brooks Holifield, The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 44: “Publication of a sermon … became an index of clerical success and prestige, especially after the 1820s. … By the mid-nineteenth century the South was awash with printed sermons; books of sermons competed for attention with a growing periodical literature devoted to worthy examples of pulpit artistry.”

\textsuperscript{58} See Faust, Creation of Confederate Nationalism, 18.


\textsuperscript{60} The most famous example in American history of this kind of political pamphlet is Thomas Paine’s Common Sense (January 1776).
sought to bring religious insight to problems with political manifestations found in the pamphlet a perfect medium by which to circulate their fast day sermons and thus console and motivate both congregants and their larger reading public.  

Newspapers were another medium by which fast day sermons found their way into print. Daily and weekly newspapers, including religious weeklies, published portions of certain sermons within days of their delivery or after they had been published in pamphlet form, providing readers with quotes, excerpts, summaries, abstracts, or the text in its entirety. On occasion, details concerning the events that had brought about the proclamation of a fast day, portions of the proclamation text, and notes on the minister’s delivery, the distinguished personages in the audience, and the reaction of the congregation to the sermon would also accompany these passages. Monthly or quarterly journals provided much of the same coverage to their subscribers, as well as providing a venue for clergymen, professors, and other trained laypeople to discuss, review, and respond – in print – to the arguments presented in the fast day sermons.

**FAST DAY SERMONS: OR THE PULPIT ON THE STATE OF THE COUNTRY (1861)**

The only book-length volume of fast day sermons published in the winter of 1860-61 was titled *Fast Day Sermons; or, The Pulpit on the State of the Country*. Issued in January 1861 by

---


62 Newspapers would often publish the announcements of national fasts; religious and denominational papers would announce fasts proclaimed by local congregations or national denominational bodies.

63 See Fritz, *Voices in the Storm*, 10, 19, and 22. Eyewitness accounts, of course, were not always accurate. And no written account could “convey [all] the elements of delivery: the speaker’s tone of voice, subtle nuances, gestures, and overall presence” (Fritz, *Voices in the Storm*, 22).

64 *Fast Day Sermons: or the Pulpit on the State of the Country* (New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1861). My conjecture that the book was published in January 1861 is based on the following: the preface of the book is dated “Jan. 1861” (viii) and its contents were all available by that month. This leads me to assume that this collection was published sometime in mid-January of 1861. More importantly, the following was listed below the publisher’s name (“Rudd & Carleton”) under “New Announcements Since Our Last Issue” in *American Publisher’s Circular and Literary Gazette* 7:3 (January 19, 1861), 30: “Fast Day Sermons, by Prominent Preachers throughout the North and South. Large 12mo.” 12mo is an abbreviation for duodecimo, which indicates that the size of the book was
the New York City publishing house of Rudd & Carleton, *Fast Day Sermons* was a collection of eleven southern and northern discourses delivered on national and state fast days between November 1, 1860, and January 4, 1861. All of the sermons selected by the editors of the volume had received newspaper coverage of some kind; many of them were available in pamphlet form and had also been reprinted in newspapers and published in religious periodicals. In the book’s preface, the publishers indicated that, at a time when the country found itself “profoundly agitated” over questions of “National existence,” it would befit “thoughtful men” to listen to “the calm voices of the Pulpit” regarding the causes of the afore-mentioned agitation. In order to facilitate that process, the book featured discourses that represented “the mind of the country, both North and South” and served to illustrate the “profound difference of opinion” not only between the two regions but also among the clergymen of a particular region as well. By “reviewing these discourses,” it was hoped that the reader would see “how widely, and yet how honestly and sincerely, good men may differ” and thus “learn for himself broader views and a kindlier charity.” The eleven sermons that followed were arranged regionally, with the four southern selections at the beginning, followed by seven northern selections. Of the latter

---

65 The bookstore and publishing firm of Rudd and Carleton (1857-1861), operated by Edward P. Rudd, George R. Rudd, and George Washington Carleton, was better known for producing sentimental romances, social novels, and humorous pieces. G. W. Carleton appears to have been the principal partner involved in the production of *Fast Day Sermons*; his trademark symbol (🪐) – the Arabic symbol for books inverted to resemble his initials – appears on the volume’s title page. Carleton would take over the publishing firm in 1861 after Edward P. Rudd’s death and George Rudd’s retirement, changing the name to G. W. Carleton (1861-1871). See *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1638-1899: Dictionary of Literary Biography: Volume 49* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Gale Research Company, 1986), 84, 406, and J. C. Derby, *Fifty Years Among Authors, Books and Publishers* (New York: G. W. Carleton & Co., Publishers, 1884), 233, 235-244.

66 *Fast Day Sermons*, [vii]

67 Ibid., [vii]
selections, four were presented in New York City, two in Brooklyn, and one was a New York college professor’s published response to one of the Brooklyn sermons.68

The sermons selected to represent “the mind” of the South came from ministers that were natives and long-time inhabitants of the region: James Henley Thornwell, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, Robert Lewis Dabney, and Robert Jefferson Breckinridge.69 All four clergymen were part of a larger group of antebellum southern ministers that have been described by historians as “gentlemen theologians,” “professor-preachers,” “clerical theologians,” and representatives of the “age of the preacher-sage in the South.”70 They were all ordained ministers in the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), more specifically the Old School section71 that maintained a congregational presence in both the North and the South until 1861.72

---

68 Six of the eleven total selections were sermons delivered by Presbyterian ministers. Publisher George R. Rudd, who was an ordained Presbyterian minister in New York, may have influenced this denominational penchant, as well as the New York state origin of all of the northern discourses. See J. A. Spalding, comp., Illustrated Popular Biography of Connecticut (Hartford, Conn.: Press of the Case, Lockwood, & Brainard Company, 1891), 211.

69 Fast Day Sermons, [vii].


71 The Old School-New School split in the PCUSA occurred in 1837-38. During the denomination’s 1837 General Assembly, the representatives of the Old School presbyteries abrogated the Plan of Union of 1801 between Presbyterians and Congregationalists and excised the four New School synods that had been formed under its auspices. The Old School argued that the Plan of Union had provoked debate between clergy and their congregations over doctrinal stands and church government procedures and that the ensuing synods were doctrinally heretical. In 1838, the excluded synods formed their own General Assembly. Both the Old and New School factions called themselves “the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America.” For a fuller account of the Presbyterian division, see Ernest Trice Thompson, Presbyterians in the South (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), I:[350]-412, and Jacob Harris Patton, A Popular History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (New York: R. S. Mighill and Company, 1900), [430]-453. On the importance of this and other denominational schisms to the severing of national bonds and the coming of the American Civil War, see Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation.

72 See Farmer, Metaphysical Confederacy, 193, 245; E. Brooks Holifield, Theology in America: Christian Thought From the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 389; George C. Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 39; Peter J. Wallace, “‘The Bond of Union’: The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837-1861” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 2004), 10, 28; and Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, I:540. T. Watson Street, The Story of Southern Presbyterians (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961), 45: “By 1860, the Old School Church was known as the largest Protestant body which was still represented in strength in both N and S; as the most conservative Church; and, according to Cyrus McCormick, as one of the two great bonds (the other was the Democratic party) holding the Union together. … [however], more than one-third of the Old School Church was in the South.” While the Old School section of the Presbyterian Church successfully avoided regional schism for over twenty years - largely by suppressing official discussion of slavery – it finally split
The Old School denomination was theologically conservative, endorsing “the infallibility of Scripture and the total depravity of man” and holding to the “traditional Calvinistic doctrines embodied in the Westminster Confession of Faith, including predestination, original sin (in the sense of complete moral inability), and original guilt”; its adoption of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, which stated that churches and their leaders should only preach on spiritual matters, served to discourage ministers from speaking on political matters from the pulpit. 73 Old School ministers were instead directed to prepare their hours-long sermons with care, “expressing themselves in language agreeable to Scripture, and level to the understanding of the meanest of their hearers; carefully avoiding ostentation, either of parts or of learning.”74

On days of fasting, prayer, and humiliation, ministers were to “point out the authority and

———

73 W. Todd Groce, “The Cassandra of Yankeedom: Robert Lewis Dabney and the Critique of the New South,” in Nineteenth-Century America: Essays in Honor of Paul H. Bergeron, eds. W. Todd Groce and Stephen V. Ash, [145]-177 (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 149, and Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, I:352. See also Holifield, Theology in America, 389-391. On the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, see Ernest Trice Thompson, The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1961); Margaret B. DesChamps, “Union or Division?: South Atlantic Presbyterians and Southern Nationalism, 1820-1861,” The Journal of Southern History 20:4 (November 1954): 488; Farmer, Metaphysical Confederacy, 256-260; and Street, Story of Southern Presbyterians, 50. According to Stout and Grasso, the doctrine of the spirituality of the church “was appropriated by southern Presbyterians, but spoke for the larger southern tradition of the strict separation of church and state” (“Civil War, Religion, and Communications,” 352, note 26). In “The Presbyterian Church in the South Atlantic States, 1801-1861” (PhD diss., Emory University, 1952), [180], Margaret B. DesChamps notes that the “evangelical denominations of the Old School believed that the church should not engage in political affairs, and that members ought not to become engrossed in partisan politics. Ministers confined their sermon topics chiefly to theological and ethical questions, church courts warned against neglecting spiritual duties in the interest of campaigns and elections, and the religious press commented with caution on political questions. Yet, in spite of the efforts of churches to avoid enmeshments in affairs of government, political and ecclesiastical realms could not be entirely separated. Events in the secular world, especially the growth of sectionalism, fell with resounding force upon all denominations.”

74 The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Containing the Confession of Faith, the Catechisms, and the Directory for the Worship of God: Together with the Plan of Government and Discipline, as Ratified by the General Assembly, at their Sessions in May 1821; and Amended in 1833 (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839), 497. Some ministers wrote their sermons out in full; the majority of them relied on notes and extensive outlines. See William Davidson Blanks, “Ideal and Practice: A Study of the Conception of the Christian Life Prevailing in the Presbyterian Churches of the South During the Nineteenth Century” (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary in Virginia, 1960), 157; Loveland, Southern Evangelicals, 40; and Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, I:220.
providences calling to the observation thereof; and … spend a more than usual portion of time in solemn prayer, particular confession of sin, especially of the sins of the day and place.”

The Presbyterian denomination also maintained high educational requirements for its ministers, requiring candidates to have a college diploma and three years of study at a seminary before being allowed to take a series of examinations whose successful completion secured a license to preach. The rigorous process produced intellectually impressive ministers, whose “wide-ranging knowledge” drew the educated and business classes to their churches and earned their denomination “elite” status among the evangelical churches. All four of the southern ministers in Fast Day Sermons (1861) earned a number of advanced academic degrees and utilized their scholarly skills to write pamphlets and books, edit religious periodicals, serve in leadership positions at denominational meetings, and teach at one of the three Presbyterian seminaries in the American South. In their interactions with each other, these four religious

---

75 The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Containing the ... Directory of Worship (1839), 518. The days of fasting, prayer, and humiliation that were observed by the Presbyterian denomination were those proclaimed by the Presbyterian General Assembly, synod, or local congregation; the days appointed by the President, Congress, or state legislative bodies were observed at the discretion of the local congregation. See Blanks, “Ideal and Practice,” 149-157, and Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, I: 122.

76 On the high educational requirements for Presbyterian clergy, see Loveland, Southern Evangelicals, 25-28; Donald G. Mathews, Religion in the Old South (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 85; Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 106; Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, I,[144], [235], [274]; and Wallace, “‘Bond of Union,’” 22. The examinations covered geography, history, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, physical sciences (astronomy and geology), mental philosophy, moral science, logic, theology (natural and revealed), ecclesiastical history, and church government. See Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, I:[212]-213.

77 Farmer, Metaphysical Confederacy, [153]. See also Robert J. Miller, Both Prayed to the Same God: Religion and Faith in the American Civil War (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 62. Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 62: “Presbyterians, though the least numerous of the three popular denominations [after Baptists and Methodists], were of comparable significance as a national religious body because of their slightly higher level of education and affluence.” Presbyterians thus had “a far greater influence in shaping the cultural life of the time than their numbers would indicate” (Street, Story of Southern Presbyterians, 40). Presbyterian “appeal was chiefly to the educated, substantial citizenry,” and as a result the denomination “embraced more people in the center of the social spectrum than either Methodists or Baptists” (DesChamps, “Presbyterian Church in the South Atlantic States,” 16, and Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 61). Interestingly, although Presbyterians comprised only a small percentage of the Southern population, they “owned a disproportionate number of slaves” (Farmer, Metaphysical Confederacy, 201).

78 Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 62: “Upwards of twenty weekly newspapers kept [Presbyterian] church members abreast of religious news, current affairs, and editorial opinion.” The three seminaries were: Union Theological Seminary (1812) in Virginia, Columbia Theological Seminary (1828) in South Carolina, and Danville Theological Seminary (1853) in Kentucky.
colleagues created their own “sacred circle,” one in which mutual admiration and occasional critique led to both lasting friendships and bitter rivalries between the men as all four gained prominence as southern religious speakers, thinkers, and leaders in the antebellum period. Although numerically behind the Baptist and Methodist denominations, the Old School Presbyterian Church exerted an incredible amount of influence in the nation, due to the local, regional, and national renown of their educated and prolific ministers.

But despite sharing common regional origins, denominational ties, educational achievement, and widespread recognition, these four southern clergymen used the fast day sermon genre to articulate distinctly different views regarding the morality of slavery, the feasibility of secession, and the appropriate religious – and political – Christian response to the crisis of the winter of 1860-61. James Henley Thornwell declared the institution of slavery to be beneficial to the region, while also admitting that its abuses were widespread and in need of correction. The “leading minister … of South Carolina,” speaking from its capital, called on the state to pursue its defense of state sovereignty, regardless of the personal sacrifice involved in the endeavor. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, in an “eloquent” and “fiery” address from his pulpit in New Orleans, maintained that God had decreed the perpetuation of slavery in the Bible and that it was the duty of all Christians to defend the divinely sanctioned institution. He also called on the state of Louisiana to dissolve its ties to the Union. Robert Lewis Dabney’s “milder”

---

80 See Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 8, and Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 62. According to Goen, the Presbyterian denomination was hampered in growth after the American Revolution due to “its scholastic doctrinal system, rigid polity, and insistence on maintaining high standards of ministerial education” (Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 49). Thomas C. Johnson, A History of the Southern Presbyterian Church, with Appendix (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1894), 322: “In 1861 there were south of Mason and Dixon’s line 12 synods of the Old School Church, 1275 churches, and 96,500 communicants.”
81 Unfortunately, the book’s preface only acknowledges the diversity of opinions of the “Northern preachers” in the volume. See Fast Day Sermons, viii.
82 Ibid., [vii].
discourse warned his fellow Virginians of the dangers of civil strife to both church and civic bodies and called on Christians to confess their sins to God and pray for peace. Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, speaking in Kentucky, sought to demonstrate why it was in the best interest of southerners to preserve national unity. One of the reasons for this stance was his belief that remaining in the federal union would better preserve the institution of slavery; a slave owner himself, he was a long-time advocate of gradual emancipation and colonization.\textsuperscript{83} Even though these four clergymen had much in common, their different biographical and educational backgrounds and their locations in different states of the southern region produced four different responses to the national political crisis. The different fast day sermons authored, delivered, and published by these four clerical minds in four southern places help to demonstrate the ways in which intellectual frameworks and social context shaped the religious aural and textual expressions of the antebellum South.

**FORMAT OF SERMON ANALYSIS**

Although historians and speech analysts have referenced *Fast Day Sermons* (1861) and analyzed a few of its selections in a variety of scholarly publications, the discourses have never been studied collectively or in their regional sections.\textsuperscript{84} This thesis will analyze the four southern sermons published in *Fast Day Sermons* (1861), which will serve to enhance historical understanding of the so-far understudied southern fast day and its accompanying sermon and rituals while also highlighting the ways in which the different geographic, social, and political

\textsuperscript{83} Ibid., viii.

contexts of the four southern states impacted the antebellum religious expressions and intellectual production of the region’s clergymen. Analysis of these sermon texts will be accompanied by information on the venue in which the sermon was delivered, a biographical sketch of the specific minister, a description of the socio-political context and events that led to a fast day proclamation, and an account of the media coverage the sermon received. The purpose of this particular contextual approach to sermon analysis is two-fold. First, it will explore several important questions that require further examination. For example, while these sermons often had transcendent themes, were the four southern ministers at the center of this thesis able to, in the words of historian George C. Rable, transcend their “parochial viewpoints, regional interests, denominational blinders” and “the prejudices of place and time” when preaching about current events and political issues? How do these southern fast day sermons reflect the intellectual and social milieu that molded and motivated the men who authored, delivered, and published them? How do these sermon texts indicate the extent to which these southern clergymen reflected and sanctioned their society’s values and the ways in which they may have challenged them? Secondly, the contextual study of these four southern fast day sermons will hopefully draw attention to the diversity of thought among antebellum clergymen during the winter of 1860-61. Just as there has never “one” American South, the ministers of the region were never of “one” mind regarding religious matters or political issues.

The following chapters will analyze the four southern discourses published in *Fast Day Sermons* (1861), exploring one sermon per chapter, in the order in which it was published in the

---

85 Rable, *God’s Almost Chosen People*, 44. See also Startup, *Root of All Evil*, 5-6.
87 For arguments that clergy’s sermons reflected and sanctioned their society’s mores, see Beringer, *Why the South Lost the Civil War*, 97; Chesebrough, “No Sorrow Like Our Sorrow”, xi; Daniel, *Southern Protestantism*, 14-15; Rable, *God’s Almost Chosen People*, 49; and Startup, *Root of All Evil*, 32. For arguments that clergy’s sermons could be critical of their society’s values, see Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, 9; Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, [ix]-x; and Startup, *Root of All Evil*, 6.
book. In each of these chapters, I will begin by providing a description of the building in which each minister delivered the sermon, as well as of the specific audience being addressed on that particular fast day. This physical description will be followed by a biographical sketch of the clergyman who authored and delivered the particular fast day sermon at the center of the chapter. This narrative will include information on his early childhood, schooling, family life, pastoral service, and professional duties and will come to an end at the moment at which the minister in question delivered his fast day sermon. Then, I will describe the social and political context of the geographical area in which this speaking opportunity took place, focusing on the prevailing mood and atmosphere of the state and the specific locale on the day in which the fast day sermon was delivered. Finally, I will provide information on the events that provoked a fast day proclamation from a national figure, state legislature, or religious group and led to the writing of the particular jeremiad.

After providing this contextual description for the fast day sermon, I will proceed with an analysis of the sermon text, beginning by identifying the main theme and aim of the sermon, as well as its organizational structure, the rhetorical devices employed, and the sources used by the minister to corroborate his claims. I will then follow the development of the theme and aim throughout the address by examining the content of the sermon, drawing attention to both rhetorical technique and style when possible. My suggestions and thoughts on the motives and intentions of the sermon content will be based on the biographical and historical context provided in the earlier section of the chapter. An account of the immediate newspaper coverage

89 David B. Chesebrough’s “A Guide for the Analysis of Sermons,” available in “Sermons as Historical Documents,” 278-280, was particularly helpful in determining my approach to these fast day sermons. Also helpful was Karen Fritz’s analysis of Confederate rhetoric, Voices in the Storm, chapter two.
and publication of the fast day sermon will conclude each chapter. By focusing on both context and content, this approach to sermon analysis will explore two important questions at the very center of this historical project: What do these fast day sermons reveal about the men who authored them and the time and place in which they were delivered and published? How does the “cultural and social information” extracted from these texts complicate our understanding of southern antebellum religion and its role in the coming of the American Civil War? In the conclusion to my thesis, I will provide brief biographical accounts of the wartime and post-bellum careers of the four ministers highlighted in the following chapters. I will also draw attention to the need for further scholarly investigation of antebellum fast day sermons, suggesting ways in which the study of these important documents can be advanced.

It is important to recognize and identify the limits of this study. First, audience reception and reader response to these fast day sermons, which could be measured by in-depth analysis of diaries, letters, recollections, and newspapers, were beyond the scope of this thesis. I will only be able to hint at aural and textual reception and response by listing the ways in which these fast day sermons were circulated in print form. Second, the fast day sermons I will be analyzing were all written by white Presbyterians in the American South. Consequently, I will not be exploring how African American ministers, preachers in other denominations, and clergymen in other parts of the nation used fast day sermons to respond to the sectional crisis of 1860-61. Finally, the analysis of each of these sermons and their authors and context will be all too brief,

---

90 Fritz, Voices in the Storm, 20.
91 Historians and scholars of literature seem to be in agreement that a methodology for measuring the influence of a sermon has yet to be completely devised. For example: Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 14: “historians simply cannot evaluate with precision the influence of a sermon … Often one must be content with witnesses who testify to the impression of a pervasive influence, knowing that the quantification of such influence remains beyond the reach of available evidence”; Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 400: note 11: “Seldom is it possible … to estimate how influential any particular sermon proved to be, but when a number of preachers from different denominations and parts of the country emphasized similar themes, that in itself was revealing.”; and Morrissey, “Interdisciplinarity,” 1123: “there is considerable research still needed before we can claim to have a methodology that uncovers a sermon’s full engagement with its historical moment.”
ensuring that this thesis will not be a definite investigation or exhaustive study of the southern fast day sermon on the eve of the American Civil War.

Despite these shortcomings and drawbacks, however, I believe that a contextual description and analysis of these four specific texts is a valuable and worthwhile endeavor. By placing these fast day sermons in their geographical, social, and political context, and exploring the ideas and motives of their authors, this series of local case studies will shed light on how the winter crisis of 1860-61 was experienced in four different places and how four different minds made sense of the chaos surrounding them. While this attempt at painting a southern clerical landscape is limited in its scope, it presents an opportunity to examine the diversity in style and opinion among those who otherwise had much in common. More importantly, this thesis will call for further study and research of antebellum southern fast day sermons, a sermon genre that can reveal a great deal about the regional society it wished to reassure, challenge, and transform.
CHAPTER I
THE SPIRIT, THE ERRAND, AND THE SIN

At first glance, the slight, pale, and stooped man ascending to the pulpit of Columbia’s Presbyterian Church on Wednesday, November 21, 1860, seemed out of place in the imposing sanctuary and among the various luminaries in attendance within it. Built on a prominent corner lot, the large, early English Gothic Revival church structure of rose-tinted stucco featured a 180-foot central steeple, arched stained glass windows, and an entrance bordered by “pseudo-Corinthian columns.” Inside, a chandelier-lit central aisle led directly to a large, white marble pulpit; the aisle separated two columns of box pews that could hold up to 800 attendants. Due to its location in the state capital, those attendants included state representatives, senators, and other community notables, as well as faculty and students from South Carolina College and Columbia Theological Seminary. With no notes in hand, James Henley Thornwell appeared to be not only physically incapable of making his voice heard in the large auditorium, but also unprepared

---

92 See Walter Brian Cisco, Taking a Stand: Portraits from the Southern Secession Movement (Shippensburg, Pa.: White Mane Books, 1998), 51; Farmer, Metaphysical Confederacy, 53, 59; Holifield, Gentlemen Theologians, [110]; Benjamin Morgan Palmer, The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875), 154; and Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 13. Although now known as the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, at the time this sermon was delivered the congregation was identified as the Presbyterian Church in Columbia; I have chosen to use the latter name.

for that fast day’s task of addressing his distinguished congregants concerning the events of the past weeks.\(^{94}\) That month had brought an unwelcome result to a presidential election, the resignation of both of the state’s senators to the U.S. Congress, and preparations for yet another election in which Carolinians would choose delegates for a secession convention.\(^{95}\) In light of that winter’s political crisis, South Carolina’s governor and legislators called for a day of fasting, prayer, and humiliation. It was up to the state’s ministers, including Thornwell, to make sense of the chaos, identify appropriate responses, and call South Carolinians to action.

The unimposing man began to speak. Within moments, Thornwell made it astoundingly clear to his congregation why many considered him “the leading Old School clergyman of the South.”\(^{96}\) His physical frame belied the strength of his voice, his scholastic background the engaging tone of his oratory. Famous public speakers such as Daniel Webster, Henry Ward Beecher, and John C. Calhoun had praised his eloquence.\(^{97}\) In fact, Thornwell’s rhetorical prowess had earned him the appellation “the Calhoun of the Church.”\(^{98}\) But on that Wednesday, the Palmetto State’s most prominent minister hoped to steer clear of political speechmaking. For well over two hours, Thornwell carefully explained what was at stake in the current crisis, the responsibility of each citizen regarding its outcome, and the honorable course to pursue if God’s favor was to be secured. His statements revealed that he had undergone a political conversion –

\(^{94}\) See Palmer, *Life and Letters of JHT*, 553.

\(^{95}\) Abraham Lincoln won the presidential election on November 6, 1860, United States Senator James Chesnut resigned his position on November 10, United States Senator James Henry Hammond resigned his position on November 11, and the election for delegates to South Carolina’s secession convention took place on December 6.

\(^{96}\) Lewis G. Vander Velde, *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 1861-1869* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932), 30. William E. Boggs, who heard James Henley Thornwell preach sometime between 1855 and 1860, said the following regarding JHT’s sermon delivery: “The manner at first was marked by the monotonous movement of voice already noted in the reading. The gestures were constrained. The head oscillated. The large white handkerchief crushed in the nervous hand swayed to and fro somewhat like a signal flag seen at a distance. But as the argument proceeded these peculiarities and constraints dropped from him … The slender frame erected itself to the fullest stature. The gesture swept freely through every arc of emphasis. The voice grew in tone and volume” (as quoted in Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It*, 84-85).


\(^{98}\) Cisco, *Taking a Stand*, 57.
a life-altering transformation that would, within weeks, enable him to staunchly defend a
separation that he had spent years opposing.

A SOUTH CAROLINIAN SCHOLAR

James Henley Thornwell was born on December 9, 1812, at the Pegues plantation in
Marlborough County, South Carolina.99 The second child of James Thornwell, the impoverished
overseer of the Pegues estate, and Martha Terrell, a devout Baptist, James Henley was born into
neither wealth nor distinction. Grief was a frequent and early visitor to his family; his twin
brother died within weeks of his birth and his father followed eight years later. After the latter’s
death, a cousin offered the family a home in the area where the widow, with help from her slave,
was able to earn a living for herself and her four young children through sewing. The precarious
nature of this source of revenue, combined with the trauma of losing his father at such a young
age, marked Thornwell for the rest of his life. His childhood cut short, the young boy was often
fearful and prone to outbursts of emotion; having been deprived of material goods as a child, he
later developed and indulged a taste for “the best of everything in its kind.”100 He began
attending a field school in 1821 and quickly distinguished himself among his classmates by his
love of reading and a precocious understanding of a variety of academic topics. These displays

---

99 Only one book-length biography of James Henley Thornwell (JHT) has been published. Written by Benjamin Morgan Palmer, The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell (Richmond: Whittet & Shepperson, 1875) is a verbose and often-rambling narrative penned by a mentee and self-proclaimed admirer of JHT. Despite Palmer’s biases towards the subject of his monograph, the volume contains a wealth of primary material, including examples of JHT’s correspondence with family and friends. The only other book that considers JHT’s life to a large extent is an intellectual biography of antebellum southern thinkers by James Oscar Farmer, Jr.: The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1986), which is based in part on his doctoral dissertation of the same title (University of South Carolina, 1982). This chapter section (“A SOUTH CAROLINIAN SCHOLAR”) is based on Palmer, Life and Letters of JHT, [1]-483, and Farmer, 5-266, unless otherwise noted. See also Chesebrough, “God Ordained This War”, 152-153; Cisco, Taking A Stand, 47-76; Holifield, Theology in America, 389-392; Kelly, Preachers with Power, [59]-83; John Miller Wells, Southern Presbyterian Worthies (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1936), 11-49; Wakelyn, Southern Pamphlets on Secession, 157; and Henry Alexander White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders: 1683-1911 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000, c1911), 309-319. The area identified as “Marlborough District” in this chapter is now known as “Marlboro District.” It is unknown when this change in terminology occurred; I have chosen to use the now obsolete designation.

100 Palmer, Life and Letters of JHT, 135.
of mental acuity brought him to the attention of his teacher, whose desire to personally supervise Thornwell’s education led him to persuade the Pegues family to offer the son of their former overseer a home with them at their plantation.

During his stay with the Pegues family, Thornwell made a fortuitous impression on a local physician. While on a professional call to the family, he noticed a “pale and diminutive boy” engrossed in reading a book the doctor thought to be beyond his capacity to understand. When he questioned the sickly-looking Thornwell on its contents, the boy sprang up, demanded that the doctor test his knowledge of the volume, and succeeded in impressing the man with his understanding and memorization of its contents. The doctor shared the story of his encounter with the young and defiant prodigy with several of his acquaintances in Chesterfield County’s town of Cheraw, including William H. Robbins, a local lawyer, and General James Gillespie, a wealthy planter. After observing Thornwell for themselves, Robbins and Gillespie decided to jointly direct and fund his future education. In 1826, Thornwell moved to Cheraw to live and read law with Robbins, studying with him for two years before transferring to Cheraw Academy, a local Presbyterian school, for a year. Thornwell’s delight in his scholastic endeavors at the academy exhibited itself most markedly in his study habits. While fellow classmates headed outside to run and play sports, Thornwell remained indoors to read. When others slept, he studied. His single-minded devotion to the acquisition of knowledge led many to assume that he would follow in Robbins’ footsteps and study law or politics. However, Thornwell’s interests in classics and metaphysics had led him to decide on theology as his chosen intellectual profession.

After successfully completing his final examinations at Cheraw Academy in 1829, the nineteen-year-old Thornwell moved 90 miles southwest to the state capital of Columbia to begin

---

a university degree at South Carolina College. While his pale and sickly appearance could have potentially elicited ridicule from fellow undergraduates, Thornwell’s intellectual prowess soon made him one of the most admired students in the junior class. He devoted fourteen hours a day to his studies, dedicating time to extra reading at the college library and the memorization of portions of the Bible and entire plays by Shakespeare. Thornwell’s ability to retain information was especially useful in his debating performances for the college’s literary and debating club, where he soon became known for his extensive knowledge and his sarcastic tone when confronting the arguments of someone he judged as having an uncertain grasp on the truth.

A frequent visitor to the local bookstores, Thornwell came across a copy of the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which he purchased and read due to his interest in religious philosophy. The book impressed him by the logic and rationality of its arguments and led him to make inquiries concerning the Presbyterian denomination for which the *Westminster Confession of Faith* was central to both doctrine and ecclesiology. The memory of that encounter remained with him as he graduated from South Carolina College in December 1831. After moving to Sumter County’s Sumterville to being teaching a class of private students, he began attending Concord Presbyterian Church and joined the congregation in May 1832. His chosen profession of theology was now not only a matter of intellectual interest, but also a matter of personal faith.

---

102 South Carolina College, founded by the state in 1801, was located in Columbia in hopes of attracting students from both the Low Country and Up Country. See Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:262. JHT attended the college during the presidency of Thomas Cooper, who was an ardent champion of states’ rights and taught classes in political economy. Rosser H. Taylor, *Ante-Bellum South Carolina: A Social and Cultural History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1942), 118: “students under his [Cooper] tuition were imbued with notions of the exalted position of the states in the Federal Union, and with the social and economic soundness of the institution of Negro slavery.” Cooper was later ousted from the college for religious views that verged on the agnostic. The institution is now known as the University of South Carolina.

103 See Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:52.

104 The name of the town (Sumterville) was shortened to Sumter in 1855.
During his short stay in Sumterville, Thornwell wrote articles for *The Columbia Hive* and *The Southern Whig*, with topics ranging from the aesthetic qualities of literature to the grounds for dueling and the intricacies of state nullification.\(^{105}\) With his heart set on leading the life of a scholar, he knew the importance of getting his name in print in order for his intellectual endeavors to be taken seriously. He did not want to live in relative obscurity and, in his own words, “die unknown, unhonoured [sic], and unsung,” but instead wished to have his intelligence acknowledged by his peers.\(^{106}\) In January 1833, Thornwell became the principal of Cheraw Academy, where he had formerly been a student and where he labored to transmit his love of learning to his often-reluctant students. During his eighteen-month tenure at the academy, he also underwent a physical transformation. He grew a foot taller and gained a little color in his cheeks, the latter development possibly connected to a brief romance with a local young woman that was put to an end by both of their families. Growing increasingly convinced that he had been called to a life in ministry, Thornwell appeared before the examination board of the Presbytery of Harmony in November 1833. His candidacy for the ministry was nearly derailed during his examination when several members of the examining board felt that his responses to questions about his personal conversion in 1832 lacked emotional sincerity. But one elder insisted that the young man showed enormous potential and the examining board opted to accept Thornwell as a candidate for Presbyterian ministry in December 1833.

Although the training required for this calling was available at nearby Columbia Theological Seminary, Thornwell instead made his way to the theological seminary in Andover,

---

\(^{105}\) JHT’s theological writings were published as *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, ed. John B. Adger (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, volumes 1-2 in 1871, volumes 3-4 in 1873). The fast day sermon at the center of this chapter was published in the fourth volume, titled “Ecclesiastical.” The editor was planning two more volumes. The first (or fifth in the series) would have consisted of sermons, public addresses, political essays, and other miscellaneous writings. The second (or sixth in the series) was to be a “Life and Letters,” written by JHT’s “intimate and particular friend,” Benjamin Morgan Palmer. Only the latter was ever published, and it was not a part of the *Collected Writings* series. See *Collected Writings of JHT*, I:iii and IV:11.

\(^{106}\) From a letter to Alexander H. Pegues, dated April 29, 1832, as quoted in Palmer, *Life and Letters of JHT*, 93.
Massachusetts, where he had been offered a scholarship to pursue language studies. He left his position at Cheraw Academy in the summer of 1834 and made his way to Andover, where he soon became disappointed by the courses being offered and the theology being taught. He moved twenty-five miles south to Cambridge to attend lectures at Harvard College and devote time to learning both Hebrew and German. His dismay at the Unitarian and – to him – unorthodox New School inclinations of both institutions finally compelled him to leave in October; his doctor had also encouraged the move to warmer climes, believing that Thornwell’s delicate health would not survive exposure to a northern winter.\footnote{Holland, \textit{Preaching Tradition}, 70: JHT was “dissatisfied with the liberal intellectual and theological climate of the Boston area.”}

Upon his return to South Carolina, Thornwell received a license to preach from the Presbytery of Harmony, which then transferred him to the Presbytery of Bethel. After less than a year of specific theological training, Thornwell was installed as the pastoral supply of a rural three-church circuit in Lancaster County in June 1835.\footnote{JHT was in charge of the “mother” church in Lancaster, as well as nearby country churches in Waxhaw and Six-Mile Creek.} A mere six months later, he married Nancy White Witherspoon, a local politician’s daughter.\footnote{JHT’s wife would give birth to nine children, only five of whom lived to be adults.} While the small size and humble conditions of the congregations under his charge at first disheartened the ambitious young man, the two-and-a-half year assignment provided Thornwell with the opportunity to confirm his gifts for the Christian ministry, particularly his prowess in the pulpit.

As a preacher, Thornwell made use of the strong voice and argumentative techniques he had gained from childhood contentions and college debate performances.\footnote{Farmer, \textit{Metaphysical Confederacy}, 68: JHT had the “tendency to approach the sermon as he did all oratorical and literary exercises, as a form of debate.”} Having grown unafraid of sharing his opinion and confident in his abilities to refute the reasoning of others, Thornwell was outspoken in his views of what constituted orthodox Calvinist theology. He
shared these thoughts with his congregants through absorbing oratory that sought to synthesize “several elements of Christian doctrine that his hearers knew in their distinct settings, but had not unified in their own minds.”\textsuperscript{111} His sermons, however, were practical rather than dry and obscure lectures on the intricacies of minute theological points.\textsuperscript{112} At this early point in his preaching career, Thornwell used a number of body movements for dramatic effect in his sermons, making particular use of his hands to illustrate key points. His sermons were often short, half-hour events, though they would grow into orations of over an hour in length towards the end of his life. His gifts for memorization were particularly helpful in his endeavors, as Thornwell never used notes from the pulpit but rather committed his opening, conclusion, and larger themes to memory and depended on his knowledge of the material at hand for the rest of the discourse. Although he was ministering in a remote area, reports of his erudite and logical orations made their way back to Columbia and his alma mater, which elected him to be the Professor of Logic and Belles Lettres in late 1837. He began teaching those subjects and lecturing in metaphysics and philosophy in January 1838.

Given his scholarly penchants and his ability to impart knowledge to an audience, the transition from rural pastorate to city academic should have gone smoothly. But Thornwell was restless, a quality he would exhibit for the rest of his professional life as he moved from post to post. The reasons for his behavior varied from year to year. At times, he indicated to friends and family that he had grown uninterested with certain duties, dissatisfied by administrative decisions at a certain institution, or simply wanted to have a more visible effect on the life of the church or the life of his students. Occasionally, his health required a change in work schedule or,

\textsuperscript{111} Farmer, Metaphysical Confederacy, 54.
\textsuperscript{112} Kelly, Preachers with Power, 74: “He [JHT] placed the strongest emphasis on a clear presentation of powerful truth, with one logical step following another, building up to a majestic climax at the end.” Vander Velde, Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 30: JHT was known for “the brilliance of his logic and the clearness of his argument in the pulpit.”
even less frequently, Thornwell would openly admit that he was motivated by a desire to increase his reputation. This restiveness appeared a mere three semesters into his teaching position at South Carolina College. Thornwell resigned in 1839 in order to become the pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Columbia, which was overseen by the Presbytery of Charleston and located just a few blocks north of the college campus. He held the position for just a year, after which he returned to South Carolina College in January 1841 to become the Professor of Sacred Literature and the Evidences of Christianity, as well as the college chaplain. His responsibilities included preparing lectures, planning sermons, directing daily chapel services, leading Bible studies, holding prayer meetings, and preaching on Sundays. The hectic schedule soon took a toll on his health; his physician recommended a sea voyage and, in May 1841, Thornwell left for a nearly four-month sojourn to Europe, leaving his wife and two children back home in Columbia.

On his return in September 1841, Thornwell resumed his busy teaching and preaching schedule at South Carolina College. He also began writing for a number of secular, religious, and denominational publications, including the *Watchman of the South*, the *Charleston Observer*, and the *Watchman and Observer*. During the 1840s, he became involved in a number of church controversies and public debates. Thornwell wrote against the continuation of church boards, debated the jurisdiction of ruling elders, and opposed the association of church courts to local voluntary societies. More notably, Thornwell argued with the Roman Catholic bishop of Charleston in the pages of *The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine*, which at the time

---

114 Street, *Story of Southern Presbyterians*, 49: “The Old School Presbyterian Church, especially in 1842-43, was concerned with two questions. Is a ruling elder’s presence necessary for a quorum of presbytery? Is it proper for a ruling elder ‘to lay on hands’ in the ordination of a minister? … Thornwell answered yes to both questions.”
was edited by his friend Robert J. Breckinridge.\textsuperscript{115} His eloquent defenses of slavery reflected Thornwell’s limited experience of plantation life, first as the son of an overseer and then as the absentee owner of Dryburgh Abbey, a plantation in Lancaster County that Thornwell acquired by his 1835 marriage.\textsuperscript{116} He and his growing family lived there over summer vacations, during which time Thornwell interacted with his plantation slaves and “developed some of the same ambiguous feelings toward them as did Southern whites in general.”\textsuperscript{117} On the whole, Thornwell was known as an easy and indulgent master who insisted on affording his slaves “every religious privilege, and contributed regularly to a minister, who made it a part of his duty to visit the place, to catechize and to preach.”\textsuperscript{118} Thornwell believed that the Bible did not declare slavery to be a sin, but that abuses of the institution existed and should be corrected.\textsuperscript{119} Abolitionists, in their zeal for reform, rejected biblical authority and denied that man was a sinful and depraved creature whose only true need was conversion; the church’s sole duty was to make known to fallen man the means of salvation and not to seek the reform of society.\textsuperscript{120}

In 1845, the Second Presbyterian Church of Baltimore, Maryland, called Thornwell to become their new pastor. Having grown increasingly unhappy in his teaching and preaching position at South Carolina College, Thornwell accepted the invitation and tendered his resignation. The college’s Board of Trustees, however, chose to enforce an obsolete law

\textsuperscript{115} Four years later, JHT published a volume containing his series of articles refuting Catholic teachings as \textit{The Arguments of Romanists, From the Infallibility of the Church and the Testimony of the Fathers in Behalf of the Apocrypha, Discussed and Refuted} (New York: Leavitt, Trow & Company, 1845).

\textsuperscript{116} Kelly, \textit{Preachers with Power}, 68: “We can account for his opinions on this matter [slavery] when we remember that, like all fallen human beings (even the redeemed), Thornwell was strongly influenced by the views of his culture, with the natural result that of course he had what later generations would see as glaring blind spots.”

\textsuperscript{117} Farmer, \textit{Metaphysical Confederacy}, 227.

\textsuperscript{118} Palmer, \textit{Life and Letters of JHT}, 343.

\textsuperscript{119} Farmer, \textit{Metaphysical Confederacy}, 226: “Having recognized that slavery, like all human institutions, was corruptible, the South’s leading evangelicals directed their efforts toward making the institution as faithful to the Christian model as human frailty would permit.”

\textsuperscript{120} According to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, which JHT championed, the church “had no mandate to league itself in any secular cause”; it should be “[d]evoted solely to matters of the spirit” (Holifield, \textit{Theology in America}, 392).
requiring a year’s notice for resignations and Thornwell felt morally obligated to comply with their request. He dedicated himself anew to his many duties at the college and found ways to serve the Presbyterian denomination from his academic post.\textsuperscript{121} In 1847, he became the youngest moderator of a General Assembly and was a frequent contributor and one of the founding editors, along with Benjamin Morgan Palmer and George Howe, of Columbia Theological Seminary’s \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review}.\textsuperscript{122} His feelings of restlessness continued, however, as did his desire to return to preaching full-time. In 1851, the Glebe Street Church in Charleston invited him to become their pastor. This time, the college trustees accepted his resignation and Thornwell left – for six months only. Later that same year, he was elected as the sixth President of South Carolina College, an indication of the college’s esteem for his talents and Thornwell’s growing reputation and stature in the state of South Carolina and in the southern region.

The presidency of South Carolina College was a prominent position in the state, placing Thornwell in the same class as senators and governors. He brought to the position his many years of professorial experience at the institution and an eagerness to discipline and impart knowledge to his students. His enthusiasm was short-lived, however. After two and half years, Thornwell attempted to leave the position to become the new Chair of Didactic and Polemic Theology at Columbia Theological Seminary.\textsuperscript{123} However, the college’s Board of Trustees once

\textsuperscript{121} During this year, Thornwell was awarded the Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) degree from Jefferson College in Pennsylvania (now Washington and Jefferson College), Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, and Centre College in Kentucky. See Wells, \textit{Southern Presbyterian Worthies}, 27.

\textsuperscript{122} Henry Smith Stroupe, \textit{The Religious Press in the South Atlantic States, 1802-1865} (Durham: Duke University Press, 1956), 122: The \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review} “differed from monthly magazines in that the leading articles tended to be much longer, more often developed serious doctrinal themes, and frequently exhibited a greater interest in the problems of church organization.”

\textsuperscript{123} Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS), founded in 1828 by the Presbyterian Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, was first known as the Theological Seminary of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia and was located in Lexington, Georgia. It moved to Columbia, South Carolina, in 1830 and held classes there for the first time in 1831. JHT had considered attending the seminary in 1834-35, but thought it was still too newly established to offer
again enforced the law requiring a year’s notice for resignations and Thornwell remained at the helm of the institution until December 1855, when he finally resigned and assumed his teaching responsibilities at the seminary.\textsuperscript{124} He also edited the literary *Southern Quarterly Review* during its last two years of publication and became co-pastor, along with the Rev. F. P. Mullally, of the Presbyterian Church in Columbia.\textsuperscript{125} Thornwell’s other services to his denomination included traveling throughout the southern region on behalf of the seminary and serving as chairman on the committee tasked with revising the Presbyterian *Book of Discipline*. In the spring of 1860, Thornwell again sailed to Europe due to health problems. However, upon his arrival on the continent, he received news from home that “Abraham Lincoln seemed sure to be elected, South Carolina sure to secede, [and] revolutionary chaos sure to erupt.”\textsuperscript{126}

As he prepared to sail back and face the mounting crisis at home, Thornwell decided “to move, immediately upon his return, for the gradual emancipation of the negro, as the only measure that would give peace to the country.” However, when he returned to South Carolina in September 1860, he found that calls for such a measure would only be met by ridicule, if not outright violence.\textsuperscript{127} Thornwell’s unionist leanings were also incongruous with the general

---


\textsuperscript{124} JHT’s move to Columbia Theological Seminary in 1856 put an end to his long association with South Carolina College, although he continued to serve as a college trustee for several years after his official departure. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, I:497: JHT was a “dominant influence in the early history of South Carolina College. He determined its educational policy (classicism rather than utilitarianism), set its religious tone, won its popularity, brought it to its highest peak of influence, and trained a generation of college students as stalwart defenders of the status quo in South Carolina.” Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It*, 83: “During Dr. Thornwell’s brief tenure of three years at the college, he had raised entrance requirements, reinforced classical studies, replaced oral with written examinations, and effectively defended state-supported education.”

\textsuperscript{125} Mullally did not become co-pastor until May 1860. See Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It*, 88.


sentiments of his native state. During South Carolina’s nullification struggles of 1832 and 1850, he had opposed the idea of state secession and spoken eloquently concerning the sacred character of the union among states.\textsuperscript{128} Only time would tell if the passage of a decade had brought about a change in Thornwell’s way of thinking, one that would allow him to advocate a separation from the federal union he had once held dear as well as retract his staunch conviction that the Presbyterian denomination and its ministers could only devote themselves to spiritual matters.

\textbf{SOUTH CAROLINA IN 1860}

By 1860, the state of South Carolina had acquired a reputation for displaying an independent and aggressive sectionalist spirit when ordered to submit to laws that were not to its liking.\textsuperscript{129} Events in both 1832 and 1850 had led a majority of its citizens to endorse the states’ rights principle of “nullification,” which stated that sovereign states could void any and all federal laws they deemed unconstitutional. The legal theory, articulated most eloquently by South Carolina’s John C. Calhoun, was cited when the state rescinded federal tariff acts of 1828 and 1832 and when it felt that the future of slavery was in peril during 1850-51.\textsuperscript{130} The first movement was halted by President Andrew Jackson’s threat to use military force to enforce federal law, while the second was interrupted by the Compromise of 1850 that secured certain rights for slave owners and ensured the continuation of slavery.\textsuperscript{131} Aside from displaying this to secede from the Union. He accepted the situation as it was, and threw himself and all of his energies into what we now know was the lost cause of Southern independence.”

\textsuperscript{128} See, for example, JHT’s “Critical Notices” in \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review} 4:3 (January 1851): 443-452. In the last page, JHT declared he could “see nothing in the measure [to secede in 1850] but defeat and disaster – insecurity to slavery – oppression to ourselves – ruin to the State. There are other aspects in which the question might be treated – but in every aspect we feel bound to express our solemn conviction that, neither before God nor man, can we justify ourselves for the fearful hazard of forfeiting all our blessings, and all our influence for good, by a hasty leap in the dark.”

\textsuperscript{129} Georgia Lee Tatum, \textit{Disloyalty in the Confederacy} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 4: “The only state in which there was not, in 1861, considerable opposition to withdraw from the Union was South Carolina, the first state to withdraw.”

\textsuperscript{130} See Calhoun’s “South Carolina Exposition and Protest,” which was presented to the South Carolina State House of Representatives in 1828.

\textsuperscript{131} See Calhoun, \textit{The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It}, 35.
secessionist proclivity, the state was also known for its strong anti-abolitionist sentiments. By 1860, there were 26,701 slave owners living in South Carolina, with an average of fifteen slaves per owner.\textsuperscript{132} With nearly half of the white families in the state owning slaves, the proportion of slaves to the total population was far greater in this state than in any other in the federal union.\textsuperscript{133} Slave labor brought great economic benefits to the state, helping create widespread approval of the lifestyle the plantation system made possible and making the institution’s preservation a main concern of the state.\textsuperscript{134} Consequently, abolitionists and their social reforms were greatly feared for the chaos and rebellion they threatened to unleash on the state and its white population.\textsuperscript{135}

The day before the national elections of 1860 took place, Governor William Henry Gist asked the state legislature to consider convening a convention if the Republican candidate proved to be successful, a convention tasked with determining what the state’s response would be to that unwelcome outcome. Although South Carolina’s eight electors gave their unanimous support to John C. Breckinridge, Abraham Lincoln emerged victorious on November 6, a result that filled the streets of Columbia with spectators who were waiting to hear from their political leaders about what the state’s next step would be. On November 10, United States Senator James

\textsuperscript{132} The average slave owner in the Low Country had twenty-one slaves; in the Up Country, eleven slaves. See H. M. Henry, “The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina” (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1913; Emory, Va., 1914), 4.

\textsuperscript{133} See Charles Edward Cauthen, \textit{South Carolina Goes to War, 1860-1865} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1950), [31].

\textsuperscript{134} Taylor, \textit{Ante-Bellum South Carolina}, vii: “The generality of the people of South Carolina and, indeed of the entire South, shared the view that the plantation civilization of the South was superior to the industrial civilization of the North in that the former conserved and perpetuated a way of life which ennobled the individual and lent stability to society.” Snay, \textit{Gospel of Disunion}, 28: “religious proslavery took firmer root in the lowcountry of South Carolina. A large slave population and dependence on the staple crops of rice and cotton made slavery there more of an essential part of the social and economic fabric, which provided a receptive setting for a proslavery interpretation of the Bible.”

\textsuperscript{135} Steven A. Channing, \textit{Crisis of Fear: Secession in South Carolina} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 237: “Secession came to be understood by the people of South Carolina as the only practicable way to avoid a specific and terrible future: the erosion of white control over the Negro; and ultimately, the destruction of slavery.” Carl N. Degler, \textit{The Other South: Southern Dissenters in the Nineteenth Century} (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 78: South Carolina's "black majority made emancipation for a society of white men who feared black men, slave or free, a dangerous doctrine to express."
Chesnut resigned his office, followed on the next day by his colleague James Henry Hammond.\textsuperscript{136} As the state prepared to hold elections for convention delegates, Thornwell and other South Carolinians began deliberating over what course the state should take. Was political separation the only way to ensure a continuation of the southern way of life? Was such an action justified by a presidential election? These and other questions required a speedy response if the state of South Carolina wished to, once again, publicly and forcefully demonstrate their displeasure concerning the political events of that winter.

**DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF THORNWELL’S FAST DAY SERMON**

On November 14, 1860, the following proclamation appeared in the pages of the *Daily South Carolinian*, with an added indication that every paper in the state would print the same:

Whereas it is proper and becoming a people who acknowledge the hand of God in every event, and bow in reverence to His will, and who desire to imitate the noble example of their forefathers, not only in resistance to oppression and injustice, but in supplication for Divine aid and counsel in this momentous crisis of our country’s history, to implore a continuation of His favor and interposition to protect and sustain us in all the trials we may be called upon to undergo, and the dangers to which we may be exposed. Now, therefore, I, WILLIAM H. GIST, Governor of the State of South Carolina, in obedience to a resolution of the General Assembly, appointing WEDNESDAY, the 21st instant, as a day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, make this my proclamation, inviting the clergy and people of all denominations in this state to assemble at their respective places of worship, to implore the direction and blessing of Almighty God in this our hour of difficulty, and to give us one heart and one mind to oppose, by all just and proper means, every encroachment upon our rights.\textsuperscript{137}

A week after the proclamation was published, and in accordance with its requests,\textsuperscript{138} Thornwell addressed his congregants from the pulpit of the state’s most influential Presbyterian

---


\textsuperscript{137} “Proclamation,” *Daily South Carolinian* 23:136 (November 14, 1860) Italics and capitalization in the original. The proclamation ended with the following signature paragraph: “Given under my hand and the seal of the State at Columbia, on the 13\textsuperscript{th} day of November, in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixty. W. H. Gist. Every paper in the State will copy.” See also Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, I:555; Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, xiv; and Cisco, *Taking a Stand*, 77.

\textsuperscript{138} According to *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Containing the ... Directory of Worship* (1839), 518: “if at any time the civil power should think it proper to appoint a fast or thanksgiving, it is the duty of the ministers
In a discourse titled “Our National Sins,” he called on South Carolinians to betake themselves to God in a spirit of humiliation and repentance concerning the ominous conditions they were facing. If they approached the proclaimed duties of that state fast day, namely “Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer,” as penitents who declared, by words and deeds, their utter dependence on God, then there was hope that He might spare them the worst of misfortunes and bless them on their chosen course of action. Thornwell described four different sins that the American nation and the state of South Carolina were committing that placed both entities in peril of divine judgment and encouraged citizens to humble themselves and repent of these transgressions on behalf of their native soil.

In his long and erudite oration, the learned Thornwell showcased his knowledge of, among other things, political economics, ancient Greek history, and scientific theories of polygenesis. Although endeavoring to steer clear of speaking about political issues such as secession from the pulpit, Thornwell’s fast day sermon came dangerously close to accusing the federal government of unconstitutional conduct and unreservedly endorsing South Carolina’s position on the sovereign rights of states. He defended the institution of slavery from abolitionist and northern critics while also reproaching southern slave owners for neglecting to fulfill their duties as Christian masters. Thornwell also acknowledged that the state’s pursuit of its current objectives could potentially require great sacrifice of life from the populace, a bleak

and people of our [Presbyterian] communion, as we live under a Christian government, to pay all due respect to the same.”

Curiously, the state of South Carolina celebrated Thanksgiving on the same date that they were called on to fast by their governor. Thanksgiving, not yet an official national holiday, was proclaimed by state governors on different dates during the year. In 1860, several northern and southern states celebrated the holiday on November 29; the state of South Carolina celebrated the holiday on November 21. For this reason, JHT’s fast day sermon on November 21 and Benjamin Morgan Palmer’s fast day sermon on November 29 – the focus of the second chapter of this thesis – were both delivered on Thanksgiving. These two sermons are sometimes referred to as “Thanksgiving Day” sermons, as well as fast day sermons. See Diana Karter Appelbaum, Thanksgiving: An American Holiday, An American History (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1985).

“Proclamation.”

See Chesebrough, “God Ordained this War”, 343; Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 36; and Stout and Grasso, “Civil War, Religion, and Communications,” 321.
probability that South Carolina’s political leaders had yet to acknowledge. Speaking from
memory, Thornwell’s scholastic discourse, according to historian James O. Farmer, was helpful in “clarifying for other Southerners the grounds on which they were being asked to stand and confirming in their minds the legitimacy and morality of their cause.”

Thornwell began his fast day sermon by stating its main scriptural text, Isaiah 37:1: “And it came to pass, when King Hezekiah heard it, that he rent his clothes, and covered himself with sackcloth, and went into the house of the Lord.” He made it clear that the particular passage he would focus on had not been chosen in order to claim a correlation between biblical Jerusalem and the state of South Carolina regarding its standing as God’s chosen people, an altogether arrogant assertion that would have been particularly unbecoming on a day devoted to statewide humiliation. Rather, Thornwell drew attention to the actions of Judah’s sovereign when Jerusalem, “the last hold of the State,” was threatened by the prospect of invasion and ruin by the Assyrian Empire. The king had humbled himself before the Lord, repented from past mistakes, and pleaded for his country’s release from danger – a worthy example for Christians to follow “in times of public calamity and distress.”

Before proceeding further, Thornwell disclosed that he was “oppressed with a difficulty” concerning the application of this scriptural passage to that winter’s current events. In his

---

142 Cisco, *Taking a Stand*, 78: “On every hand politicians were predicting an easy, perhaps bloodless, victory in the event secession was resisted.” By contrast, JHT declared in his fast day sermon that the “path to victory may be through a baptism of blood” (*Fast Day Sermons*, 56).

143 Farmer, *Metaphysical Confederacy*, 271. The contents of JHT’s fast day sermon are mentioned briefly in several books, including Farmer, *Metaphysical Confederacy*, 261-262, and Cisco, *Taking a Stand*, 77-78. See also Chesebrough, “*God Ordained This War*”; 343; Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 208; Daniel, *Southern Protestantism*, 4-5; DesChamps, “Presbyterian Church in the South Atlantic States, 1801-1861,” 199-200; DesChamps, “Union or Division?” 494; Noll, “*The Bible and Slavery*,” 65; Noll, *Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 2; Rable, *God’s Almost Chosen Peoples*, 36; Stout and Grasso, “Civil War, Religion, and Communications,” 321; and Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, 381. Curiously, Palmer, in his *Life and Letters of JHT*, and Calhoun, in *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It*, make no mention of this fast day sermon.

144 *Fast Day Sermons*, 10.

145 Ibid., 9-10. The actions of King Hezekiah and his people spared Jerusalem from being conquered by the Assyrians under Sennacherib. A mysterious plague took the life of 185,000 Assyrian troops overnight and Sennacherib withdrew to Nineveh. See Isaiah 37:1-38 (KJV).
twenty-five years of preaching in the Palmetto State, he had “never introduced secular politics into the instructions of the pulpit.” Thornwell held firmly to a belief in the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, which limited the “business of a preacher” to the elucidation of biblical texts. Regarding political issues affecting the state, a trained minister could only exhort congregants to follow the law and do their civic duty, as defined by their specific political entities. Thornwell’s theme on that Wednesday, however, was national sins, a topic that required him to make “allusions, more or less precise, to the theory and structure of the government.” Therefore, he clarified that the thoughts he was about to convey were “not announced as the Word of God,” but would rather be proven, by the use of different kinds of evidence, to carry as much weight as “Divine commands,” consequently making his opinions concerning political matters fall under the purview of his ministerial duties. Thornwell stated that he would stop short of declaring the point at which an evil became intolerable and would not presume to “prescribe the mode and measure of redress” if that were the case. \footnote{146} Determining a course of action during the current winter of crisis remained the exclusive right of the political state.

Having revealed his fear that he might “transgress the limits of propriety, and merge the pulpit into the rostrum,” Thornwell continued his description of “the duty of a minister in relation to matters of State” by assuring his listeners that his intent when speaking of “the nature and structure” of the national government was to establish the points by which he would “survey the sins of the country” and, as a result, “ground the consciousness of sin” into their hearts and minds. \footnote{147} The “great aim” of Thornwell’s fast day sermon was:

not to expound our complex institutions, but to awaken the national conscience to a sense of its responsibility before God. It is not to enlighten your minds, but to touch your

\footnote{146}{Fast Day Sermons, 10-12.}
\footnote{147}{Ibid., 13.}
hearts; not to plead the cause of States rights or Federal authority, but to bring you as penitents before the Supreme Judge.'\textsuperscript{148}

The political leaders of the state had set apart the day in order for the entire citizenry to follow the example of King Hezekiah, for South Carolina to rend her clothes, cover herself in sackcloth, and come into the House of the Lord. Having gathered together in churches throughout the state, it only remained for congregants to determine how such an endeavor should be undertaken. On that Wednesday, Thornwell and other ministers throughout the state of South Carolina were called upon to “instruct the people as to the attitude we should all assume in the presence of Jehovah.”\textsuperscript{149}

His introduction thus concluded, Thornwell began the body of his sermon by indicating the two main points that the first half of his sermon would address: “first, the spirit in which we should approach God, and second, the errand on which we should go.”\textsuperscript{150} Concerning the first, he began by stating that the state of South Carolina should recognize that a providential Ruler directed earthly affairs, bestowing power on those whom He chose and thus making those wielding state power responsible, ultimately, to Him:

As the State is essentially moral in its idea, it connects itself directly with the government of God. It is, indeed, the organ through which that government is administered in its relations to the highest interests of earth. A State, therefore, which does not recognize its dependence upon God, or which fails to apprehend, in its functions and offices, a commission from heaven, is false to the law of its own being.\textsuperscript{151}

Any state that attempted to “realize the idea of justice … without taking into account the religious element in man” embarked on a futile endeavor, since men “that have no religion are

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 13-14.
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 14. Kelly, \textit{Preachers with Power}, 81: “Thornwell’s sermons are generally clearly outlined, though often the outline is more natural than obtrusive. His sermons have the great value of progressive thought in their various stages, which with each part gather momentum, and increase the forcefulness of the message as they approach the climax. The result is that the logical presentation of the truth operates as a mighty hand moving closer and closer to the will of the hearer.”
\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Fast Day Sermons}, 15.
incapable of law” due to their lack of fear in the future judgment of a higher power.\textsuperscript{152}

Consequently, every state “must have a religion, or it must cease to be a government of men.”\textsuperscript{153}

Thornwell further clarified that the state should not only have a religion, but that it should have “the true religion.” False or multiple religions did not “generate an inward principle of obedience” in their adherents, but rather led to outbreaks of civic disorder when devotees discovered the pretense.\textsuperscript{154} In order to have a united citizenry, the political community needed to “take its religious type from the doctrines, the precepts, and the institutions” of one, sole religion.\textsuperscript{155} Thornwell explained that he was not calling on political leaders to establish the “true religion” as the official church of the state.\textsuperscript{156} That would only result in suppressing religious expression in the society and would violate the separation that existed between the duties of a church and the responsibilities of the state. What he wanted to make clear was that religious life, although shaped expressly by the church, extended far beyond the physical house of worship, affecting the civic life of state legislators and those who subjected themselves to the laws they created:

The State realizes its religious character through the religious character of its subjects; and a State is and ought to be Christian, because all its subjects are and ought to be determined by the principles of the Gospel. As every legislator is bound to be a Christian man, he has no right to vote for any laws which are inconsistent with the teachings of the Scriptures. He must carry his Christian conscience into the halls of legislation.\textsuperscript{157}

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 15-16.
\textsuperscript{153} Ibid., 16. In this section, JHT quoted from Adolphe Thiers’ twenty-one volume 	extit{Histoire du consulat et de l’empire} (Paris: Paulin, 1845-74): “Whether true or false, sublime or ridiculous, man must have a religion. Every where, in all ages, in all countries, in ancient as in modern times, in civilized as well as in barbarian nations, we find him a worshipper at some altar, be it venerable, degraded, or blood-stained.”

\textsuperscript{154} 	extit{Fast Day Sermons}, 16-17. In this section, JHT quoted from James McCosh, 	extit{The Method of The Divine Government} (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1851), 60: when religion is discovered to be untrue, “the infidel spirit takes courage, and, with a zeal … it proceeds to level all existing temples and altars, and erects no others in their room.”

\textsuperscript{155} 	extit{Fast Day Sermons}, 18.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 16.
\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 18.
Having established that the state required a true religion in order to govern effectively, Thornwell affirmed that South Carolina recognized Christianity as the religion of the state: “We are a Christian people, and a Christian Commonwealth. … We accept the Bible as the great moral charter by which our laws must be measured, and the Incarnate Redeemer as the Judge to whom we are responsible.” In recognizing Christianity as the religion of South Carolina, Thornwell was not attempting to exclude those who did not agree with his previous affirmation. Christian principles commanded that the rights and freedom of conscience of those who did not acknowledge “the authority of Jesus” be “sacredly maintained” by the state. But those same principles required those who professed the Christian faith to “mould their institutions” in compliance with the teachings of Christianity. It required of Thornwell’s congregants to prostrate themselves before God and acknowledge their dependence, swear their allegiance, and confess their responsibility.  

This, in essence, was “the spirit” in which South Carolinians should “approach God” on that fast day.  

Thornwell then proceeded to his second main point regarding “the errand on which [South Carolinians] should go” on that particular Wednesday, namely, “fasting, humiliation, and prayer.” Fasting served as “a symbolical confession,” a way for congregants to outwardly demonstrate that they felt undeserving of God’s gracious gifts. This communal ritual needed

---

158 Ibid., 19-21.
159 Ibid., 14.
160 Ibid., 14, 21.
161 Ibid., 22. In this section, JHT quoted from Jean Calvin’s *Institutio Christianae religionis: in libros quatuor nunc primum digesta, certisque distincta capitibus, ad aptissimam methodum: aucta etiam tam magna accessione vt propemodum opus nouum haberi possit* ([Geneva]: excudebat Antonius Rebulius, 1561), Book IV, Chapter XII, Section 14: “when manifestations of the Divine anger appear, as pestilence, war, and famine, the salutary custom of all ages has been for pastors to exhort the people to public fasting and extraordinary prayer.” JHT also cited the deliverance of the city of Nineveh as a biblical example of the positive effect of communal and repentant fasting. See Jonah 3:1-10 (KJV).
to be performed in a spirit of humiliation; otherwise, it risked becoming “an idle mockery.”  

After all, the fast day’s intention was “to be impressed with a sense of our sins as a people; to confess them humbly before God; to deprecate His judgments, and to supplicate his favor.”  

Protestants often regarded sin as being “private and personal,” a classification that implied that the state was incapable of this manner of wrongdoing. However, if the state was a moral institution – as Thornwell had demonstrated earlier in the sermon – then the state was capable of sinful actions against its subjects, other states, and God himself, by, among other things, neglecting its duties and exceeding the limits of its lawful power. This concept of national and/or state sin was often overlooked, since citizens were “not accustomed to judge of the State by the same canons of responsibility which we apply to individuals.” Sinful actions by the state were classified as “errors,” “blunders,” and “unfaithfulness,” rather than “aberrations … [that] must be answered for at the bar of God.” If these offenses were committed, the national and/or state sin had to be “pardoned or punished, confessed and forsaken,” or else it would bring about the demise of the political entity. As part of that fast day’s “errand,” therefore, Thornwell’s congregants should be overcome with the magnitude of their individual, state, and national sins, confess these sins with “humility and penitence,” and “seek Divine guidance and Divine strength for the future” through prayer. Thornwell’s hope was that:

If we are truly penitent, and truly sensible of our dependence upon God; if it is the reigning desire of our hearts to know His will, and our fixed purpose, in reliance on His

---

162 *Fast Day Sermons*, 22. JHT quoted from Isaiah 58:5-7 (KJV): “Is it such a fast as I have chosen? a day for a man to afflict his soul? is it to bow down his head as a bulrush, and to spread sackcloth and ashes under him? wilt thou call this a fast and an acceptable day to the Lord? Is not this the fast that I have chosen? to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke? Is it not to deal thy bread to the hungry, and that thou bring the poor that are cast out to thy house? when thou seest the naked that thou cover; and that thou hide not thyself from thine own flesh?”

163 *Fast Day Sermons*, 22.

164 Ibid., 24-25. JHT listed the following as empires that had been ruined by national sin: Assyria, Persia, Greece, and Rome.

165 Ibid., 14 and 25-26.
strength, to do it, He may give us an answer of peace, He may bring light out of darkness, and extract safety from danger.\textsuperscript{166}

The task that remained for Thornwell was to indicate to his state the particular sins that its citizens should confess and repent of, followed by a description of the blessings they should plead for. He began the second half of his fast day sermon by stating that his congregants needed to evaluate their actions “in a double light”: first as members of “this Confederacy, … these United States” and then as “a particular Commonwealth.” Regarding the former, South Carolinians could not detach themselves from “a personal interest in the sins and transgressions of the whole people,” regardless of whether they had participated in the sin or not. The errors and shortcomings of the “common country” were on the verge of dissolving a union that the Founding Fathers had intended to be perpetual.\textsuperscript{167} Moreover:

\begin{quote}
A name once dear to our hearts, has become intolerable to entire States. Once admired, loved, almost adored, as the citadel and safeguard of freedom, it has become, in many minds, synonymous with oppression, with treachery, with falsehood, and with violence. The government to which we once invited the victims of tyranny from every part of the world, and under whose ample shield we gloried in promising them security and protection – that government has become hateful in the very regions in which it was once hailed with the greatest loyalty. Brother has risen up against brother, State against State; angry disputes and bitter criminations and recriminations abound, and the country stands upon the very brink of revolution.\textsuperscript{168}
\end{quote}

These perilous conditions called on every patriot to heed King Hezekiah’s example, as well as “survey the sins of the land” in order that all could humble themselves before God. Thornwell complied by describing four general sins: the first three were sins committed by the nation as a whole, and the last was an offense particular to the state of South Carolina. The first national sin was the breach of promise and break in contract between Congress and the sovereign states that made up the federal government. Thornwell began his explanation of this sin by

\textsuperscript{166} Ibid., 26.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 26-27.
\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 27-28.
recounting a short history regarding “the peculiar structure of our [national] government.” At first, the Articles of Confederation (1777) had determined that the states making up the new American nation were “separate and independent” from each other. The nation’s Founding Fathers, however, observed that, despite the differences between the sovereign states, there was an underlying unity in the diverse population: “The people were of one blood, one language, one religion. They were, in short, one race.” The challenge was how “to make the people, who were already many, at the same time, one”; the solution was the creation of a federal alliance between consenting sovereign states that produced political structures which, “under certain conditions, acted immediately upon the people of all the States, without the formal ratification of their own Legislatures.” However, “the ultimate ground of the authority of federal legislation” remained “the consent of the confederating states.”

This consent could only be “presumed beforehand” under certain conditions set forth in the Constitution of the United States (1787). “In this way,” said Thornwell, “our fathers organized a government that united us for all common purposes, and left us in our original diversity to prosecute our separate and local interests.” Congress was thus “the creature of the States, and … [t]he creature of a treaty, in which the contracting parties were all equal.” This type of federal government required “a scrupulous adherence to good faith” if it was to function properly. If Congress exceeded its powers or if states did not fulfill the actions required of them by the original alliance, those actions would constitute a betrayal of the federal principles and states’ sovereignty that would have eventually “spread freedom, civilization and religion through the whole length of the land.”

---

169 Ibid., 28-30.
170 Ibid., 31.
171 Ibid., 33.
“equaled only by the treachery of a Judas, who betrayed his master with a kiss.”\textsuperscript{172} The Union was dissolved at the very moment in which this good faith between Congress and sovereign states was broken; “the epitaph which may be written on its tomb, is a memorial of broken faith.”\textsuperscript{173}

Although Thornwell claimed he did not intend to accuse one section of the country of abandoning the aforementioned principles of federalism, he subsequently segued into a discussion of slavery in which he charged the non-slaveholding states of not only breaking faith, but of justifying their actions upon a false “plea of conscience.” These states, in their unwillingness to “open the Territories to the introduction of slaves” and their reluctance to return fugitive slaves, had claimed to be operating under the principles of “a higher law.” Although Thornwell acknowledged that a higher law indeed existed, he claimed that non-slaveholding states were applying it improperly regarding the issue of slavery. If these states felt that it was “wrong to countenance slavery by restoring fugitives to their masters, or by permitting it to enter into the Territories,” then they should “withdraw from the Union” that required them to fulfill an oath they now believed “to be wicked.” Even supposing that slavery was immoral, the responsibility for the institution rested entirely on the slaveholding states. The non-slaveholding states were only required to observe the Constitution and not “interpose and arrest the operation” of the laws in slaveholding states. This they could fulfill by returning fugitives to “the jurisdiction of the laws” they had escaped and acknowledging that all states had an “equal right

\textsuperscript{172} Ibid., 31 and 33-34. Earlier in the sermon, when describing how Congress could exceed its powers, JHT said that certain actions by Congress would make them “guilty of a breach of trust and of disloyalty to its own masters [the states].” See \textit{Fast Day Sermons}, 31.

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 34.
of property” in the new territories and allowed to introduce their own “peculiarities” to the “joint possession” of land.\textsuperscript{174} The request of the slaveholding states was, in fact, simple:

We do not ask the North to introduce it [slavery] upon their own soil; we do not ask them to approve it; we do not ask them to speak a single word in its defence [sic]; we only ask them to execute in good faith the contract which has been solemnly ratified betwixt us. We ask them not to interfere with the jurisdiction of our own laws over our own subjects, nor with the free use of our own property upon our own soil.\textsuperscript{175}

The second national sin was the perversion of the representative principle that allowed the people to choose federal representatives tasked with ascertaining what the will of the people “ought to be.” In a parliamentary government, said Thornwell, representatives protected the people “from their own prejudices and passions” by calmly and wisely deliberating legislation on their behalf. This type of “free commonwealth” avoided “equally the extremes of the despotism of a single will, which is sure to terminate in tyranny, and of the still more hateful despotism of mobs, which is sure to terminate in anarchy.” Sadly, the current representatives to the Congress of the United States, rather than deliberating, discussing, and inquiring after truth, were instead taking part in corruption, slander, factionalism, and other forms of indecorous behavior. Rather than serving as “a model of refined, impartial and courteous debate,” the federal legislature had instead “made itself a scandal to a civilized people” and helped bring the country “to the brink of dissolution.”\textsuperscript{176} This “abuse of the representative principle” had:

\begin{quote}
deified the people, making their will, as will, and not as reasonable and right, the supreme law; and they, in turn, have deified themselves, by assuming all the attributes of government, and exercising unlimited dominion. They have become at once legislators, judges, juries, and executioners.\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 35-37.
\textsuperscript{175} Ibid., 37-38.
\textsuperscript{176} Ibid., 39-40.
\textsuperscript{177} Ibid., 41.
The populace had transformed into a mob with little to no respect for the law, a particularly lamentable condition given that the federal government had, until recently, been “a noble one.” Thornwell lamented what could have been:

had we been faithful to its principles, the blessings it has already conferred upon us would be but the beginnings of its triumphs. Could we continue a united people, united in heart as well as in form; could the government be administered according to the real genius of our federal and representative institutions, imagination can hardly conceive the scene of prosperity, influence and glory which would dawn upon our children a hundred years hence. When we contemplate that we might become, and then look at the prospect which is now before us, we have reason to put our hands to our mouths, and our mouths in the dust, and to exclaim: God be merciful to us sinners!”

The third national sin did not concern the actions of the federal government, but instead referred to wrongdoings that were committed by a majority of the nation’s populace. The most obvious of these was the commonplace use of blasphemous language, which introduced God’s name “into every subject, and upon all occasions” and irreverently made “light of God.”

Another offense was the disregard shown to keeping the Sabbath day holy, most explicitly shown by the government in permitting mail delivery on Sundays. Finally, Americans tended to believe themselves invincible and accordingly failed to acknowledge their dependence on God.

Having concluded his discussion of the sins committed by the nation as a whole, Thornwell proceeded to discuss a fault that was particular to South Carolina, namely the failure of the state’s Christian masters to fulfill the duties owed to their slaves. He began by stating that the question of whether slavery was biblically permissible had already been established in the affirmative. “Our consciences,” said Thornwell, “are not troubled, and have no reason to be troubled, on this score.” South Carolinians held slaves in bondage “not from avarice, but from principle”; the system of labor created by the presence of slavery, in which “labor and capital are

---

178 Ibid., 42.
179 Ibid., 42. Italics in the original.
180 Ibid., 43-44.
made to coincide,” guaranteed full employment of labor and ensured that the profits garnered would be used for the laborer’s upkeep. In contrast, the system of free labor in the non-slaveholding states, where “the laborer [was] not a part of the capital of the country,” allowed the entrepreneur to accumulate a great amount of funds since only the labor that would “yield the largest returns” was employed. The laborer grew poorer – particularly as the population increased – while the capitalist increased his “affluence and splendor.” Given enough time, this stark dichotomy would lead to “agrarian revolutions and intolerable distress.”

The government was thus faced with the following options. They could either “make provision to support [unemployed] people in idleness,” thwart population growth, or find a way to organize the labor force more efficiently. The first two options presented a number of difficulties: providing for unemployed people would reward them for their idleness and create resentment among the employed, while preventing births was nearly impossible. The only way in which laborers could be simultaneously employed and supported materially, said Thornwell, was by “converting the laborer into capital; that is, by giving the employer a right of property in the labor employed; in other words, by slavery.” A master was required to “find work for his slave,” which resulted in the elimination of indigence; providing slaves with “food and raiment” required a reinvestment of a plantation’s profits back into its laboring capital. Thornwell predicted that non-slaveholding states would eventually have to organize their labor in a manner that closely resembled slavery or endure a series of upheavals against the current free labor system by unemployed or poorly paid laborers. While at present the non-slaveholding states believed themselves to be materially and morally superior to their slaveholding counterparts, a

---

181 Ibid., 45-46.
“day of reckoning” would come in which “unemployed labor and selfish capital [would] stand face to face in deadly hostility.”\(^{182}\)

Thornwell recognized that slavery, like any other earthly institution, was “liable to abuse.”\(^{183}\) However, the idea impelling it was wise, ultimately securing “the rights of property” while also providing “a safeguard against pauperism and idleness.”\(^{184}\) Detractors claimed that slaves were treated as animals or as mere agrarian tools, but this only betrayed “a gross ignorance of the real nature of the relation” between a master and slave:

> Slavery gives one man the right of property in the labor of another. The property of man in man is only the property of man in human toil. The laborer becomes capital, not because he is a thing, but because he is the exponent of a presumed amount of labor. This is the radical notion of the system, and all legislation upon it should be regulated by this fundamental idea.\(^{185}\)

After concluding his description of the two labor systems, Thornwell asked his congregants to ponder a number of questions that served to return their attention to the fourth sin being discussed in the fast day sermon. The first series of questions was:

> Have we, as a people and a State, discharged our duty to our slaves? Is there not reason to apprehend that in some cases we have given occasion to the calumnies of our adversaries, by putting the defence [sic] of slavery upon grounds which make the slave a different kind of being from his master?\(^{186}\)

\(^{182}\) Ibid., 46-48.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 48. See JHT’s article in the Southern Presbyterian Review, titled “Report on Slavery,” 5:3 (January 1852): 379-393, in which he argued that slavery was part of the curse that the fall of Adam had introduced into the world and therefore not an absolute good.

\(^{184}\) Fast Day Sermons, 48. Holifield, Theology in America: 502: JHT “went out of his way to assert the common humanity of blacks and whites, and he deplored the irresponsibility of masters, but he combined his reading of the Bible with a conviction that black people were destined for slavery.”

\(^{185}\) Fast Day Sermons, 48-49. See JHT’s 1850 sermon, published as The Rights and Duties of Masters: A Sermon Preached at the Dedication of a Church Erected in Charleston, S. C., for the Benefit and Instruction of the Coloured Population (Charleston: Press of Walker & James, 1850) and in the Southern Presbyterian Review as “Slavery and the Religious Instruction of the Colored Population,” 4 (July 1850): 105-41, in which he made a distinction between owning a slave and owning that slave’s labor. Loveland, Southern Evangelicals, 199: “the master’s right to the slave’s labor did not deprive the slave of the possibility of moral, intellectual, and religious cultivation and, therefore, did not deprive him of his ‘humanity.’”

\(^{186}\) Fast Day Sermons, 49.
In his own response to these questions, Thornwell made reference to the scientific theory of polygenesis, which denied “the common brotherhood of humanity” and instead claimed that non-white races were fundamentally different and morally inferior to the white race.\(^{187}\)

Thornwell vehemently rejected this theory of multiple origins, for if the African was “not descended from Adam, he has not the same flesh and blood with Jesus, and is therefore excluded from the possibility of salvation.” Those who based their defense of slavery on polygenesis thus brought the institution “into conflict with the dearest doctrines of the gospel.” South Carolina’s Christian masters had, at times, failed to acknowledge this “common brotherhood” relationship with their slaves and consequently excluded them from the means of their eternal salvation.\(^{188}\)

Thornwell proceeded to ask a second series of questions:

Is our legislation in all respects in harmony with the idea of slavery? Are our laws such that we can heartily approve them in the presence of God? Have we sufficiently protected the person of the slave? Are our provisions adequate for giving him a fair and impartial trial when prosecuted for offences? Do we guard as we should his family relations? And, above all, have we furnished him with proper means of religious instruction?\(^{189}\)

He called on his congregants to give the questions thoughtful consideration, for:

Our slaves are a solemn trust, and while we have a right to use and direct their labor, we are bound to feed, clothe and protect them, to give them the comforts of this life, and to introduce them to the hopes of a blessed immortality. They are moral beings, and it will be found that in the culture of their moral nature we reap the largest reward from their service.\(^{190}\)

Thornwell daringly instructed his Columbia congregation to “apply the Golden Rule in the treatment of their slaves.”\(^{191}\) Only then would the slave be provided with what was “just and

\(^{187}\) Ibid., 49. JHT’s belief in the “common brotherhood” between the white and non-white races did not amount to racial equality.

\(^{188}\) Ibid., 49-50. Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” 51: JHT “took special pains throughout his pastoral career to denounce the idea that Africans constituted a species distinct from Caucasians.”

\(^{189}\) Fast Day Sermons, 51.

\(^{190}\) Ibid., 51-52.

\(^{191}\) Noll, “The Bible and Slavery,” 65, referring to Fast Day Sermons, 52. Noll asserted that this part of the sermon was one of JHT’s “most courageous pronouncements,” particularly given whom JHT was addressing on that fast day.
equal” and only then would “the capabilities of good which the relation of slavery contains” be able to unfold fully.\textsuperscript{192}

Thornwell proceeded to describe the two blessings that South Carolinians should seek and ask for as part of the overall “errand” they were called to do on that fast day.\textsuperscript{193} The first blessing was “the grace of magnanimity,” which would allow congregants to rely humbly on God to make them “equal to every occasion” that would confront them in the future.\textsuperscript{194} This same grace would keep the state of South Carolina from becoming “the victim of petty passions” and instead remain “calm, collected, self-possessed, resolved,” and prepared to “do all that may become a State.” The second blessing to ask for was for wise statesmen and politicians to emerge and guide South Carolina through “the present emergency,” for:

If ever there was a time, since the adoption of the Federal Constitution, when the whole country needed the counsel and guidance of patriotic statesmen, it is now, when, under the lead of demagogues, factions and politicians, we have corrupted every principle of our polity, and brought the Government to the brink of dissolution. No human arm is equal to the crisis. No human eye can penetrate the future. Our only help is in God; from Him alone cometh our salvation.\textsuperscript{195}

Only if God’s favor was sought through fasting, humiliation, and prayer would the tasks before the state, whether they were “to lay the foundations of a new empire, or readjust the proportions of the old,” be successful.\textsuperscript{196}

Thornwell concluded his fast day sermon by calling on his congregants to pray for courage, for “Even though our cause be just, and our course approved of Heaven, our path to

\textsuperscript{192} Fast Day Sermons, 52.
\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid., 54-55. JHT listed the religious leaders Moses and Joshua, the legal reformers Solon and Lycurgus, and the political leaders William III of Orange and George Washington as leaders that God had appointed during previous crises.
\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., 55.
victory may be through a baptism of blood.” The state of South Carolina, in pursuit of its noble cause, might be made to suffer and might not be ultimately victorious. But neither of these possibilities should deter the citizens of the state from embarking on the task they had set for themselves. Firmly convinced that their course was right and that their sufferings would not be in vain, Thornwell declared:

Let right and duty be our watchword; liberty, regulated by law, our goal; and, leaning upon the arm of everlasting strength, we shall achieve a name, whether we succeed or fall, that posterity will not willingly let die.

Summaries of the fast day sermon appeared in a number of local and national newspapers; the full sermon was published in the weekly *Southern Presbyterian*, the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, and as a pamphlet, all of which circulated widely through the region and nation. The sermon was also reproduced “in the very front” of *Fast Day Sermons* (1861), whose editors characterized the discourse as full of “abstract reasoning” and containing within it “the whole argument of Disunion.” Although Thornwell never used the word “secession” in his fast day sermon, he did use the term in personal correspondence within days of delivering the sermon, revealing his opinions regarding the actions of his state during the winter crisis: “the secession of the South … is inevitable, the sooner it is brought about the better.” He did not have long to wait. Eight days after delivering his fast day discourse, the Synod of South

---

197 Ibid., 56.
198 Cauthen, *South Carolina Goes to War*, 43: “The clergy of South Carolina cannot be accused of becoming mere political agitators on the eve of secession, but they did on occasion express in no uncertain terms their approval of the course which South Carolina was about to follow.”
199 *Fast Day Sermons*, 56.
200 See, for example, “A Sketch of the Sermon of Rev. Dr. Thornwell, Delivered on Wednesday Last,” *Daily South Carolinian*, November 23, 1860. JHT’s sermon was also published in the December 22, 1860, issue of the *Southern Presbyterian* and as “National Sins: A Fast-Day Sermon” in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* 13:4 (January 1861): 649-688; the fast day sermon was published as a pamphlet titled *National Sins: A Fast Day Sermon, preached in the Presbyterian Church, Columbia, November 21, 1860* (Columbia: The Southern Guardian, 1860).
201 *Fast Day Sermons*, [vii].
202 From letter to Robert Lewis Dabney, dated November 24, 1860, as quoted in Thomas Cary Johnson, *The Life and Letters of Robert Lewis Dabney* (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1903), 223-224. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 258: “Thornwell’s views on the sectional controversy were representative of the majority of southern evangelicals. Although opposed to disunion in the 1850s, they supported secession in 1860-61.”
Carolina, which ordinarily thought it dangerous for ministers to take part in political affairs, called on clergymen and “the people of South Carolina … to imitate their revolutionary forefathers, and stand up for their rights.”

On December 6, elections were held for delegates to a state convention that would consider the state’s response to the election of Abraham Lincoln as president of the United States. After holding their first meeting in Columbia on December 17, the convention adjourned to Charleston where three days later the 169 convention delegates voted unanimously to dissolve the state’s union to the federal government, signing an ordinance of secession to that effect.

Within weeks, the states of Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas had followed South Carolina’s lead.

Thornwell, convinced “more and more” each day that his state had “acted at the right time and in the right way,” became an ardent spokesperson for the Confederate cause. In January 1861, he published “The State of the Country,” a “purely political essay” that defended South Carolina’s choice to secede, in the Southern Presbyterian Review. That same month, he

---

203 Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina, November 1860, as quoted in Street, Story of Southern Presbyterians, 54. See also Cauthen, South Carolina Goes to War, 44. Vander Velde, Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 30: the Synod of South Carolina, “meeting before the secession of that state, deliberately resolved to cast its fortunes with those of South Carolina, in case it should secede from the Union.” Wayne Carter Eubank, “Benjamin Morgan Palmer, A Southern Divine” (PhD diss., Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1943), 115, quoting from the Minutes of the Synod of South Carolina, November 1860, 8: the resolutions submitted were as follows: “1. Resolved, That the period has arrived when it becomes the duty of every Minister and Elder, South, to let his position be known. 2. Resolved, That fidelity to the South requires us to sever all connection with the Northern portion of the General Assembly. 3. Resolved, That we recommend to all Presbyteries connected with this Synod to take steps to dissolve their connection with the General Assembly. 4. Resolved, That a Committee be appointed to correspond with Synods and Presbyteries, South, with the view of forming a Southern Assembly. 5. Resolved, That we still cherish fraternal feelings towards all those brethren who have ever stood up firmly for the rights of the South.”

204 See Calhoun, The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It, 99; Channing, Crisis of Fear, 284; and Cisco, Taking a Stand, 78-80.

205 From letter to the Rev. Dr. J. Leighton Wilson, dated January 7, 1861, as quoted in Palmer, Life and Letters of JHT, 486. Palmer, Life and Letters of JHT, 467: “Into this [secession] movement Dr. Thornwell threw himself, from the beginning, with all the ardour [sic] of his nature; and to the day of his death, laboured [sic] and prayed, with patriotic fervour [sic], for the success of the Confederate cause.”

delivered the opening prayer at the first session of South Carolina’s legislature, asking for God’s guidance as the state’s leaders began to form a new government.\textsuperscript{207} Although years in the making, Thornwell’s conversion to the secessionist cause – and to an expanded ministerial role in political affairs – was now complete. And because of the respect and admiration he had come to garner – both in his state and in the Presbyterian denomination – many other ministers followed in his stead and declared themselves in favor of disunion.

\textsuperscript{207} See Farmer, \textit{Metaphysical Confederacy}, 266.
CHAPTER II
A PROVIDENTIAL DUTY

The large sanctuary of the prestigious First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, Louisiana, was filled to overflowing on Thursday, November 29, 1860. Although the imposing Gothic structure had a seating occupancy for up to 2,000 people, many of those in attendance— including local white and black church members, non-Protestants who resided in the area, and cosmopolitan visitors to the rapidly growing Crescent City—were unable to find a seat in either the floor or gallery of the main hall. While some in the audience came to marvel at the church’s architecture, the majority of that day’s congregants were there to observe the state’s fast day.208 More significantly, they came to that specific church on the south side of Lafayette Square to hear Benjamin Morgan Palmer, “one of America’s most dazzling preachers,” provide a “transcendent perspective” to the tumultuous events of that month, including a disappointing result in the latest presidential election and the movement in Palmer’s native South Carolina secede from the federal union.209 The small, dark, and sprightly man who addressed the overcrowded sanctuary on that state fast day had earned a reputation for offering “electrifying

208 See Wayne C. Eubank, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon, 1860,” 291, 296-297; Thomas Cary Johnson, The Life and Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1906), 174, 182; Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 35; and Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 176. Curiously, the state of Louisiana celebrated Thanksgiving on the same day that they were called on to fast by their governor. Thanksgiving, not yet an official national holiday, was proclaimed by state governors on different dates during the year. In 1860, Louisiana was one of several northern and southern states to celebrate the holiday on November 29. For this reason, both JHT’s fast day sermon on November 21 – the focus of the first chapter of this thesis – and Benjamin Morgan Palmer’s fast day sermon on November 29 were delivered on Thanksgiving. Both of these sermons are sometimes referred to as “Thanksgiving Day” sermons, as well as fast day sermons. See Appelbaum, Thanksgiving.

209 Bonner, Mastering America, 141, xi.
performances” from the pulpit, using his sonorous voice and hand motions to hold his audience spellbound and enraptured. His sermons were known not only for their intellectual rigor but also for the appeal made to the sentiments and passions of listeners through the use of emotion-laden words and descriptive phrases.\footnote{Bonner, Mastering America, 141. See also Bonner, Mastering America, 142; Calhoun, The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It, 64; DesChamps, “BMP,” 14; Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, [45], 67, [170]; and Kelly, Preachers with Power, 108-118.}

Those who had grown accustomed to Palmer’s prowess at preaching extemporaneously from brief sermon outlines would have been surprised to see the dignified minister approach the pulpit on that state fast day with a manuscript in hand. Scarcely lifting his eyes from the carefully prepared text, he read the document in a calm and steady voice over the next two hours.\footnote{See Calhoun, The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It, 99; Eubank, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon,” 297, 304; Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 81, 221; Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 35; White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 366; and Wakelyn, Southern Pamphlets on Secession, xv. The following is from a manuscript written by eyewitness William O. Rogers on June 9, 1904, as quoted in Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 219: “Contrary to his usual custom Dr. Palmer had written his sermon; and read it – slowly, carefully, with constrained voice – without a single gesture, without elevating his voice in any sentence during the hour of its delivery. The solemnity of the audience was very impressive. The calmness of the speaker was the calmness of deep emotion held in check by the solemnity of the occasion. The whose scene was a remarkable tribute to the intellectual and moral powers of the speaker.”}

Palmer explained to his listeners that the changes to his customary sermon delivery were due to “the agitation of feeling natural to one who is about to deviate from the settled policy of his public life.”\footnote{Fast Day Sermons, 61. See also Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 205.} Although his ministerial career had been marked by a conservative moderation in political matters, the content of that fast day’s sermon would show no such restraint, particularly regarding slavery, which Palmer aggressively defended as “a biblically sanctioned, economically vital, and socially necessary institution,” and secession, a political act which he passionately sanctioned from the pulpit.\footnote{Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 35.} On that Thursday, the audience of the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans bore witness to Palmer’s venture into the political arena, a
choice that would catapult him into national fame and ultimately transform him into “the South’s most notorious disunionist.”

**A NEW ORLEANIAN ORATOR**

Benjamin Morgan Palmer was born on January 25, 1818, in his family’s home on Beaufain Street, Charleston, South Carolina, and named after his uncle, a renowned Congregational minister at Charleston’s Circular (Independent) Church. The fourth and youngest child of the Rev. Edward Palmer (1788-1882), a rural Congregational-turned-Presbyterian minister who served churches in the state’s Low Country, and Sarah Bunce, a well-read woman who served as his first teacher, Benjamin Morgan was born into a family committed to pastoral ministry. Within two years of Palmer’s birth, his father departed unaccompanied to Andover, Massachusetts, where he spent eighteen months at Phillips Academy studying the Latin grammar required for pursuit of a ministerial diploma. He then matriculated at Andover Seminary, eventually earning a divinity degree as well as a degree from Yale College. During his absence, Sarah was left to care for their four small children. With the help of her sister, she ran a small boarding school in Charleston until 1823, when the family reunited in Andover after two of Palmer’s siblings died tragically within a week of each other. During the family’s brief stay in New England, the five-year old Palmer was taught to read by his mother, who used the Bible as his reading primer.

---

After graduating in 1824, Palmer’s father was licensed and installed as the pastor of the Congregational Church at Dorchester, a village about eighteen miles from Charleston that wealthy planters used as a summer retreat. Palmer continued his education under his mother’s direction, adding the works of William Shakespeare, Walter Scott, John Milton, and John Locke to his program of study. In 1827, the Congregational Association that had ordained Palmer’s father joined with nearby Presbyterian churches to form the Charleston Union Presbytery. The family soon moved to the village of Walterboro, where Palmer’s father began to serve as the pastor of Bethel Church. Three years after their move, Palmer enrolled in the Walterboro Academy, where he received training in Greek, Latin, mathematics, and rhetoric. In 1831, his father accepted a call to the Stony Creek Church in McPhersonville, but the family did not join him until almost a year later in order for Palmer to finish his academic year at the local academy.

In the summer of 1832, the fourteen-year-old Palmer made his way to New England to enroll as a student at Amherst College in Massachusetts. During his two-year tenure, he continued his progress in rhetoric and the classics, adding philosophy and divinity to his coursework. He was soon at the top of his class and formed friendships with several of the other students, including the small contingent of students that hailed from southern states and Henry Ward Beecher who, like Palmer, would earn a reputation for powerful preaching. The 1830s was not a welcoming time for a South Carolinian studying north of the Mason-Dixon line. As abolitionist sentiments grew and the Nullification movement emerged in South Carolina, anti-

216 Eubank, “BMP,” 26: “From his mother, Benjamin seems to have derived a love for the beautiful; an intense and penetrating intellectual capacity; a desire for good literature; an aggressive, dynamic independence tempered with a pleasing degree of sociability. From his father’s lineage he appears to have inherited a sense of orderliness and discipline; an unyielding tenacity; a tendency towards courtesy, common sense and unrestricted charity; a finely balanced measure of egoism rooted in stubborn Calvinistic principles.”

217 The following is from an unpublished manuscript on the life of Dr. Stuart Robinson, written by BMP (date unknown), as quoted in Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 47, regarding the southern students at Amherst: “Five of the number hailed from Virginia, four from Georgia, and one poor speckled bird from South Carolina [referring to himself].” Henry Ward Beecher’s fast day sermon was also published in Fast Day Sermons (1861). See pages [265]-292.
Southern sentiment began to grow rife in the northern region. Palmer increasingly felt called upon to verbally and physically defend the southern cause, responding with both his debating skills and fists when his native state came under criticism over the institution of slavery and its threatened political secession from the federal union over long-standing tariff grievances. In the spring of 1834, a confrontation with faculty members led to a worsening of the rift between him and the college. As a member of the secretive Athenian Literary Society at Amherst College, Palmer moved to table a faculty-instigated motion to terminate the society’s reading of anonymous letters at their meetings that were often critical of the teaching staff. A fellow student and society member reported his action to the faculty, who demanded that Palmer reveal whether he was the author of one of those belittling letters. Palmer viewed this move by the faculty as a breach on his honor and he refused to disclose any information whatsoever, despite being threatened with dismissal from the college.

Although the faculty decided not to expel one of their brightest students, the sixteen-year-old Palmer chose to leave the institution of his own accord and return home to Charleston. His father, whom he had failed to consult before departing Amherst College, believed his son’s actions had been imprudent and thoughtless. Palmer’s father refused to speak to him upon his arrival, an estrangement that led the teenager to leave the family home within weeks in search of employment and a more welcoming environment. For the next two years, he tutored a number of Charleston-area children and served as a schoolmaster in McPhersonville in the summer months, quickly earning a reputation for effectiveness and successful implementation of classroom

---

218 Ibid., as quoted in Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 47-48, recalling his stay in Amherst: “It was an uncanny time for Southern men to trim their sails for Northern seas. The Nullification storm had just burst over the country, and was not yet appeased. The abolition fanaticism was rising to the height of its frenzy. The elements of conflict were gathering in the theological world, which a little later resulted in the schism rending the Presbyterian Church asunder. The sky was full of portents, and the air screamed with war cries on every side. The unfortunate South Carolinian [student at Amherst, i.e., himself], whom fate reserves to record in these pages his own disaster, was too young and unformed in character to steer his bark over such tempestuous billows, and was soon wrecked upon a treacherous reef.”
discipline. In the summer of 1836, after experiencing months of remorse concerning irreligious behavior followed by a timely intervention by a religious cousin, Palmer experienced a spiritual conversion and obtained membership in his father’s Presbyterian church at Stony Creek. His religious transformation led to a renewed vigor for study and thoughts of pursuing the ministry as a future career. With those sentiments in mind, Palmer decided to enter the junior class at the University of Georgia in January 1837, paying his way by working as a tutor. He became an active member of the university’s literary and debating society, distinguished himself as a public speaker for the College Temperance Society, was initiated into the Phi Kappa Society, and wrote essays on Christian themes for a student newspaper. Graduating at the head of his class in the spring of 1838, Palmer was now convinced that he was being called to a life of ministry in which he could use his oratorical skills to advance God’s kingdom on earth.

In January 1839, Palmer enrolled at Columbia Theological Seminary, continuing to work as a tutor in order to pay tuition costs and once again excelling academically among his fellow students. He continued to hone his oratorical skills by working as a traveling newspaper agent for Columbia’s *South-Carolina Temperance Advocate*, soliciting subscriptions and lecturing on Christianity and the evils of excessive drinking. He also came under the influence of another well-known orator, James Henley Thornwell, who had just moved from his professorial position

---

219 See Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It*, 51; Kelly, *Preachers with Power*, 89; and Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals*, 8. The nature of BMP’s irreligious behavior was never made clear in either BMP’s letters of that period or his later recollections to friends or family members.

220 The University of Georgia was the first chartered state university in the United States, established in 1785 but not holding classes until 1801. Between 1811 and 1860, the institution appointed a series of Presbyterian ministers to serve as president. See F. N. Boney, *A Pictorial History of the University of Georgia* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2000), 2-41.

221 Columbia Theological Seminary (CTS), founded in 1828 by the Presbyterian Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, was first known as the Theological Seminary of the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia and was located in Lexington, Georgia. It moved to Columbia, South Carolina, in 1830 and held classes there for the first time in 1831. In 1839, the Old School Presbyterian institution had about thirty-two students and two faculty members, Aaron W. Leland and George Howe. Both of them were New Englanders by birth, but Southerners in sympathy. See Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It*, 33-34; Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 119-121; Duncan, “BMP,” 39-41; Johnson, *History of the Southern Presbyterian Church*, 394-395; and Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, I:122, 283. The institution relocated to Decatur, Georgia, in the 1920s.
at South Carolina College to the pulpit of Columbia’s Presbyterian Church. Enthralled by
Thornwell’s preaching and intellect, Palmer soon transferred his membership in 1840 from the
Stony Creek Church in McPhersonville to Thornwell’s church in Columbia. After graduating
from the seminary in 1841, Palmer served as a pulpit supply to the Presbyterian Church in
Anderson, where he had previously spent time canvassing for subscriptions to the *South-
Carolina Temperance Advocate*. In October 1841, Palmer, along with his new bride Mary
Augusta McConnell and her young slave Caroline, made his way to Savannah, Georgia, to serve
as pastor to the First Presbyterian Church in that city. He dove zealously into his pastoral
duties, preaching about three times a week, serving as church administrator, overseeing church
discipline cases, and visiting ailing parishioners. Hoping to devote what spare moments he had
during the week to studying theology and history, Palmer stopped writing out his sermons in full
and instead began preaching extemporaneously from rough outlines, a method that he believed
led to greater excitement from the pulpit.

---

222 BMP would later write a biography of JHT, in which he described hearing his future mentor preach for the first
time. Palmer, *Life and Letters of JHT*, 154: “From the opening of the discourse [by JHT], there was a strange
fascination, such as had never been exercised by any other speaker. The first impression made was that of being
stunned by a peculiar dogmatism in the statement of what seemed weighty propositions; this was followed by a
conscious resistance of the authority which was felt to be a little brow-beating with its positiveness; and the, as link
after link was added to the chain of a consistent argument, expressed with that agnostic fervour [sic] which belongs
to the forum, the effect at the close was to overwhelm and subdue.”

223 Mary Augusta McConnell was the stepdaughter of George Howe, one of the two professors at Columbia
Theological Seminary. BMP and his wife had six children. Their first, a son, was born in 1842 and died two years
later; five daughters followed. See Johnson, *Life and Letters of BMP*, 225. The First Presbyterian Church in
Savannah was established in the summer of 1827 by disgruntled members of the Independent Presbyterian Church

224 Eubank, “BMP,” 63: “Palmer’s previous training and experience as a debater and orator had much to do with his
success in the new venture. Debate, with its emphasis upon keen, quick, and well-organized thought, now insured
unity in his extempore efforts. Free from the fetters of the manuscript, his delivery became more direct, more
spontaneous, and more dynamic. In order to avoid reliance upon any type of manuscript, Palmer refused to employ
even a written outline, depending solely upon the use of a skeleton plan, which he memorized. Thus, free to develop
his theme in accordance with the particular occasion, Palmer’s new style of speaking was vastly more stimulating
and acceptable than formerly.”

69
In January 1843, Palmer returned to South Carolina’s capital to become the pastor of its prominent Presbyterian Church. His former mentor James Henley Thornwell, who had vacated that pulpit in 1840, now became one of his parishioners, along with state legislators and the faculty and student bodies of South Carolina College and Columbia Theological Seminary. During his eleven-year tenure at one of the state’s most influential Presbyterian congregations, Palmer preached three times every Sunday and several times during the week, oversaw the construction of a new church building, served as a delegate to denominational assemblies, and visited every single family in the parish. He was especially gifted at providing grieving church members with empathy and comfort, having suffered the devastating loss of his two-year old son in 1844. In addition to his pastoral duties, Palmer also began to write for a number of publications, including a number of articles for the Southern Presbyterian Review, a theological journal he co-founded in 1846 and helped to edit, along with James Henley Thornwell and his wife’s stepfather, George Howe. Other activities included addressing local literary and scholastic societies, giving commencement speeches for a number of the community’s academies, and, beginning in 1851, serving as an informal provisional instructor at Columbia.

---

225 When BMP arrived in Columbia’s Presbyterian Church in 1843, the congregation consisted of only 128 members. However, those members were some of the most influential political and academic men in the state. See Calhoun, The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It, 52-53.
All of these activities served to increase Palmer’s stature in the state and in the national Presbyterian denomination.

It wasn’t long before Palmer’s prowess in the pulpit, with his pen, and in the classroom led to the bestowal of honorary degrees and offers of employment from around the country. In 1852, Oglethorpe University in Milledgeville, Georgia, conferred on him the Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) degree, while congregations in Baltimore, Charleston, Cincinnati, and Philadelphia requested that he fill their pulpits. Palmer declined the offers, feeling content in his position as minister in South Carolina’s capital and also fully aware that the Presbytery of Charleston, which had licensed him to preach in the area, would be incredibly reluctant to let him leave. However, after eleven years of service to the Presbyterian Church of Columbia, the Synod of South Carolina announced that it had other plans for one of its most renowned ministers. In 1854, that body elected Palmer to serve as Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Polity at Columbia Theological Seminary. He was reluctant to give up the pulpit completely, however. He continued to serve his congregation during his first year of full-time teaching and then preached occasionally at the small Presbyterian Church in Orangeburg during his second year as a member of the seminary’s faculty. The Synod’s attempt to convert the pastor into a full-time academic

---

227 For an example of a commencement speech delivered by BMP after his tenure at Columbia’s Presbyterian Church, see *A Discourse Upon Female Excellence, Delivered Before the Fayette Female Academy, at its First Commencement, July 28, 1859* (New Orleans: True Witness Book and Job Printing Office, 1859). During the 1851-52 and 1853-54 academic years, BMP lectured on ecclesiastical history and polity at Columbia Theological Seminary.

228 At this point in his career, BMP had gained national stature “as the sort of theologian, pastor, and orator who could appeal to congregations in the free states as well as in the slave states” (Bonner, *Mastering America*, xiii).

229 BMP received an honorary LL.D. degree from Westminster College in Fulton, Missouri, in 1870. The specific congregations who requested his services, and the years in which they did so, were as follows: Second Presbyterian Church in Baltimore (1846), Glebe Street Church in Charleston (1852), Central Church of Cincinnati (1852 and 1854), and a Presbyterian church in Philadelphia (1853, name not specified in the sources). BMP was also elected to the Chair of Oriental Literature at Danville Theological Seminary in Kentucky (1853) and unanimously elected to the faculty of Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey (1860), but he declined both invitations.
and occasional fund-raiser ultimately failed. Palmer grew increasingly unhappy at not being able to use his oratorical gifts to their full extent, finally asking to be released from his professorial duties in 1856 after receiving repeated and unanimous calls from the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans to serve as its pastor. Although the Synod was reluctant to see him leave, it finally relented and Palmer made his way to south Louisiana in December 1856, where he would remain as a minister almost continually for the next forty-six years.

The First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans was the largest Presbyterian congregation in the city, affording Palmer the opportunity to preach to a large and diverse group of local congregants and visitors every Sunday, as well as several times during the week. His weekly schedule included leading various prayer meetings and Bible studies, as well as instructing the children of the congregation on the Presbyterian catechism and ministering to black members of the congregation. His pastoral ministry, however, soon extended beyond the stone walls of the church building and into the city itself. Many of his sermons appeared in the city’s secular newspapers, leading to numerous requests from both religious and non-religious groups to have Palmer address them on a variety of topics. As an ever-growing number of congregants gathered at the new church building he helped dedicate just a few months after his arrival, Palmer also increased his role in the Presbyterian denomination. In 1857, he served the Synod of Mississippi and the Presbytery of New Orleans as an examiner of ministerial candidates in the areas of ecclesiastical history and polity, as well as in the Presbyterian sacraments. He soon gained renown throughout the city for his pastoral visits, particularly when he risked his own health to call on ill congregants during the 1858 yellow fever epidemic. The courage he showed earned

230 Eubank, “BMP,” 95: “The minister who could control the heart of the popular assembly was never truly at home in the classroom; for the chief concern of the Seminary professor was not in the winning of disciples to Christianity but rather the imparting of knowledge to those already devoutly Christian.”
231 During the American Civil War, BMP fled from New Orleans to Columbia, South Carolina. See conclusion of this thesis for more information.
him a great deal of goodwill from New Orleanians, including citizens of the Catholic and Jewish faiths.

As his reputation and influence in the state of Louisiana increased, Palmer made it clear to his acquaintances that he still identified himself with and remained loyal to his native state and its political and social outlooks.\(^{232}\) He frequently uttered the phrase, “I am a South Carolinian, you know,” particularly when explaining “some strongly held opinion or [a] distinctive course of action” he advocated in opposition to those around him.\(^{233}\) When, in 1860, the state of South Carolina was teeming with fire-eaters and other proponents of secession, Palmer, who until then had remained relatively silent concerning slavery, became “inwardly agitated” and finally felt it incumbent to comment and speak publicly on the issue at the center of the turmoil and the secessionist solution proposed by the state of South Carolina.\(^{234}\) The feeling grew stronger after the election of Abraham Lincoln to the office of the president of the United States on November 6, 1861, a man that Palmer would later characterize as a purely “sectional” candidate who owed his rise to a political party with a history of “unblushing perjuries.”\(^{235}\) On the day he delivered his fast day sermon in New Orleans, Palmer spoke as a native of the Palmetto State, a South Carolinian who sought to solve the problems of his region by delivering an unprecedented political address from his city pulpit in which he made clear that his loyalties rested with the proponents of secession.

LOUISIANA IN 1860

\(^{232}\) Johnson, *Life and Letters of BMP*, 18: “in his political views, in his social ideals, in his manners, in a certain quality of heroic daring, and in the persistent maintenance of his views against all comers, he soon became, and ever remained, a noble exponent of much that was the best and highest in South Carolina civilization.” Johnson, *Life and Letters of BMP*, 37: “In his political views, in his bearing in society, in his breadth of sympathies, in his regard for the family and the home, he was a South Carolinian of the highest type.”


\(^{235}\) *Fast Day Sermons*, 71 and 73.
In 1860, Louisiana’s port city of New Orleans was the largest and most cosmopolitan city in the southern region.\textsuperscript{236} With a total population of 168,675, including over 10,000 free blacks, the burgeoning metropolis was home to a sizeable percentage of foreign-born residents as well as a temporary residence to a large number of visitors from around the nation.\textsuperscript{237} Located along the Mississippi River, and with easy access to the Gulf of Mexico, merchants, entrepreneurs, and planters made their way to the teeming commercial and business center of the lower Mississippi Valley to exchange goods, receive shipments, and purchase slaves in the nation’s largest market.\textsuperscript{238} The economic interests of the state and its port city were closely related to its connections to northern and European cities, resulting in citizens who were particularly concerned about the prospect of either secession or civil conflict disrupting the political bonds they had with those areas. Political changes could potentially disrupt the city’s successful trade network, placing the urban area in pecuniary danger; its geographic location also made it a valuable, and thus likely, target of military invasion by warring factions.\textsuperscript{239} As sectional zeal overtook the state of South Carolina, Louisiana remained hesitant to commit to a definite political course of action.

The outcome of the presidential elections on November 6, 1860, captured the state’s indecision concerning their impending political path. Although John C. Breckinridge received

\textsuperscript{236} According to the 1840 census, the city of New Orleans was the fourth largest in population, after the cities of New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore. It was also the fourth busiest port, after the ports of London, Liverpool, and New York City. See Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 172-173, and Eubank, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon,” 297.

\textsuperscript{237} Enslaved and free African-Americans made up nearly half of the state’s population. Population data garnered from the eighth United States census (1860), as quoted in Jefferson Davis Bragg, Louisiana in the Confederacy (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1941), 34-36. See also Eubank, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon,” 291.

\textsuperscript{238} The state of Louisiana was also a banking center. Bragg, Louisiana in the Confederacy, 37: “Louisiana ranked first in capital stock, first in deposits, first in specie, and ninth in the number of banks among the slaveholding states.”

\textsuperscript{239} Bonner, Mastering America, xiv: “The withdrawal of Louisiana from the union would have drastic implications for the partisan system that had connected New York to the slave South, and for those increasingly intricate commercial, financial, and cultural ties on which the city’s future viability depended.” See also Dwight Lowell Dumond, The Secession Movement, 1860-1861 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1931), 126.
Louisiana’s electoral votes, John Bell came in a close second; in the city of New Orleans, Breckinridge received fewer votes than either Bell or Stephen Douglas. However, the resulting victory of Abraham Lincoln and the Republican party at the polls led to a change in the state’s sentiments as concern grew over the effects that the new political party’s platform would have on the state’s profitable slave trade. Sixteen days after the election, the uncertainty over how to proceed led Governor Thomas Overton Moore, who was in favor of secession, to call for a special session of the state legislature to convene on December 10, stating that:

whereas, the election of Abraham Lincoln to the office of President of the United States by a sectional and aggressive anti-slavery party, whose hostility to the people and the institutions of the South has been evinced by repeated and long-continued violations of Constitutional obligations and fraternal amity, now consummated by the last insult and outrage perpetrated at and through the ballot box … both patriotism and the necessity of self-preservation require us to deliberate upon our own course of action.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF PALMER’S FAST DAY SERMON

In the midst of this turmoil, Louisiana’s governor also called on the state to observe November 29 as a day of thanksgiving as well as a day of fasting, prayer, and humiliation. Palmer, who may have obtained and read a copy of James Henley Thornwell’s fast day sermon delivered just eight days prior, prepared a discourse titled “Slavery A Divine Trust,” in which he defended the institution of slavery as a divinely sanctioned and providential trust given to southerners. He argued that its development and extension in the nation was a uniquely southern duty, a responsibility owed to fellow southerners, their slaves, the civilized world, and to God.

---

240 According to the New Orleans Daily Picayune, December 5, 1860, Breckinridge received 22,681, Bell 20,204, and Douglas 7,625. Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 36: “there was still significant Unionist sentiment in the state [of Louisiana] and city [of New Orleans].”
241 The Courier (New Orleans, La.), November 23, 1860. The announcement was given the day before it was published in this particular newspaper.
242 See Duncan, “BMP,” 130; Fast Day Sermons, [57]; and Wakelyn, Southern Pamphlets on Secession, xv, 63. The exact date on which the governor made this proclamation, and what he said, is unknown. According to The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Containing the ... Directory of Worship (1839), 518: “if at any time the civil power should think it proper to appoint a fast or thanksgiving, it is the duty of the ministers and people of our [Presbyterian] communion, as we live under a Christian government, to pay all due respect to the same.”
Although there were reasons to hope that a conflict between North and South would ultimately not break out over the issue of slavery, Palmer believed that it was inevitable that two regions with such divergent interests and principles would finally confront each other. He declared his hesitancy to speak publicly from the pulpit on what had been viewed as a solely political and economic issue for several decades. However, the question of whether slavery should continue included moral aspects in its response, making it imperative for a religious leader to address the topic. Palmer also sketched out a course of action for slave states to follow in the months ahead that included initiating measures to create a new confederacy of states dedicated to the preservation of slavery. Throughout the fast day sermon, he contrasted his somber delivery with the use of emotion-laden descriptions that evoked the destruction that would come to the region if it did not secede. Palmer also faulted the northern, free labor states for bringing about the present crisis, a rhetorical strategy that aroused the sentiments of his audience and challenged them to accept their duty as described by him in his proposed political strategy.²⁴³

Palmer began his fast day sermon by stating its two main scriptural texts. The first was Psalm 94:20: “Shall the throne of iniquity have fellowship with thee, which frameth mischief by a law?”; the second was Obadiah 1:7: “All the men of thy confederacy have brought thee even to the border; the men that were at peace with thee have deceived thee, and prevailed against thee;

²⁴³ The contents of BMP’s fast day sermon are mentioned briefly in several books, including Bonner, Mastering America, xi-xiii; David B. Chesebrough, Clergy Dissent in the Old South, 1830-1865 (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), 18; Chesebrough, “God Ordained This War”, 146, 196-197, 329; Daniel, Southern Protestantism, 5; DesChamps, “BMP,” 16; DesChamps, “Union or Division?” 494-495; Duncan, “BMP,” 133-134; Eubank, “BMP,” 123-125; Eubank, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon,” 297-304; Hickey, “BMP,” 67, 186-189; Haskell Monroe, “Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Day Address,” Louisiana History 4:2 (1963): 105-118; Haynes, Noah’s Curse, 130-132; Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 35-36; Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 175-180; Robert Livingston Stanton, The Church and the Rebellion: A Consideration of the Rebellion Against the Government of the United States; and the Agency of the Church, North and South, in Relation Thereto (New York: Derby & Miller, 1864), 163; Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, I:556-557; and Wakelyn, Southern Pamphlets on Secession, xv, xxix, 63-77.
they that ate thy bread have laid a wound under thee; there is none understanding in him.” He continued by acknowledging the governor of the state as the one who annually called on residents of Louisiana to gather together to express their thanks to God and, in this case, also plead with Him for mercy. This act by the governor acknowledged the existence of “a mighty and double truth”: God was personally involved in shaping the future of nations and men were equipped with a religious nature that sought after God. Practitioners of natural and/or pagan religions acknowledged the everyday workings of “a universal and ruling Providence”; even skeptics and atheists abandoned their irreligious principles when faced with moments of crisis and despair. Christians and non-Christians alike could thus find grounds for “momentary fellowship” on a day set aside for the entire state to pay “public and united homage to the God of nature and grace.”

The combination of a shared “religious feeling” and a desire to comply with the directives of a public authority figure had brought about this particular gathering at First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans. In years past, communal observance of a day of thanksgiving allowed congregants to express their gratitude over the many blessings received throughout the year. However, “the triumph of a sectional majority” in the most recent national elections marred that year’s observation and spelled out “the probable doom of our once

---

244 The second scriptural text is cited erroneously as “Obadiah v.” in Fast Day Sermons, [57].
245 Fast Day Sermons, [57].
246 Ibid., 58. When discussing the religious musings of those who practiced natural religion, BMP quoted from James Thomson’s poem titled “Autumn,” which was part of his poetry cycle titled The Seasons (London, 1730), as well as from James 1:17 (KJV): “Father of lights, from whom cometh down every good and perfect gift.”
247 Fast Day Sermons, 58.
248 Ibid., 58.
249 In this section on giving thanks, BMP quoted from three different Psalms, changing the present tense verses to past tense. The first was Psalm 118:15 (KJV): “The voice of rejoicing and salvation was in the tabernacles of the righteous.” The second was Psalm 144:13-14 (KJV): “that our garners were full, affording all manner of store; that our sheep brought forth thousands and tens of thousands in our streets; that our oxen were strong to labor, and there was not breaking in nor going out, and not complaining was in our streets.” The third was Psalm 122:7 (KJV): “Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces.”
Palmer characterized that winter’s political and social situation as absolutely dire: “we are in the most fearful and perilous crisis which has occurred in our history as a nation.” He went on to list the factors that had brought about this state of affairs:

Sectional divisions, the jealousy of rival interests, the lust of political power, a bastard ambition, which looks to personal aggrandizement rather than to the public weal, a reckless radicalism, which seeks for the subversion of all that is ancient and stable, and a furious fanaticism, which drives on its ill-considered conclusions with utter disregard of the evil it engenders – all these combine to create a portentous crisis, the like of which we have never known before, and which puts to a crucifying test the virtue, the patriotism, and the piety of the country.  

Before going any further, Palmer reminded his audience that he had “never intermeddled with political questions,” not just because of his religious conviction that a minister should steer clear of the political sphere, but because the factional issues of the time had yet to involve matters “sufficiently momentous to warrant my turning aside, even for a moment, from my chosen calling.” He had remained silent throughout the most recent political campaign, biding his time in lamentations over the ever-growing sectional divisions and preparing for a time when his silence would no longer be required, a time when he could finally speak clearly and publicly “as a Christian and a divine” concerning the problems facing the nation. That hour had finally come; it was no longer “lawful to be still.” Any and all who had the power to influence the public’s opinion during this perilous time should do so “or prove faithless to a trust as solemn as any to be accounted for at the bar of God.”

---

250 Fast Day Sermons, 59. In this section, BMP quoted two biblical passages, changing the first one from the past tense to the present tense. The first was Habakkuk 3:7 (KJV): “[We] see the tents of Cushan in affliction, and the curtains of the land of Midian do tremble.” The second was Luke 21:25-26 (KJV): “signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; upon the earth distress of nations, with perplexity; the sea and the waves roaring; men’s hearts failing them for fear, and for looking after those things which are coming.”

251 Fast Day Sermons, 59-60.

252 Ibid., 60.

253 Ibid., 61. BMP’s biographer mentioned that “doubt was entertained here and there as to the propriety of a Gospel minister’s expressing all these views in God’s house” (Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 223).
As the renowned preacher of a prestigious urban congregation, Palmer considered himself a representative of the ministerial class “whose opinions in such a controversy are of cardinal importance,” especially given the moral and religious aspects of that year’s crisis. The issues being debated in the nation had been deliberated by religious bodies for years and resulted in the schism of the two largest denominations in the country: the Methodists and the Baptists. Palmer requested forgiveness beforehand from both God and the Presbyterian congregation if he had failed to understand what he perceived to be his duty on that state fast day, which he characterized as follows:

It is my purpose – not as your organ, compromising [sic] you, whose opinions are for the most part unknown to me, but on my sole responsibility – to speak upon the one question of the day; and to state the duty which, as I believe, patriotism and religion alike requires of us all. I shall aim to speak with a moderation of tone and feeling almost judicial, well befitting the sanctities of the place and the solemnities of the judgment-day.254

Palmer began the body of his sermon by stating that the chief obligation of the day was to “ascertain the nature of the trust providentially committed” to southerners, that is, to determine the duty that God had entrusted to Christians to faithfully carry out, regardless of circumstances. The specific “providential trust” given to the southern people, revealed by an investigation into their needs, customs, principles, and identity, was “to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of slavery as now existing.”255 Palmer made it clear that this assertion did not necessitate a discussion concerning whether the institution of slavery created the best relationship between laborer and employer, although this could be argued in the affirmative.256 More importantly, although making clear what the providential duty of the present time was, Palmer did not mean...
to imply that this duty would remain the same in the future. After all, he said, it would be arrogant to presume that providence was not capable of working out “a solution undiscoverable by us” to what he described as the “social problem” of the region. Geographic and political changes might bring about both welcome and unwelcome changes in the forthcoming years, but it would be up to subsequent generations to determine how this duty would be transformed in subsequent scenarios. For now, the one thing that southerners asked for themselves and their progeny was the freedom to carry out their particular duty, since they alone were “authorized … [and] competent” to determine what it was and agree on the best way in which to develop and extend it. Any interference, particularly in the form of national legislation that hoped to limit or abolish slavery, should be resented and resisted by the southern region.257 When challenged by those who claimed that the days of slavery were numbered, Palmer declared that the only response of a Christian southerner was to “proclaim to all the world that we hold this trust from God, and in its occupancy we are prepared to stand or fall as God may appoint.”258

The providential duty of “conserving and transmitting the system of slavery” was given to the southern people for four key reasons, which Palmer proceeded to describe. The first was that slavery was an integral part of the southern way of life; the “first law” of nature, the very “principle of self-preservation,” demanded the institution’s continuance and expansion.259 Palmer rhetorically asked his listeners whether this first point required further elucidation:

Need I pause to show how this system of servitude underlies and supports our material interests? That our wealth consists in our lands, and in the serfs who till them? That from the nature of our products they can only be cultivated by labor which must be controlled in order to be certain? That any other than a tropical race must faint and wither beneath a tropical sun? Need I pause to show how this system is interwoven with

257 Fast Day Sermons, 63. Curiously, BMP characterized this northern interference as coming from “abroad,” as if the slave states already formed a distinct nation. He also quoted from a slightly modified Psalm 94:20 (KJV) when speaking of the obtrusiveness of national legislation: “the throne of iniquity frameth mischief by a law.”
258 Fast Day Sermons, 64.
259 Ibid., 64. Italics in the original.
our entire social fabric? That these slaves form parts of our households, even as our children; and that, too, through a relationship recognized and sanctioned in the scriptures of God even as the other? Must I pause to show how it has fashioned our modes of life, and determined all our habits of thought and feeling, and moulded the very type of our civilization? How, then, can the hand of violence be laid upon it without involving our existence?  

The existence and social order of the “so-called free States” was not being undermined by the slave states, whose only wish was for the free-labor states to find satisfactory solutions to the problems their region faced, which were brought about by population growth, economic fluctuations, class struggles, labor unrest, and mechanization. Sadly, said Palmer, these southern wishes for goodwill and success were not reciprocated by the free-labor states towards the slave-labor states. Instead, the responsibilities and trials of the slave states had been the focus of “unrighteous assault [by northern, free-labor states] through five and twenty years.”

The second reason that southerners were entrusted with preserving and spreading slavery was because they were “the constituted guardians of the slaves themselves.” The black race was characterized by “dependence and servitude,” Palmer argued, and thus required “their providential guardians” to protect them from acquiring the freedom they were incapable of putting to good use or suffering a tragic death if transported – via colonization – to the primitive continent of Africa. The third reason was that the economic security of “the civilized world” depended on the conservation of slavery. Despite the criticism leveled at the institution for a number of years, the nations of the world had “grown more and more dependent upon it for sustenance and wealth.” England and several northern states manufactured finished goods
from the raw agricultural products of the slave-labor-dependent southern region, and southerners, in turn, purchased those commodities. This symbiotic relationship brought profits to both cultivator and manufacturer. Making reference to the second scriptural text of that day’s sermon, Obadiah 1:7, Palmer maintained that attacking the institution that helped to feed and clothe the nation would only bring about destruction and devastation.265

The fourth reason for guarding the institution of slavery from its detractors was in order to “defend the cause of God and religion.” Although the abolitionist movement claimed to be advocating for human rights, they were instead attacking God by condemning “all subordination and law,” acting much like the atheists who created a reign of terror in revolutionary France.266 Under the guise of seeking reform, they were attempting to “quicken the activity of Jehovah,” regardless of whether this meant trampling on the providential balancing act that allowed certain “evils which check others that are greater.” The abolitionist “spirit of atheism,” which crusaded “against constitutions, and laws and compacts, against Sabbaths and sanctuaries, against the family, the State and the church,” needed to be resisted by southerners at all costs.267

Having described why the responsibility to “preserve and transmit our existing system of domestic servitude, with the right, unchanged by man, to go and root itself wherever Providence and nature may carry it” was a providential duty owed “to ourselves [southerners], to our slaves, to the world, and to almighty God,” Palmer asserted that the “divine trust” would be faithfully

---

265 In this section, BMP quoted from Esther 4:14 (KJV), changing it from singular to plural: “Who knoweth whether we are not come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

266 Fast Day Sermons, 68. Given the diverse make-up of the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans’ congregation, it is quite probable that there were abolitionists in the audience when BMP uttered these sentiments. See Eubank, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon,” 297. BMP’s first biographer mentioned that “a few of his [BMP’s] people broke with him that day, though it came near to breaking their hearts to do it” (Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 223).

267 Fast Day Sermons, 69-70.
carried out despite “the baptism of fire” that might ensue.\textsuperscript{268} The institution of slavery had been subject to critique for years, but the objections had grown increasingly fanatical and its critics far more numerous in the past years. As the North had insisted on making an issue out of something that was “clear, simple and tangible,” the moment of crisis had finally arrived in which victory must be decided “for one or the other.” Palmer maintained that “the entire guilt of the present disturbance” belonged solely to the northern region:

With a choice between three national candidates, who have more or less divided the vote of the South, the North, with unexampled unanimity, have cast their ballot for a candidate who is sectional, who represents a party that is sectional, and the ground of that sectionalism, prejudiced against the established and constitutional rights and immunities and institutions of the South. What does this declare – what can it declare – but that from henceforth this is to be a government of section over section; a government using constitutional forms only to embarrass and divide the section ruled, and as fortresses through whose embrasures the cannon of legislation is to be employed in demolishing the guaranteed institutions of the South? What issue is more direct, concrete, intelligible than this?\textsuperscript{269}

Palmer followed this statement by posing the following question to his congregants:

“how shall she [the South] meet that which is prepared for her?” Even in that year’s winter of crisis, reasons were being devised to “defer the day of evil” and hold back the havoc of national revolution. First, many asserted that President-elect Lincoln had been “chosen by a fair majority, under prescribed forms.”\textsuperscript{270} This assertion, however, was meaningless, since the Constitution had become a means by which to subject and oppress the southern region. The federal union created by the Founding Fathers had essentially been destroyed by this loss of “mutual confidence” between the two regions. Furthermore, declared Palmer, the federal yoke was being cast off “for causes immeasurably stronger than those pleaded in” the Declaration of

\textsuperscript{268} Ibid., 70. The third quote comes from the sermon’s title, p. [57].
\textsuperscript{269} Ibid., 71-72. BMP stated the following after the blocked quote above: “I thank God that, since the conflict must be joined, the responsibility of this issue rests not with us, who have ever acted upon the defensive; and that it is so disemarrassed and simple that the feeblest mind can understand it” (\textit{Fast Day Sermons}, 72).
\textsuperscript{270} Ibid., 72.
Independence. Second, it was “softly whispered” that the President-elect planned to administer his government “in a conservative and national spirit.” Palmer made it clear that it did not matter what Lincoln’s intentions were, since:

He is nothing more than a figure upon the political chess-board – whether pawn, or knight, or king, will hereafter appear – but still a silent figure upon the checkered squares, moved by the hands of an unseen player. That player is the party to which he owes his elevation; a party that has signalized its history by the most unblushing perjuries. What faith can be placed in the protestations of men who openly avow that their consciences are too sublimated to be restrained by the obligation of covenants or by the sanctity of oaths?  

Third, it was suggested that the North’s official electors in the latest presidential election would choose to cast their votes for a non-sectional candidate, in complete disregard of the wishes of voters throughout the northern region. Palmer believed this to be unlikely and that, regardless of probability, it would constitute a “breach of faith” and doom the nation to “four years of increasing strife and bitterness.” “Let us not desire to shift the day of trial,” argued Palmer. “The issue is upon us; let us meet it like men, and end this strife forever.” Lastly, there had been “whispers” that the Republican majority that had emerged victorious in the recent election was not in agreement over their future objectives. This hope, declared Palmer, was fallacious. The atheistic abolitionist spirit, which he had described earlier in his sermon, was the “informing and actuating soul” of the Republican party and it would not rest until it had brought “slaughter and ruin” to the nation. The “first article” in the Republican party’s platform was “the restriction of slavery within its present limits,” a danger to the southerner’s providential trust that

---

271 Ibid., 73. In this section, BMP quoted from two passages in the letter to the Hebrews. The first was Hebrews 8:13 (KJV), which he pluralized: “In that we say a new covenant, we have made the first old, and that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanity away.” The second was Hebrews 1:12 (KJV), which he changed from future to present tense: “as a vesture it is folded up.”

272 Fast Day Sermons, 73-74.

273 Ibid., 74.
was now embodied in the soon-to-be inaugurated leader of the nation. Making reference to the first scriptural text of that day’s sermon, Psalm 94:20, Palmer characterized the present crisis as “the historic moment” in which the fate of the institution of slavery would be decided, the moment in which the South’s destiny would be settled as either victor or subject.

Palmer proceeded to outline a course of action for the southern region, in which he expressed his support for the secessionist measures being contemplated by his native state of South Carolina, calling on the state of Louisiana to follow suit:

Let the people in all the Southern States, in solemn counsel assembled, reclaim the powers they have delegated. Let those conventions be composed of men whose fidelity has been approved – men who bring the wisdom, experience and firmness of age to support and announce principles which have long been matured. Let these conventions decide firmly and solemnly what they will do with this great trust committed to their hands. Let them pledge each other, in sacred covenant, to uphold and perpetuate what they cannot resign without dishonor and palpable ruin. Let them, further, take all the necessary steps looking to separate and independent existence, and initiate measures for framing a new and homogeneous confederacy. Thus, prepared for every contingency, let the crisis come.

There was still hope that northerners would recognize their folly and put an end to the abolitionist movement that had been the source of all the current trouble. But Palmer admitted he was “not sanguine that such an auspicious result will be reached,” principally because even if

274 Ibid., 75. What followed in this section was a long quotation from what BMP characterized as “an article written to pacify the South, and to reassure its fears.” The author of the quote was William Cullen Bryant, from an article published in The Evening Post (New York, N.Y.) on November 18, 1860: “There can be no doubt whatever in the mind of any man, that Mr. Lincoln regards slavery as a moral, social and political evil, and that it should be dealt with as such by the Federal Government, in every instance where it is called upon to deal with it at all. On this point there is no room for question – and there need be no misgivings as to his official action. The whole influence of the Executive Department of the Government, while in his hands, will be thrown against the extension of slavery into the new territories of the Union, and the reopening of the African slave trade. On these points he will make no compromise, nor yield one hair’s breadth to coercion from any quarter or in any shape. He does not accede to the alleged decision of the Supreme Court, that the Constitution places slaves upon the footing of other property, and protects them as such wherever its jurisdiction extends; nor will he be, in the least degree, governed or controlled by it in his executive action. He will do all in his power, personally and officially, by the direct exercise of the powers of his office, and the indirect influence separable from it, to arrest the tendency to make slavery national and perpetual, and to place it in precisely the same position which it held in the early days of the Republic, and in the view of the founders of the Government.” The source for the original publication information of this quote was Wakelyn, Southern Pamphlets on Secession, 75, note 4.

275 Fast Day Sermons, 76.

276 Ibid., 77.
new guarantees were elicited from the largely anti-slavery northern people and “grafted upon the constitution,” there was no reason to believe that these guarantees would not be “trampled under foot” at some point in the near future. Still, it was “within the range of possibility in the providence of God” for such an outcome to take place. Palmer would “not shut out the alternative,” but also urged his fellow southerners to prepare for a peaceful separation from their northern counterparts. The “historic moment” in which they were situated would require them to speak “as with the voice of one man.” Otherwise, future generations would be left “denouncing the blindness and love of ease which hath left them an inheritance of woe.”

Palmer concluded his sermon by defending his digression into the realm of politics:

I have done my duty under as deep a sense of responsibility to God and man as I have ever felt. Under a full conviction that the salvation of the whole country is depending upon the action of the South, I am impelled to deepen the sentiment of resistance in the Southern mind, and to strengthen the current now flowing toward a union of the South in defence [sic] of her chartered rights.

It was a duty he hoped he would never have to repeat, as “bright and happy days” were ahead for the southern region. If the body of his sermon had not made it clear where his allegiances lay, Palmer left no room for uncertainty in his dramatic finale:

It only remains to say that, whatever be the fortunes of the South, I accept them for my own. Born upon her soil, of a father thus born before me – from an ancestry that occupied it while yet it was a part of England’s possessions – she is, in every sense, my

---

277 Ibid., 78. When speaking of this probable political division, BMP cited the biblical story of the separation between Abraham and Lot as a worthy example for both southerners and northerners to follow. He quoted from Genesis 13:8-9 (KJV): “Let there be no strife, I pray thee, between me and thee, and between my herdmen and thy herdmen, for we be brethren. Is not the whole land before thee? Separate thyself I pray thee, from me – if thou wilt take the left hand, then I will go to the right, or if thou depart to the right hand, then I will go to the left.”

278 Fast Day Sermons, 79-80. BMP also predicted that “within five and twenty hears, the history of St. Domingo will be the record of Louisiana” (Fast Day Sermons, 79). This was a reference to the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804), in which a slave revolt led to the abolition of slavery and the establishment of the independent Republic of Haiti. See Jeremy D. Popkin, You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

279 Fast Day Sermons, 80.

280 Ibid., 80. Another reason BMP believed this duty would not need to be repeated again by him was that, if “another political earthquake” were to unsettle the region, he hoped to be “where the wicked cease from troubling and where the weary are at rest” (Job 3:17 (KJV)). The two instances of “where” in the previous quote were changed from the original “there” in the scriptural text.
mother. I shall die upon her bosom; she shall know no peril but it is my peril — no conflict but it is my conflict — and no abyss of ruin into which I shall not share her fall. May the Lord God cover her head in this her day of battle!281

On the day he delivered the fast day sermon, Palmer received two letters: one from members of his congregation and the other signed “your fellow citizens and friends.” Both requested copies of his discourse for immediate publication and circulation. He responded that same day with the following reply:

That two communications should be received from different sources, requesting my discourse of this day for publication, is sufficient proof that I have spoken to the heart of this community. The sermon is herewith placed at your disposal, with the earnest desire that it may contribute something toward rallying our whole people to the issue that is upon us.282

Within days, a “handsome pamphlet edition” was printed and distributed throughout the country.283 The morning after Palmer delivered his fast day sermon, the New Orleans Daily Delta informed readers that copies of the discourse, which the editors referred to as “the ablest ever delivered by its accomplished author” and expressive of “the profound and universal sentiments of the community,” were available in their publishing offices and would be published in full the following day.284 Sunday’s edition of that same newspaper republished the fast day sermon, referring to it as a “cogent, exhaustive, logical and impressive production”; Tuesday’s edition printed the discourse for a third time, saying it did so “in accordance with the urgent request of a large number of our friends, and to supply a demand which seems yet far from

281 Fast Day Sermons, 80.
282 Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 222-223.
283 Johnson, Life and Letters of BMP, 223. The title of said pamphlet was The South: Her Peril, and her Duty. A Discourse, delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, November 29, 1860 (New Orleans: Office of True Witness and Sentinel, 1860). Other pamphlet editions include The Rights of the South, Defended in the Pulpits (Mobile, Al.: J. Y. Thompson Printing Company, 1860), Thanksgiving Sermon delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, Nov. 29th, 1860 (Milledgeville, Ga.: Boughton, Nisbet & Barnes, State Printers, 1860), Slavery and Divine Trust: The Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate the Institution as it Now Exists (New York: George F. Nesbitt & Co., 1861), and Thanksgiving Sermon, delivered at the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, on Thursday, December [November] 29, 1860 (New York: George F. Nesbitt, 1861). According to Bonner, Mastering America, xii: “Nearly 100,000 copies of the sermon would ultimately appear in pamphlet form.”
284 The Daily Delta (New Orleans, La.), November 30, 1860.
exhausted, although the supply from this office alone has exceeded thirty thousand copies.\textsuperscript{285}

The oration was also warmly received by the \textit{New Orleans Daily Crescent}, which praised Palmer and his sermon as “the most vigorous and striking” of the discourses delivered on the state fast day and printed the sermon in full on Monday, December 3.\textsuperscript{286} Abstracts, selected quotations, and the full text of the sermon were also widely reprinted in other local newspapers, as well as in regional papers; northern newspapers made reference to the oration, many of them condemning its call for secession.\textsuperscript{287} The sermon was also one of the two “fiery [southern] addresses” included in \textit{Fast Day Sermons} (1861), described by its editors as an “earnest and eloquent” appeal to southerners to preserve their rights.\textsuperscript{288}

Of all the sermons preached in southern churches during the winter crisis of 1860-61, Palmer’s fast day oration was, by far, “the most publicized” and “the most influential.”\textsuperscript{289} Its endorsement of secession had an almost immediate effect on the political course of the state of Louisiana.\textsuperscript{290} One eyewitness recalled: “After the benediction, in solemn silence, no man speaking to his neighbor, the great congregation of serious and thoughtful men and women

\textsuperscript{285} \textit{The Sunday Delta} (New Orleans, La.), December 2, 1860; \textit{Daily Delta}, December 4, 1860.

\textsuperscript{286} \textit{New Orleans Daily Crescent}, November 29 [sic], 1860.

\textsuperscript{287} See, for example, the \textit{Mobile Daily Advertiser} (Mobile, Ala.), December 2 and December 14, 1860; \textit{The Tri-Weekly Southern Guardian} (Columbia, S.C.), December 13, 1860; \textit{The Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier} (Charleston, S.C.), December 13, 1860; \textit{The Weekly Mississippian} (Jackson, Miss.), December 19, 1860; \textit{The Southern Field and Fireside} (Augusta, Ga.), December 29, 1860. The sermon was also printed, under different titles, in several journals. See, for example, “The Trust Providentially Committed to the South in Relation to the Institution of Slavery,” in \textit{The Southern Planter} 21 (February 1861): 115-119; and “Why We Resist and What We Resist: The Two Opposing Views of the Great Issue Between the North and the South,” \textit{De Bow’s Review} 30 [sic] (February 1861): 223-336. Northern coverage of BMP’s sermon was characterized by “outrage rather than enthusiasm … [regarding] his separatist ultimatum” (Bonner, \textit{Mastering America}, xiii-xiv). See, for example, \textit{The New York Times}, December 1, 1860; “Review of a Discourse Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, Nov. 29, 1860, by Rev. B. M. Palmer, D.D.,” \textit{Daily Atlas and Bee} (Boston, Mass.), January 12, 1861; and a review of the sermon published in \textit{The Princeton Review} 33:1 (January 1861): 167-171. For further details on the publication and distribution of BMP’s fast day sermon, see Eubank, “BMP,” 125-127; Eubank, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon,” 305-309; DesChamps, “BMP,” 16; and Johnson, \textit{Life and Letters of BMP}, 220-222.

\textsuperscript{288} \textit{Fast Day Sermons}, [vii].

\textsuperscript{289} DesChamps, “BMP,” 14, and Bonner, \textit{Mastering America}, xii.

\textsuperscript{290} Unlike other fast day sermons of the period, Palmer’s calls for Louisiana and other slave states to secede “preceded political action” (Chesebrough, “\textit{God Ordained This War}”, 146). See also Eubank, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon,” 309.
dispersed; but afterwards the drums beat and the bugles sounded; for New Orleans was shouting
for secession.”

The same eyewitness declared that the fast day sermon:

confirmed and strengthened those who were in doubt; it gave directness and energy to
public sentiment – so that perhaps no other public utterance during that trying period of
anxiety and hesitancy did so much to bring New Orleans city and the entire State of
Louisiana squarely and fully to the side of secession and the Confederacy.

As newspaper editors and religious leaders praised or denounced Palmer’s words,
political leaders quoted from the sermon in special state conventions called together by
governors throughout the southern region to discuss the viability of secession. A mere three
weeks after Palmer endorsed secession from his New Orleans pulpit, the state of South Carolina
withdrew from the federal government. The state of Louisiana would follow on January 26,
1861, becoming the sixth state to join the Confederate States of America.

The fast day sermon not only helped sway the state’s sentiments towards secession, but, in the words of H. Shelton
Smith, also “catapulted Palmer into South-wide fame overnight.” He became “the secessionist
orator of the day,” a widely-sought speaker tasked with calling on southerners to defend their
“divine trust” by separating themselves from the political union they once held dear.

---

291 From a manuscript written by eyewitness William O. Rogers on June 9, 1904, as quoted in Johnson, *Life and
Letters of BMP*, 220.
294 The vote to adopt the Ordinance of Secession was 113 to 17. See Bragg, *Louisiana in the Confederacy*, 32.
University Press, 1938), 19-20: BMP’s fast day sermon “unquestionably exerted a profound influence” on the state
of Louisiana’s decision to secede.
296 DesChamps, “BMP,” 14, and *Fast Day Sermons*, [57].
CHAPTER III
PATRIOTISM, PEACE, AND DUTY

As Robert Lewis Dabney made his way to the large, central pulpit of the College Presbyterian Church on Thursday, November 1, 1860, the assembled worshippers would have found it difficult to focus on anything else but that day’s speaker and his message. Dabney had designed the newly built church with just that objective in mind. White women and men had separate entrances into the building; black and enslaved attendants made their way to the balcony seating provided for them by means of outside staircases on either side of the porch. In the main auditorium, there were no stained-glass windows or ornate crosses to distract attention, no organ or choir music to preface or follow orations. The simple and classically designed sanctuary had as its sole focal point the pulpit, for worship in this south-central Virginia church consisted solely of listening to the voice of God, conveyed either through the reading of biblical texts or their explication by an ordained minister. The balcony and the two columns of pews facing the pulpit provided seating for up to 800 attendants to participate in this communal listening act. On that Thursday, those attendants would have consisted of local members of the Prince Edward County community of Hampden-Sydney, as well as the student bodies and faculty members of Hampden-Sydney College and Union Theological Seminary, the latter being the institution.

297 The church is referred to in various sources as both “College Church” and “College Presbyterian Church”; I have chosen to use the latter appellation.
where Dabney and his co-pastor, his brother-in-law Benjamin H. Smith, both worked as professors.\(^{298}\)

Many of the men and women who gathered at the College Presbyterian Church were preparing themselves for the upcoming fast day, whereupon all Presbyterian churches in Virginia were urged by their governing synod to abstain from food on November 4, the Sunday before the presidential election, and spend the day in prayer and humiliation before God. With secessionist fever raging in nearby South Carolina, the Synod of Virginia also asked its ministers to preach on the Christian’s duty to be a peacemaker in hopes that Virginia’s Presbyterians would be an example of moderation to their fellow southerners.\(^{299}\) The tall, somber, and bearded figure that spoke at College Presbyterian Church three days before the general synod-wide fast day more than complied with the Synod’s requests.\(^{300}\) Addressing not just his region but the “thirty-four thousand evangelical ministers, and four millions of Christian adults” in the nation, the forty-year old Dabney spoke the words, “Peace, be still” – words that had, at one time, calmed turbulent winds over a sea, words that Dabney hoped would bring calm to an increasingly tumultuous political and social environment in his state, region, and country.\(^{301}\)


\(^{299}\) See Johnson, Life and Letters of RLD, 212. I was unable to determine if, on Sunday, November 4, a) Dabney delivered the same fast day sermon as the one he had given on Thursday, November 1, b) Dabney delivered a different sermon, c) B. M. Smith, Dabney’s co-pastor, delivered a sermon, or d) someone else altogether delivered a sermon.

\(^{300}\) See In Memoriam: Robert Lewis Dabney (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1899), 15-16; Lucas, RLD, 13; and Johnson, Life and Letters of RLD, 30.

\(^{301}\) Fast Day Sermons, 86-87. The quotation “Peace, be still” is found in Mark 4:39 (KJV). They were the words spoken by Jesus to the winds that were causing the boat in which he and his disciples were traveling during his first
Robert Lewis Dabney was born on March 5, 1820, at his family’s 550-acre plantation, Walnut Grove, set on the banks of the South Anna River in Louisa County, Virginia. The sixth child of Charles Dabney, a moderately successful planter and miller who served as a justice of the peace in Louisa County’s court, and Elizabeth Randolph Price, who had kinship ties to the Randolph family of Virginia statesmen, Robert Lewis was born into a family who traced their arrival in the eastern Piedmont to the 1650s and thus commandeered a certain amount of local community respect as long-time land-holders and descendants of old Tidewater gentry and a number of Revolutionary War heroes. Privileged status, however, did not translate into an idle childhood for Dabney. Growing up on the family’s mill and tobacco farm, the young boy gained first-hand expertise in cultivation, plantation management, and construction, all skills that he would put to immediate use after his father’s death in 1833. Although Dabney was not the oldest son in the family, the then thirteen-year-old was the eldest male still residing in the family home and thus became head and master of the house at his father’s passing; the responsibility of running the plantation, supervising the family’s twenty to thirty slaves, paying of his father’s outstanding debts, and caring for his mother and two younger siblings fell to him.

After almost three years of looking after his family, Dabney made the difficult choice to leave Walnut Grove in the hands of his mother and younger brother in order to attend Prince
Edward County’s Hampden-Sydney College. Dabney’s years of study at the local field school in Louisa County, where he had received a rudimentary classical education that included instruction in Latin, Greek, mathematics, and astronomy, allowed him to enroll as a half-advanced sophomore in June 1836. Struggling with guilt for having momentarily relinquished his family duties and fully aware that the costs of his education were a financial hardship on his family, Dabney focused intently on his studies and on his extracurricular activities in one of the college’s literary and debating clubs. He also began corresponding regularly and copiously with family members and friends, finding in this frequent communication a measure of relief from the feelings of homesickness that plagued him after leaving his home for the first time. Fourteen months later, just as he was finally beginning to build relationships with fellow students, professors, and local members of the Hampden-Sydney community, pecuniary and property troubles called him back home to his responsibilities at Walnut Grove. Dabney left the college in September 1837, having successfully completed his junior course of study. Just as important for his future career, he experienced a religious conversion to the Protestant faith during a student-led spiritual revival on campus and joined Providence Presbyterian Church upon his return to Louisa County.

Having been apprised through his family’s letters of the deteriorating condition of the plantation’s mill and the further debts accrued by his mother, Dabney began implementing a number of plans to improve his family’s property and augment their income upon his arrival back home. His first tasks were to rebuild the run-down grist mill and plant crops of corn and

303 The officially non-sectarian school had served the educational needs of Virginia’s Presbyterians since its founding in 1776 and, although Dabney had yet to profess a Presbyterian faith, his father had served as a ruling elder at one of the oldest Presbyterian churches in the state (Providence Presbyterian Church). See Johnson, *History of the Southern Presbyterian Church*, 398-399; Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:81-82; and Thompson, *Spirituality of the Church*, 10.

wheat, all of which Dabney accomplished by working alongside the family’s slaves in both the stone quarry and the fields. Once the plantation was on a more stable footing, he chose to supplement the family’s income by teaching at neighborhood country schools, the first of which he helped to build in 1838. Teaching allowed him to oversee his sibling’s education, as well as set aside funds that would allow him to complete his college education. Two years after returning home, Dabney once again left his home in Louisa County to complete his education. This time his destination was Albermarle County’s University of Virginia, whose wide variety of courses and proximity to family who offered him room and board had a far greater appeal than returning to Hampden-Sydney College.

Dabney began his studies at the University of Virginia in December 1839, enrolling in math, physics, chemistry, and Latin. As before, he remained determined to excel in his studies, although he grew increasingly skeptical of many of the new ideas presented to him in the classroom, particularly to those articulated by the university’s foreign faculty. Exposure to new ideas, rather than broadening his educational horizons, served to instead make him far more critical of those who held opinions unlike his own and those who did not share his state and regional origins. He once again turned to debating societies, such as the university’s Jefferson Society, and writing as an outlet for his frustrations. Correspondence with family and friends and short, often sarcastic, pieces written for publication in the university’s newspaper and Charlottesville’s Jeffersonian Republican reveal Dabney have been a states’ rights Democrat who believed that the institution of slavery was often more of a burden than a blessing to a master. His own experiences in managing slaves at such a young age had instilled in him a belief that providence had established the separation of labor that helped ensure his own family’s economic success, but that the degree of power given to one person over another could often lead
to the abuse of slaves. Dabney also believed that the preservation of personal and familial honor required not the fighting of duels in response to a variety of affronts, but rather faithful adherence to the rules and laws set in place by the region’s traditional social order. In his own case, the needs and honor of his family called him back to Walnut Grove in July 1842, after receiving a Master of Arts degree and graduating in physics, chemistry, mathematics, Latin, philosophy, political economy, Greek, French, and Italian.

Dabney resumed the management of his family’s business affairs for the next two and a half years. He also opened a classical school in his home, allowing him to earn the money with which to pay for the seminary training required of ministers by the Presbyterian denomination. In November 1844, he returned to Prince Edward County, this time to enroll as a student of divinity at Union Theological Seminary, at that time located on the south end of the Hampden-Sydney College campus. The seminary’s three professors – all of whom were southerners – took as their main aim to instruct their students in the fundamental tenets of the Old School Presbyterian tradition: “the plenary and verbal inspiration of the Bible, the utter depravity of man, and the awesome omnipotence of God.” Their eighteen students also had the opportunity to craft and deliver sermons almost upon arrival. Dabney himself preached nearly every week, either at the seminary or at a nearby church, allowing him to practice his exposition

305 Union Theological Seminary (UTS), founded in 1812 by the Presbyterian Synods of Virginia and North Carolina as a regional training center for prospective ministers, began as the theological department of Hampden-Sydney College, becoming its own separate institution in 1824. Hoping to stay the South’s declining influence in the training of ministers, the theologically conservative Presbyterian school fell on rough times in the 1840s: the Old School-New School split in 1837-38 and the formation of a New School synod in Virginia resulted in the resignations of all but one of the seminary’s professors and the withdrawal of many of its financial supporters, while the move of Columbia Theological Seminary to South Carolina in 1830 and the continued prestige of New Jersey’s Princeton Theological Seminary all served to draw many Old School ministerial students native to Virginia and North Carolina away from UTS. See Herbert Clarence Bradshaw, History of Prince Edward County, Virginia: From Its Earliest Settlements Through its Establishment in 1754 to its Bicentennial Year (Richmond: The Dietz Press, 1955), 158-160, 249; Johnson, History of the Southern Presbyterian Church, 393-394; Overy, “RLD,” 34; Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, I:258, I:276-277; and Street, Story of Southern Presbyterians, 38-39. The institution relocated to the north side of Richmond in 1898 and changed its name to Union Presbyterian Seminary in 2009.

306 Overy, “RLD,” 34.
style in front of both supportive parishioners and critical classmates. His academic progress at Union was often slowed down by a number of health problems that had afflicted him over the years, including digestive disorders and weak eyesight. Dabney, however, took advantage of the times when he enjoyed better health and managed to complete the three-year divinity course in two years, graduating at the top of the class in June 1846 at the age of 26.

After receiving a license to preach, Dabney returned once again to Louisa County, this time as a missionary to several neighborhood churches, including his home congregation, Providence Presbyterian Church. Although the assignment allowed him to be near his mother at Walnut Grove, the extensive travel between congregations required by the position exacerbated his health problems. The reputation of his deceased father’s service to the parishioners of Providence church also overshadowed Dabney’s attempts to make his own name in the area. He seized an opportunity to move west to the upper Shenandoah Valley in July 1847, starting his first full-time pastorate at Augusta County’s Tinkling Spring Presbyterian Church. The demands on his time were numerous. During his six-year tenure, Dabney oversaw numerous church discipline cases, supervised a classical school at the church, participated in denominational activities, helped lead a spiritual revival, and undertook the design and construction of a new church building. He also married Lavinia Morrison, a clergyman’s daughter, in 1848, and welcomed their first two sons in 1849 and 1850. Aside from his duties as a professional minister, Dabney also purchased a series of farms and successfully worked the fields alongside his slaves and hired black help.307

His primary task at Tinkling Spring was, of course, to preach on a regular basis. At this early point in his career, Dabney often wrote out his sermons in full and read from a manuscript.

307 After the Emancipation Proclamation came into effect on January 1, 1863, Dabney lost thirty-three slaves. Twenty-seven of them belonged to his mother and six of them were his. See Lucas, RLD, 31.
or detailed notes from the pulpit. The recitative nature of his orations did not lessen their intensity, for Dabney soon became known as a powerful and zealous preacher. The central aim of most of his sermons was to illustrate how belief in Jesus Christ was the only solution available to a sinning people who had transgressed against God and the society He set in place for them. While he sometimes broached topics other than salvation from the pulpit, issues of public policy were never deemed adequate topics for his homilies. For Dabney, the church setting was a sacred space in which only discussions of a spiritual nature were appropriate. He restricted his personal views on political issues such as slavery to the columns of both religious and secular newspapers in the Richmond area. In his published justifications of the institution, Dabney made it clear that he continued to regard the ownership of African-American slaves as morally righteous while conceding that the power relations created by such an institution were curiously susceptible to racial exploitation. Despite the criticisms that could be leveled at the practice and the burdens it created on masters, Dabney never considered emancipation as an aim but rather called on masters to become beneficent overseers of their labor. He also encouraged southerners to display a united front when defending the practice before the ever-growing group of abolitionists who Dabney faulted for the growing sectional tensions in the nation.

While calling on southerners to remain unified in their stand on slavery, Dabney also made repeated calls for them to support their region’s educational institutions rather than see students head north to complete their studies, placing generation after generation in danger of

308 As a subscriber to the Presbyterian doctrine of the spirituality of the church, RLD believed that ministers should only proclaim the gospel and steer clear from speaking about politics and other issues that were under the purview of the state. Scholars have not reached a consensus about whether this stance on speaking on public issues was a convenient posture for southerners who didn’t wish to confront the immorality of slavery or whether it was a stance that was truly held. Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, 154: “In fact the Southern churches never truly abstained from social comment; their self-described isolation was merely a protective gesture during the slavery controversy.” Lucas, *RLD*, 93, disagrees with Holifield.

309 See, for example, Dabney’s series of articles published by the *Richmond Enquirer* in the spring of 1851. He also published a number of pieces on the subject in Richmond’s *Watchman and Observer* in the early 1850s.
exposure to heretical ideas and threatening future regional unity. As someone who had been fully educated in Virginia, he believed in “the superiority of Southern education for Southern people,” feeling that only these institutions could respond adequately to local needs. More specifically, he called on the Presbyterians of Virginia to come to the aid of his alma mater, Union Theological Seminary, which he praised for her commitment to simple and orthodox theological education and dedication to training ministers for local congregations. Princeton Theological Seminary in New Jersey had long been regarded as the unofficial “national” seminary for Presbyterians; Dabney and many of his southern minister counterparts had long feared that it held an unhealthy monopoly on the training of the denomination’s ministers and hoped that encouraging “home” education would put a check on Princeton’s appeal. Dabney’s concern for Union Theological Seminary’s welfare – and his growing reputation in and service to the denomination – did not go unnoticed. After a failed attempt to lure Kentucky’s Robert J. Breckinridge to fill the position of Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Polity, Union Theological Seminary’s Board of Electors offered the appointment to Dabney in May 1853. That summer, after the congregation at Tinkling Spring released him from service and he had received a Doctor of Divinity degree from Hampden-Sydney College, Dabney left the Valley to return to Prince Edward County, this time not as a student but as a professor.

Upon arriving at Hampden-Sydney, Dabney took on a variety of duties, both within and without the institution, aside from his teaching responsibilities at Union Theological Seminary. He took charge of the seminary’s library and the maintenance of the campus, as well as teaching a variety of courses at neighboring Hampden-Sydney College when required by faculty vacancies and serving as a teaching assistant to Union’s aging professor of didactic and polemic

[^311]: See, for example, RLD’s July 1852 article in the *Watchman and Observer*, titled “The State and Claims of Union Theological Seminary.”
theology. He also traveled extensively throughout Virginia and North Carolina in hopes of recruiting new students and faculty members from the supporting synods and raising much-needed funds for the seminary. Three years into his tenure, financial pledges and student enrollment were on the rise, the divinity curriculum had been greatly expanded, new property had been purchased, and four professors were now in place, including Dabney’s brother-in-law Benjamin M. Smith as professor of Oriental Literature. Although overtaking Princeton was not a realistic goal, Dabney hoped that his efforts and rising reputation at Union would draw southern students to the seminary that might have thought of heading to South Carolina’s Columbia Theological Seminary or to Kentucky’s Danville Theological Seminary. As Dabney’s star rose, he was promoted to more prestigious posts within the Virginian institution. In 1857, he began teaching the capstone course of the divinity curriculum, Mental and Moral Philosophy, to Union’s senior classes. And in the spring of 1859, he became the Adjunct Professor of Systematic and Polemic Theology and Sacred Rhetoric, a post considered to be the most prestigious and important at Union and a position that established Dabney not only as the most prominent member of the faculty but one who was becoming increasingly indispensable to the survival of the institution.

Dabney’s growing prominence in the Presbyterian denomination rested, in part, on his role in the formation of a number of religious periodicals, as well as the publication of several articles and books. In 1855, he helped oversee the formation and publication of *The Presbyterian Critic and Monthly Review*; the following year, he helped direct the creation of *The

---

312 By the time RLD delivered his fast day sermon, student enrollment had increased from eleven students in the 1852-53 academic year to thirty-nine in 1860-61. See Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, I:502-503.

313 Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, I:502: RLD “contributed more than anyone else to the renaissance of the institution [UTS] in the decade preceding the Civil War.” Holifield, *Gentlemen Theologians*, 87: RLD “made his professorship one of the most influential positions in Southern Presbyterianism, and he became known as a champion of unyielding conservatism, both as a churchman and as a social thinker.”
Central Presbyterian from the sale of Richmond’s Watchman and Observer. Both publications were concerned with the life of the Presbyterian Church in the southern states, the former critiquing errors within the church and the latter opposing variations in traditional Presbyterian doctrine. Also in 1855, he published a memoir on a former Union Theological Seminary professor. A year later, he edited that same professor’s Critical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. During the 1850s, Dabney contributed pieces to The Central Presbyterian, The Presbyterial Critic and Monthly Review, and the Southern Presbyterian Review. Many of the articles centered on the slavery issue, wherein he appealed to southerners to avail themselves of the arguments for slavery found in a correct interpretation of the Bible, particularly when defending the morality of the institution before northern abolitionists. Dabney was beginning to defend the institution more whole-heartedly, without mentioning its drawbacks or abuses, since this tactic seemed to him “far less erroneous than the abolitionism” increasingly championed in the northern states.

In addition to his many duties at Union Theological Seminary, his service to the Presbyterian denomination, and the time spent performing research and writing for a variety of publications, Dabney also continued to preach. He began his ministerial duties at the New Store Church in Buckingham County, then served the Village Church and Briery Church in Charlotte County, and finally, in 1858, he and his brother-in-law, the Rev. Dr. B. M. Smith took charge of

---

315 Clement Eaton, The Freedom-of-Thought Struggle in the Old South (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1964), 312: RLD “pointed out that the defense of slavery which would reach the common man was not philosophic argument, but the actual words of the Bible. The resting of the Southern case upon the literal interpretation of the Bible, he maintained, would drive the abolitionists to admit their infidelity.”
316 Young, “Psychology of the South,” 51. Historian Clement Eaton argued that RLD’s shifting views on slavery illustrated “how youthful radicals on the slavery question were conquered by the prevailing level of thought” in the southern region (Freedom-of-Thought Struggle, 296). While a student at Hampden-Sydney, RLD had acknowledged the abuse that the institution of slavery made possible. Later on in life, particularly after becoming a professor at Union Theological Seminary, he defended the institution unreservedly.
the College Presbyterian Church in Hampden-Sydney. In his preaching as in his teaching, Dabney emphasized the authority of the Bible over the life of a Christian and the doctrine of providence that had set all things in place, including the hierarchical structure of southern society and the Presbyterian denomination. By this point in his career, he had established himself as a conservative in the Southern tradition, one who supported class, gender, and racial distinctions, held the land and its agriculture in high esteem, and believed in limited self-government. In 1860, two separate job offers presented Dabney with an opportunity to move north of the Mason-Dixon line and potentially increase his reputation in the denomination. The first was from Princeton Theological Seminary, who offered him the chair of Ecclesiastical and Biblical History; the second was from the Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York City, who invited him to become their pastor. He declined both proposals. If his goal of “providing Southern ministers for Southern churches was going to be a reality, then he needed to stay at Union Seminary.” The offers, however, served to confirm that his reputation in the pulpit, with a pen, and in the classroom had spread beyond the confines of his state. His favorable reception with some northern audiences, along with prominence in his own region, would allow Dabney to act as a southern representative to Northern conservatives in the winter of 1860-61.

VIRGINIA IN 1860

By 1860, the state of Virginia had established itself as one of the most prestigious in the nation and in the southern region. Its storied past included the distinction of being home to Jamestown, the first permanent English settlement in North America, as well as providing the

---

317 See Lucas, RLD, 24.
318 By 1860, RLD had only traveled north (to New York City) twice on matters of Presbyterian business. His third trip would occur in 1880, for the purpose of sailing to Europe. See Lucas, RLD, 24.
319 Lucas, RLD, 97. Another reason for RLD’s desire to stay in Hampden-Sydney stemmed from the tragic deaths of his first two sons just months after his third son was born in 1855. The two boys were subsequently buried in the UTS graveyard. RLD’s wife would give birth to three more boys, one in 1857, another in 1859, and the last in 1865.
320 See Lucas, RLD, 105.
nation with four of its first five presidents. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, James Monroe and many other Virginians played crucial roles in the revolutionary and early national periods of American history, securing for their state a dominant position in national and regional politics. Despite experiencing a slight decline in its economic fortunes due to the ebb and flow of agricultural production and the lessening importance of slavery to the state’s economy, Virginia remained “the most populous state in the South, with more whites and slaves in 1860 than any other southern state.”

Proportionally fewer of those whites, however, were slave owners. Perhaps this fact, along with “the lingering liberal influence of Thomas Jefferson,” help explain the presence of antislavery feeling in the state, as well as its support for the colonization of former slaves. This lack of consensus over the issue of slavery, as well as the state’s celebrated role in the nation’s history, combined to make Virginians less susceptible to the secessionist fever that seemed to have overtaken the state of South Carolina during the winter of 1860-61. As talk of disunion increased, the citizens of the state that had done so much to bring the American nation into being were reluctant to bring about its division and even destruction over an issue on which they held certain reservations and qualms.

Anti-secessionist sentiment was strongest in the western part of the state, where geographic proximity to and economic relations with northern states increased Virginian sympathy for remaining within the Union rather than following the hasty and as-yet uncertain path of certain southern states towards separation. Debates between pro-Union and anti-Union factions of the Democratic Party also kept the state from heeding calls from fire-eaters to

---

322 See Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, [130].
323 Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 28.
324 See Tatum, Disloyalty in the Confederacy, 5.
withdraw from the United States. According to David Overy, Virginians instead “wavered between loyalty to Southern institutions and the threat of Republican domination on the one hand and fear of civil war and devotion to the Union on the other.” As they did not relish the prospect of, in the words of historian W. Todd Groce, “being caught in a cross-fire in the event of [civil] war,” the majority of Virginians instead chose to act as moderate mediators and back “new constitutional guarantees of supposedly endangered southern rights, coupled with a hands-off policy by the federal government toward the seceding states.” They also “advocated a policy of watchful waiting,” in which they prepared themselves to act if an action coming from the northern states “promised less endurable consequences than secession.” Dabney, as a representative Virginian, shared his native state’s concerns; as a Presbyterian minister, he sought to do all within his power to bring about a peaceful resolution to that year’s tumult.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF DABNEY’S FAST DAY SERMON

In October 1860, the Synod of Virginia met in Lynchburg and elected Dabney as the session’s moderator. One of the orders of business was the designation of a general synod-wide fast day to take place on November 4, 1860, the Sabbath (Sunday) before the federal election. Dabney, who had long felt the need to observe a day of fasting, prayer, and humiliation, was instrumental in bringing about this appointment. Ministers were instructed by the Synod to “preach sermons … on the duty of Christians as peacemakers” and pray for an “escape from national convulsions.” Pursuant to these directives, Dabney prepared a discourse, titled “The

---

325 See Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, [130].
326 Overy, “RLD,” 100.
328 Overy, “RLD,” 82.
329 Daniel, Southern Protestantism, 2, and Robert L. Dabney, Discussions, ed. C. R. Vaughan (Richmond: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1890-92?), II:401, note 1. The minutes of this meeting of the Synod of Virginia were unavailable for perusal. Information on what transpired there and what the synodical directives were comes from Johnson, Life and Letters of RLD, 212. According to The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Containing the ... Directory of Worship (1839), 517-518: “Fasts … may be observed … by the congregations under
Christian’s Best Motive For Patriotism,” in which he called on members of the College Presbyterian Church to work towards saving the nation and the larger church from experiencing the calamitous effects of civil war. If Christians failed to prevent present circumstances from escalating into full-blown conflict, he explained, they would hinder the progress of the gospel and be harshly judged by God for their indifference. He described three different duties that, if practiced by the Christian patriot, would bring about an end to the winter of crisis they were currently experiencing. The first was for Christians to pray for peace and confess their sins, the second was for them to vote and use their influence wisely, and the third was for them to seek to do everything in their power to be calm and patient with those who threatened and castigated them.

Citing examples from history and a number of scriptural texts, Dabney critiqued the southern leaders who were attempting to “misrepresent, misdirect and inflame” the public’s sentiments and urged his listeners to display moderateness in their language and actions.\footnote{Fast Day Sermons, 93.} Perhaps in an attempt to practice the moderation that he was preaching – or perhaps stemming from his long-held commitment to not speak about public issues from the pulpit – Dabney’s sermon text avoided words like secession, union, slaves, and slavery, as well as any suggestions concerning how Virginians should vote in the upcoming election. Strictly adhering to the fast day sermon genre, he placed his emphasis on the “collective self-examination and reformation” of those who gathered at the College Presbyterian Church just three days before their synod had called on them to fast and pray.\footnote{Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 160.} Dabney, reading aloud from a fully written sermon
manuscript on that Thursday, hoped to appeal to all of them to seek the peace of their country and church in prayer, thought, and action.\textsuperscript{332}

Dabney began his fast day sermon by stating its main scriptural text, Psalm 122:9: “Because of the house of the Lord our God, I will seek thy good.” In that particular sacred poem, King David stated his resolution to work for peace in Jerusalem in order to safeguard its temple, i.e., the “house of the Lord our God.” Dabney used this biblical passage to define Christian patriotism as a devotion to peace, prompted by a love for country and an even deeper desire to seek the wellbeing of fellow Christians and the larger church; this was a “stronger and holier” motive for patriotism than that available to non-believers. The peace of the “spiritual commonwealth,” Dabney explained, could be put into serious jeopardy by events in the secular republic. Although the kingdom of God and the civil state occupied different realms, what occurred in the political sphere could potentially affect what happened in the sacred sphere. And no political event, according to Dabney, could prove to be more disastrous to the success of the gospel and “the interest of Zion” than armed conflict.\textsuperscript{333}

Dabney went on to describe the deleterious effects that even the slightest political agitations, such as those experienced during an election season, had on a nation’s spiritual life: “The mind is absorbed by agitating secular topics, angry and unchristian emotions are provoked, and the tender dew of heavenly-mindedness is speedily evaporated by the hot and dusty turmoil of the popular meeting and the hustings.” How much more would these feelings intensify, asked Dabney, if the unrest took on “a violent and convulsive aspect” and even turned into an “actual war”? The upheaval would be great indeed, affecting not just the liturgical and sacramental life

\textsuperscript{332} See Johnson, \textit{Life and Letters of RLD}, 114. The contents of RLD’s fast day sermon are mentioned briefly in several books, including Johnson, \textit{Life and Letters of RLD}, 213-214; Lucas, \textit{RLD}, 99-101; and Overy, “RLD,” 94-95. See also Chesebrough, “\textit{God Ordained This War}”, 309-310; Daniel, \textit{Southern Protestantism}, 2; Rable, \textit{God’s Almost Chosen Peoples}, 38; Snay, \textit{Gospel of Disunion}, 201; and Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, I:562.

\textsuperscript{333} \textit{Fast Day Sermons}, [81]-82.
of the church, but causing disruptions in the domestic sphere, a demoralization of the young, and havoc in education and commerce. Even more alarming was the high incidence of death brought about by this kind of martial turmoil, not just physically on the battlefield but spiritually as a result of the ensuing rampant growth of immorality. Dabney declared that civil conflicts were “known as the most bitter of all,” since previous bonds of familiarity made subsequent conflict all the more acrimonious and hurtful. And there were no two lands more intimately connected than the northern and southern regions of the United States, “parted by a line so long, so faint, so invisible, that it does not separate.” In the past, the two regions had combined their strengths to conquer “common enemies” like “the British Lion,” which made the prospect of a fratricidal war between them all the more reason for weeping “tears of blood.”

If division between the regions did in fact occur, Dabney predicted an ensuing decline in population, economic, and agricultural growth. He also lamented the nation’s lost opportunity to demonstrate that it could survive “untainted by the steps of civilized despots, or organized crime,” “work out the great experiment of equal laws and a free conscience, for the first time, for the imitation of the world,” and nurture a “free Church” with a world-wide missionary reach. This desired-for national repute would be utterly destroyed by the coming of a civil war: constitutional rights would be infringed, critics of self-government would rejoice at the failure of the American experiment, and the salvation of the world would be delayed.

Dabney then posed the following rhetorical question: “Christians of America – Brothers – Shall all this be?” Would the “thirty-four thousand evangelical ministers, and four millions of Christian adults” that constituted the national Church passively allow such a frightening vision to become reality? Even more troubling, would they actively assist in “inflaming the animosities

334 Ibid., 82-84.
335 Ibid., 85-86.
which they should have allayed” and thus join the devil in his disruptive work.\textsuperscript{336} The judgment of future generations towards this indifference would be harsh indeed:

Why, they will say, was there not enough of the majesty of moral weight in these four millions of Christians, to say to the angry waves, “Peace: be still?” Why did not these four millions rise, with a LOVE so Christ-like, so beautiful, so strong, that strife should be paralyzed by it into reverential admiration? Why did they not speak for their country, and for the House of the Lord their God which was in it, with a wisdom before whose firm moderation, righteousness, and clear light, passion and folly should scatter like the mist? Were not all these strong enough to throw the arms of their loving mediation around their fellow citizens, and keep down the weapons that sought each other’s hearts; or rather to receive them into their own bosoms than permit our mother-country to be slain? Did this mighty Church stand idly by, and see phrensy [sic] immolate so many of the dearest hopes of man, and of the rights of the Redeemer, on her hellish altar? \textsuperscript{337}

Dabney followed these questions by reiterating his previous point that Christians had a stronger motive for allaying any and all circumstances that could potentially lead to civil conflict, and that was for the sake of the life of the Church. If Christians in the country were not able to keep conflict from overwhelming the nation, then the Church was altogether ineffective and no better than the “effete” Roman Catholic religion that had allowed the Crusades and Inquisition.\textsuperscript{338} To conclude the first part of his sermon, Dabney dramatically foreshadowed what the extent of the Church’s culpability would be if it failed to seek and keep the peace of the country:

In the sight of Heaven’s righteous Judge, I believe that if the Christianity of America now betrays the interest of man and God to the criminal hands which threaten them, its guilt will be second only to that of the apostate Church which betrayed the Saviour [sic] of the world; and its judgment will be rendered in calamities second only to those which avenged the Divine blood invoked by Jerusalem on herself and her children.\textsuperscript{339}

\textsuperscript{336} Ibid., 86-87. RLD made earlier reference to the role played by the devil in military conflicts. \textit{Fast Day Sermons}, 83: “War is the grand and favorite device of him who was a liar and murderer from the beginning, to obstruct all spiritual good, and to barbarize mankind.”

\textsuperscript{337} Ibid., 87. The quotation within the blocked quote is from Mark 4:39 (KJV).

\textsuperscript{338} \textit{Fast Day Sermons}, 87.

\textsuperscript{339} Ibid., 88.
This emotional denunciation was immediately followed by what Dabney termed “the more practical part” of his discourse, introduced by a question that many of his audience were probably posing to themselves: “How, then, shall Christians seek the good of their country, for the Church’s sake?” Dabney proceeded to describe three different duties that his auditors could – and should – practice in order to maintain peace during perilous times like theirs. The first duty was to pray for the country, not just individually but together with one’s faith community. Churches should gather together, as the College Presbyterian Church was doing on that Thursday, and “humble themselves before a holy God,” in full knowledge that they had offended the Lord by sinning on an individual and national level. He re-stated the main scriptural text of his sermon, Psalm 122:9, and also quoted from Joel 2:15-17, one of the more well known passages concerning corporate fasts in the Hebrew Bible, to demonstrate the biblical precedent and mandate for such an action as theirs on the upcoming Sunday. With regard to the confession of sins, Dabney made clear that he was not going to point to the “sins of fellow-citizens of another quarter of the Confederacy, from whose faults some may suppose the present fear arises” – a not-so-veiled critique of the secession fever displayed by South Carolinians, who less than a month earlier had elected an aggressively pro-secession state assembly. Confessing the sins of fellow Christians would serve no useful purpose, since it was “for our own sins alone that we are responsible to God … [and] that we have the means of reforming, by the help of His grace.”

340 Ibid., 88. Italics in the original.
341 Ibid., 88. Joel 2:15-17 (KJV): “Blow the trumpet in Zion, sanctify a fast, call a solemn assembly: Gather the people, sanctify the congregation, assemble the elders, gather the children, and those that suck the breasts; let the bridegroom go forth of his chamber, and the bride out of her closet. Let the priests, the ministers of the Lord, weep between the porch and the altar; and let them say, Spare thy people, O Lord, and give not thy heritage to reproach.”
342 Fast Day Sermons, 88. The South Carolina election in question took place on October 8, 1860. See Channing, Crisis of Fear, 245.
That being the case, Dabney proceeded to name three different types of sins that Christians should bear in mind when prayerfully confessing. The first were personal sins that had caused a “black cloud of guilt” to form between the individual in question and God. The second were social sins, of which he gave three examples: materialism, waste, and sacrilegious language. The third was described by Dabney as “that peculiar sin” of the Southern region, which for him was not a reference to the “peculiar” institution of slavery, but rather to the “pretended ‘code of honor’” that allowed individuals to exhibit unjustifiably violent reactions to personal slights without fear of future prosecution. He concluded this section by reminding his congregants that, even though they may be found on the side of the righteous regarding “the particular point of present differences and anticipated collisions,” God might still choose to punish them for other sins by means of these potentially calamitous events. God’s providential plan might permit “an unjust aggressor to make himself the instrument, wherewith to lash His sinning people, even when he afterwards punished the invader himself.” The references to “an unjust aggressor” and “invader” are the only indication in the body of the sermon text indicating Dabney’s expectations that the northern states would ultimately provoke an inter-regional confrontation and attack the southern region.

The second duty for a Christian to carry out, for the sake of both the country and the Church, was to ask of himself the following: “what would God have you to do?” Regardless of whether the individual in question was a legislator, a magistrate, a newspaper editor, or simply a private citizen, the ethical teachings of Jesus Christ should have an effect on how he performed his political responsibilities – specifically, for whom he chose to vote for during political

343 Fast Day Sermons, 89-90. In this section, RLD quoted from Numbers 35:33 (KJV): “So ye have polluted the land wherein ye are; for blood, it defileth the land, and the land cannot be cleansed of the blood that is shed therein, but by the blood of him that shed it.”
344 Fast Day Sermons, 90.
345 Ibid., 90. Italics in the original.
elections. Rather than basing the choice on allegiance to a certain political party or the directives of an influential leader, Dabney said that Christians should instead carefully evaluate candidates and vote for those that upheld “the cause of peace” and displayed “principles of righteousness, peace and love.” Sadly, the following scenario was altogether too frequent: “how often have we gone on Monday to the hustings, after having appeared on Sabbath as the servants of the Prince of Peace, and brethren of all his servants, and in our political heats speedily forgotten that we were Christians?” While Dabney was not critical of Christians who aligned themselves with a particular party, he called on believers to place their allegiance to the kingdom of Christ before loyalty to a political faction, which could sometimes result in refusing to vote for the party’s nominee if that candidate was corrupt. If Christians seriously undertook this “prominent duty” and agreed to carry their “citizenship in the kingdom of Heaven everywhere, and make it dominate over every public act,” political parties would have no choice but to nominate men of virtue, respectability, and honesty for public office.

Dabney followed this discussion of how Christians should use their votes and political influence with a critique of yet another kind of public leader – the newspaper editor – and those who allowed these influential posts to be filled by incompetent men:

Some [newspaper editors] are honorable and patriotic; but more are unreliable; some mere half-educated youths, without any stake of family, estate, or reputation in the community; some fiery denouncers, some touching the springs of public affairs with a drunken hand, and many the open advocates and practitioners of the duellist’s [sic] murderous code – these men you have permitted and even upheld and salaried, in your

346 Ibid., 91.
347 RLD was himself a Democrat who would go on to vote for John C. Breckinridge five days later in the 1860 presidential election. See his letter to Moses D. Hoge, dated January 4, 1861, as quoted in Johnson, Life and Letters of RLD, 221. The majority of votes in Prince Edward County went to Dabney’s candidate: Breckinridge received 432 votes, Bell received 374, Douglas received 65, and Lincoln received none. Virginia’s fifteen electoral votes, however, went to Bell. See Richmond Enquirer, November 16, 1860, and Bradshaw, History of Prince Edward County, 377.
348 Fast Day Sermons, 92. RLD cited Exodus 18:21 (KJV) in this section [italics in the sermon text]: “choose out of all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness, and place such over them to be rulers.”
easy thoughtlessness, to misrepresent, misdirect and inflame the public sentiment of the nation!\textsuperscript{349}

When incompetent men were at the helm of these publications, particularly “at such a period as this,” they were apt to use inflammatory and deceptive language to incite others to reckless action, often in order to further their own political ends. For those of his listeners who thought that unprincipled politicians and journalists would never stoop to such dishonesty, Dabney cited the example of the yearlong reign of terror during the French Revolution, which he blamed on the “unscrupulous leaders” of the Girondins and the Jacobins who “resorted to the trick of imputing odious and malignant motives to all adversaries.”\textsuperscript{350} The “reckless and incapable” men of the press, using those same tricks, were on the brink of causing that same havoc in the southern region:

They have bandied violent words, those cheap weapons of petulant feebleness; they have justified aggression [sic]; they have misrepresented our tempers and principles – answered, alas, by equal misrepresentations and violence in other quarters – until multitudes of honest men, who sincerely suppose themselves as patriotic as you think yourselves, are really persuaded that in resisting your claims, they are but rearing a necessary bulwark against lawless and arrogant aggressions [sic].\textsuperscript{351}

Yet another example from history cited by Dabney to illustrate the unruliness of the southern press was the 1856 caning of Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts by Representative Preston Brooks of South Carolina. During a speech denouncing the Kansas-Nebraska Act, Sumner had criticized and ridiculed Brooks’ cousin, Senator Andrew Butler of South Carolina, who was one of the authors of the bill. Days later, Brooks walked into the Senate chamber and proceeded to strike Sumner numerous times with a cane, an attack from

\textsuperscript{349} Fast Day Sermons, 92-93. 
\textsuperscript{350} Ibid., 93-94. RLD referenced “the narrative” of Adolphe Thiers as his source of information concerning the reign of terror, possibly referring to the French statesman’s twenty-one volume Histoire du consulat et de l’empire (1845-74). JHT quoted from this same work in his fast day sermon. See Fast Day Sermons, 16. 
\textsuperscript{351} Fast Day Sermons, 94. RLD believed that secession was a political move that only South Carolinians and other fire-eaters desired and not, in fact, what the majority of southerners wished for.
which the senator never fully recovered. While characterizing Sumner’s public disparagement of Butler as an “unjust and wicked insolence,” he reserved his greatest censure for the members of the southern secular press who had justified Brooks’ violent and “ill-judged” action and thus inflamed the passions of northern men who “might have remained calm and just” towards their southern counterparts. On the basis of those two examples, Dabney concluded that it seemed that only the spilling of blood would cause people to “pause and consider” that they had brought about their own desolation purely on the basis of a press-created misunderstanding of the other.

Dabney, however, still held hope that this historic scenario would not be repeated – at least not to its full extent – in the South. And he believed that those who had listened to him thus far agreed with his thoughts on the subject, stating, “I know that I have but expressed the common sentiments of all good men among us.” However, he chastised the congregants of College Presbyterian Church for allowing their influence and income to indirectly support “these agents of mischief and misrule, who thus misrepresent your characters, and aims, and rights.” If the good of the public was not enough to sway them from their indifference towards these matters, Dabney reminded his congregants that they and their children would be the ones to suffer if the present war of words turned into a “fatal collision.” To conclude this section on a Christian’s second duty, Dabney implored: “For God’s sake, then – for your own sakes, for your children’s sake, arise – declare that from this day, no money, no vote, no influence of yours, shall

---

352 See William James Hull Hoffer, *The Caning of Charles Sumner: Honor, Idealism, and the Origins of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010). The code of honor that RLD references explicitly (*Fast Day Sermons*, 89) and implicitly (*Fast Day Sermons*, 95) in this sermon was one that “depended on others’ opinions and often required violence in order to be maintained” (Lucas, *RLD*, 101). RLD’s idea of true honor involved adhering to the rule of law and displaying a pious and sacrificial faith. See Lucas, *RLD*, 24, 32, 34, and 103.

353 *Fast Day Sermons*, 94-95. See *Richmond Enquirer*, June 9 and 12, 1856, and *Richmond Examiner*, May 30, 1856, for Virginian examples of what RLD described as “the insane, wicked, and insulting justification” carried out by the southern press in regards to the caning of Charles Sumner (*Fast Day Sermons*, 95).
go to the maintenance of any other counsels than those of moderation, righteousness, and manly forbearance.”

The third duty of a Christian who sought the peace of his country and Church was to “study the things which make for peace.” This duty received the shortest treatment of the three, but it also served to conclude the sermon and reiterate the argument Dabney had been making throughout, making its length inversely related to its significance to the aim of the sermon itself. He called on all who listened to do all in their power to have no conflict with their fellow Christians, using gentle language when insisting that their constitutional rights be respected and displaying self-control if threatened or admonished by others. Rather than identifying the faults of those who disagreed with them, the congregants of College Presbyterian Church should instead acknowledge their own errors and attempt to make reparations for them, even if those who erred against them did not reciprocate this action. If there did come a time when remonstration was warranted, then let it be done “in the tone of wounded love” rather than in a menacing pitch. Dabney concluded his fast day sermon with a final request and a biblical promise: “In one word; let each one resolve to grant all that is right, and ask nothing else; “and lo, there will be a great calm.”

After the sermon, the white male component of the College Presbyterian Church audience made a unanimous request of Dabney to print his oration. It therefore can be assumed that Dabney’s thoughts on patriotism, peace, and duty were, in fact, “fairly representative” of the opinions of this congregational constituency. The sermon was fully printed in local and

354 Fast Day Sermons, 95-96.
355 Johnson, Life and Letters of RLD, 114: “weight of conclusion was characteristic of all his preaching.”
356 Fast Day Sermons, 96-97. The quotation “and lo, there will be a great calm” is a reference to Mark 4:39 and/or Matthew 8:26. After Jesus spoke the words “Peace, be still” (Mark 4:39), thus rebuking the winds that had threatened His boat (Matthew 8:26), the winds ceased to blow and there was a great calm over the water. See footnote 5 of this chapter.
357 Dabney, Discussions, II:401, note 1.
national religious and secular newspapers and as a pamphlet, circulating throughout the nation.\textsuperscript{358} And, of course, the sermon was printed in \textit{Fast Day Sermons} (1861), placed out of chronological sequence to follow the “fiery addresses” of both Thornwell and Palmer.\textsuperscript{359} One important point to keep in mind with regards to Dabney’s printed discourse in \textit{Fast Day Sermons} (1861) was that it, unlike the other three southern sermons or any of the northern sermons in the book, was followed by a postscript. The curious addendum read as follows:

[The reader of this sermon will notice that its date, before the late Presidential election, accounts in part for its topics and also for its omissions. He is also requested to bear in mind that the professed attitude of the people to whom it was preached, – that of penitents before the Most High, rendered allusions to their own sins alone appropriate at that time; and hence the sermon contains no implication that they are the only, or the chief offenders, in those particulars. – R. L. D.]\textsuperscript{360}

By the time of the sermon’s publication in \textit{Fast Day Sermons} (1861), the national political landscape had changed dramatically: the presidential election had resulted in a victory for the Republican candidate, the state of South Carolina had considered the voting outcome as sufficient casus belli and had seceded from the Union, and several other southern states were preparing to follow its lead.\textsuperscript{361} Dabney’s discourse had focused on a Christian’s patriotic duty to seek peace, a directive whose fulfillment had grown all the more elusive in the months since its initial articulation in Hampden-Sydney, Virginia. The sermon, originally aimed at the fasting and humbled congregants of College Presbyterian Church, had focused on the faults and

\textsuperscript{358} See, for example, \textit{Daily National Intelligencer} (Washington, D.C.), November 29, 1860. The title of the pamphlet was \textit{The Christian’s Best Motive for Patriotism: A Sermon, preached in the College Church, Hampden Sidney, Va. on the 1st of November, 1860} (Richmond: Chas. H. Wynne, 1860). The fast day sermon was also published in Dabney, \textit{Discussions}, II:401-412.

\textsuperscript{359} \textit{Fast Day Sermons}, [vii].

\textsuperscript{360} Ibid., 97. The brackets are in the original.

\textsuperscript{361} Although unhappy about the election of Abraham Lincoln, RLD believed that South Carolina’s adoption of the “Declaration of Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union” on December 24, 1860 was unwarranted and characterized the state as “treacherous, wicked, insolent and mischievous … [their choice to secede without consultation with other southern states had] worsted the common cause, forfeited the righteous strength of our position, and aggravated our difficulties of position a hundredfold” (from letter to Moses D. Hoge, dated January 4, 1861, as quoted in Johnson, \textit{Life and Letters of RLD}, 222). By February 4, 1861, seven states – South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas – had seceded from the Union and formed the Confederate States of America.
shortcomings of the southern people while largely overlooking those of their northern
counterparts. When Dabney’s fast day sermon was chosen for distribution by a New York City
publisher in 1861, however, it was important for him to clarify that the passage of time – and the
prospect of a change and growth in his sermon’s readership – had caused him to have “second
thoughts” regarding a November 1860 discourse that now seemed remarkably dated for
publication in January of 1861.362

With a national audience now readying to examine the words meant, at most, for a
regional following, Dabney felt it necessary to clarify – via the addendum – that his southern
critique was not meant to insinuate that only that region had erred. Possibly he wanted to
safeguard himself against severe judgment from his local counterparts, or perhaps he did not
want history to remember him as being overly critical of his locale. Regardless of underlying
motives, Dabney also chose to continue remaining silent regarding matters of public policy in the
postscript, as if he were still speaking from the pulpit of College Presbyterian Church rather than
from the printed page of a book. Although a confession of errata was permissible, it did not
follow for Dabney that the outcome of elections justified secession, civil war was now inevitable,
and political secession ought to be advocated from a sacred

362 Chesebrough, “God Ordained This War”, 310. Dabney, Discussions, II:401, note 1: Editor C. R. Vaughan noted
that RLD, in delivering this fast day sermon, had “endeavored to bear in mind the truth, that if we would indeed
propitiate God, the appropriate business for us, on a day of humiliation and prayer, is confessing our own sins, and
not those of other people. He [RLD] was afterwards mortified to perceive a total failure to appreciate this on the
part of many, who circulated and used the sermon, not with a generous emulation in a similar exercise of candor and
honesty; but only with the design of encouraging aggression, by the hope that Southern Christians would constrain
their section to be acquiescent under any aggression whatever.”
363 See Lucas, RLD, 101.
absolute necessities of self-defence [sic] require.”

Titled “A Pacific Appeal to Christians: An Address to the Clergy and Laity of the Christian Churches of the Country,” his paper was signed by an array of Virginia’s most prominent Presbyterians, including Dabney’s co-pastor, B. M. Smith, and Thomas J. Jackson, who would go on to earn the famous nickname of “Stonewall” as a general in the Confederate Army. Dabney’s conversion to a pro-secession stance had yet to take place. For this particular Virginian, caution and moderation in the long winter months ahead still held the promise of preventing civil conflict.

---

364 “A Pacific Appeal to Christians,” which RLD circulated in January 1861, as quoted in Johnson, Life and Letters of RLD, 216. Street referred to this publication as “a plea for patience and moderation and for the preservation of the Union” (Story of Southern Presbyterians, 53).

365 See Johnson, Life and Letters of RLD, 217-218. The paper was subsequently published in the March 1861 issue of The Central Presbyterian. See also Daniel, Southern Protestantism, 8.
CHAPTER IV
MODERATION AND RESOLVE

On Friday, January 4, 1861, a crowd of people gathered at the prominent Odd Fellows Hall in Lexington, Kentucky, to observe a day of national humiliation. Among them were worshippers from both the First and Second Presbyterian churches of that city, “secession-minded slaveholders of the Bluegrass” region, and other members of the general public, many of them still taking in the recent secession of the state of South Carolina from the federal government and eagerly responding to President Buchanan’s call to fast and pray for an end to that winter’s contentious circumstances. Addressing them that day was an equally contentious man and a well-known figure in the state, the “scion” of a Kentucky family that was renowned for its public and ministerial service to the state and nation. While the speaker had first pursued a career in state politics, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge had long ago “exchanged the language of the hustings for the language of Zion.” What he had not abandoned, however, were his long-held and uncompromising unionist views, a political stance that was placing him

366 The Odd Fellows Hall, located on the southeast corner of Main and Broadway Street across from the Lexington courthouse, was “a combined meeting hall and opera house with one-story business facilities” designed by one of Lexington’s most prominent architects, Cincinnatus Shryock, in “an early version of his characteristic High Victorian Gothic Revival style.” It was destroyed by fire in 1886. See Walter E. Langsam and Richard S. DeCamp, “National Register of Historic Places Inventory – Nomination Form: Odd Fellows Temple,” Lexington-Fayette Co. Historic Commission, August 1979, http://pdfhost.focus.nps.gov/docs/NRHP/Text/80001520.pdf (accessed April 11, 2011), 3.
369 Mayse, “RJB,” 94.
increasingly at variance with many a southern audience. His public speech on that national fast day would be yet another opportunity for the politician-turned- Presbyterian minister to make his opinions known on a subject consuming antebellum Americans during the winter of 1860-61.

As he made his way to the front of the hall, Breckinridge may have called to mind the three links of the Odd Fellows fraternity: friendship, love, and truth. That particular Lexington audience he was about to address was “tense and none too friendly” and his critics had anything but love for a man described as irascible, “conceited,” and “too controversial in his tastes, too extreme in his statements, [and] too ready to express his opinion upon all occasions.” However, the tall, thin, and bespectacled man, “bedecked with an enormous beard,” was convinced that he would be speaking truth to his listeners. In that day’s “stirring sermon,” Breckinridge championed the union cause, denounced secession as both

---

370 The Independent Order of Odd Fellows was chartered in North America in 1819 by a lodge in Britain. The fraternal organization provided several kinds of benefits to members, including a basic form of health insurance, funeral assistance, discretionary aid, housing for aged members, and benefits for widows and orphans of Odd Fellows. The individual lodges also helped members “locate employment, business contacts, and sources of credit . . . [and] provided their members with social benefits such as respectability, fellowship, intimacy with other men, entertainment, and ritual that bolstered male confidence” (George Emery and J. C. Herbert Emery, A Young Man’s Benefit: The Independent Order of Odd Fellows and Sickness Insurance in the United States and Canada, 1860-1929 (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1999), 24). The group’s presence in Kentucky dated back to 1832, and a lodge was formed in Lexington sometime in the mid-1840s. See The Official History of Odd Fellowship, The Three-Link Fraternity, edited by Henry Leonard Stillson (Boston: The Fraternity Publishing Company, 1898), 344-346, and Howard A. M. Henderson, “Historical Sketch of the Independent Order of Odd-Fellowship, in the State of Kentucky,” in Lewis and Richard H. Collins, Collins’ Historical Sketches of Kentucky (Covington, Ky.: Collins & Co., 1874), 530-536. The Roman Catholic Church was strongly opposed to secret societies, viewing them as centers of subversive religious and social activity. Emery, A Young Man’s Benefit, 127: “before 1894, . . . some bishops aggressively counselled [sic] parishioners against joining the Odd Fellows or remaining Odd Fellows, in some cases to the point of withholding the sacraments from them.” This disregard by the Roman Catholic Church may have made membership to a secret society particularly appealing to Breckinridge, who was strongly anti-Catholic. While it is unknown whether Breckinridge was a member of the Odd Fellows, he served as a Grand Orator for the Masonic Order in Kentucky.


372 Holifield, Gentleman Theologians, 202. See also Victor B. Howard, “Robert J. Breckinridge and the Slave Controvery in Kentucky,” Filson Club Historical Quarterly 53:4 (October 1979), 334; Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 71; and Hambleton Tapp, “The Slavery Controversy Between Robert Wickliffe and Robert J. Breckinridge Prior to the Civil War,” Filson Club Historical Quarterly 19:3 (July 1945): 157. Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 51: “When he [RJB] spoke, he believed God approved; when his opponents differed with him on issues he considered important, he felt equally certain that they were thwarting the Lord’s course.”
unconstitutional and immoral, and called on Kentucky and other border states to do all in their power to preserve the unity of the American nation.373

A KENTUCKY LAWYER

Robert Jefferson Breckinridge was born on March 8, 1800, at his family’s Fayette County plantation, Cabell’s Dale, near Lexington, Kentucky.374 The seventh child of John Breckinridge, then serving as speaker of Kentucky’s House of Representatives, and Mary Hopkins Cabell, the daughter of a Revolutionary War officer, Robert Jefferson was born into a nationally prominent family of politicians, lawyers, and ministers.375 His older brother, Joseph Cabell, served as both speaker of the Kentucky House of Representatives and secretary of state for Kentucky; his two other brothers, John and William Lewis, became Presbyterian ministers, the former serving for several years as a faculty member at Princeton Theological Seminary and the latter as President

---

373 Wakelyn, Southern Pamphlets on Secession, xv.
375 John Breckinridge represented Botetourt County, Virginia, in the Williamsburg House of Delegates before moving to the Bluegrass region of the state of Kentucky in 1793. He then served as the state’s attorney general and as representative and speaker of the state’s House of Representatives. After serving as a delegate to the Kentucky Constitutional Convention of 1799, he served one term as Kentucky’s United States Senator and one year as Attorney General of the United States under President Thomas Jefferson. See Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, [1]-35; and Lowell H. Harrison, John Breckinridge: Jeffersonian Republican (Louisville: Filson Club, 1969). Although several members of his family believed John Breckinridge to be the author of both the 1798 and 1799 Kentucky Resolutions, which condemned the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 as exceeding the constitutional powers of the federal government, historians believe that then-Vice President Thomas Jefferson wrote the first resolution and most likely the second one as well. However, John Breckinridge did introduce the 1798 Resolution in the state House of Representatives. See William J. Watkins, Reclaiming the American Revolution: The Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions and Their Legacy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), [55]-56.
of Centre College in Danville, Kentucky.\textsuperscript{376} From an early age, Breckinridge’s unruly nature suggested that he would not choose a career in public service. The young boy became particularly difficult to manage after his father died in 1806, leaving his mother to care for seven children, fifty-seven slaves, a 20,000-acre plantation, and the large family fortune. Placed in the care of his two older brothers, Breckinridge was schooled by tutors at Cabell’s Dale, followed by several years at a nearby classical school. Although he displayed a natural capacity for learning, his temper often overtook him and led to displays of aggression, most notably when he beat an old slave on his family’s plantation grounds at the age of fourteen, an action for which he received a severe whipping from his mother.

In 1817, Breckinridge followed in his brothers’ footsteps and enrolled in the College of New Jersey at Princeton. His stay at the institution was cut short when he provoked a fight that caused him and another student to be suspended. Although he was later reinstated, the “hot blooded Kentuckian” chose instead to leave the school and complete his education at Yale College.\textsuperscript{377} After three winter months, however, he was made aware that a twelve-month residence was required in order to graduate, leading him to transfer to Union College in Schenectady, New York, from which he earned a B.A. in the fall of 1819.\textsuperscript{378} Breckinridge returned to Cabell’s Dale in 1821 after months of traveling solo, unsure of what career he wanted to pursue. For the next two years, he lived the life of a wealthy planter, helping his mother manage the family’s estate and leading an active social life, which included frequent attendance

\textsuperscript{376} Joseph Cabell practiced law and served as a ruling elder in the Second Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, before entering state politics. John served as chaplain to the U.S. House of Representatives and pastor to the Second Presbyterian Church of Lexington, Kentucky, and the Second Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland, before becoming a professor at Princeton’s seminary in 1836. William Lewis served as pastor to the First Presbyterian Church in Louisville, Kentucky, for twenty-three years before becoming president of the Presbyterian-affiliated Centre College (1863-1868). For more on the Breckinridge brothers, see Kelley, “RJB,” 3-4, and Klotter, \textit{Breckinridges of Kentucky}, 40.

\textsuperscript{377} Mayse, “RJB,” 52.

\textsuperscript{378} The College of New Jersey (now Princeton University) would award RJB with an honorary M.A. in 1832; Union College would later award him an honorary Doctor of Divinity (D.D.) degree.
at dances and parties.379 His years of drifting came to an end in 1823, when marriage to a distant cousin, Ann Sophonisba Preston, convinced him to ensure his future family’s security by training to be a lawyer.380 His older brother’s untimely death that same year further reinforced his aspirations to a legal profession, as Breckinridge took over legal trusteeship of the family fortune. In 1824, he began practicing law in Lexington, Kentucky, and used a portion of his family money to buy his own Fayette County plantation, which he named “Braedalbane.”

A year later, finding the legal profession unfulfilling, Breckinridge followed the family tradition and began a political career.381 He was elected to represent Fayette County in Kentucky’s House of Representatives in 1825, serving there until 1828. During his tenure, he advocated internal improvement, agricultural progress, and, along with fellow conservative and upper-class Whigs, joined the Old Court faction in the legislature, which voted to repeal anti-relief measures brought about by the Panic of 1819.382 During the 1820s, Breckinridge called for an end to slavery, stating that the institution was a moral and political evil corrupting the nation and harming both slaves and their owners, an altogether unusual and perhaps courageous position for a slave owner like himself to take. He became heavily involved in the Kentucky Colonization Society, which favored emancipation but placed far more emphasis on removing free blacks from the state than on abolishing slavery.383 In 1828, Breckinridge sat on a
committee that drafted Kentucky’s response to the secessionist movement in South Carolina, which had appropriated the “nullification” logic of the 1798 and 1799 Kentucky Resolutions that Breckinridge’s father had supported. Unlike his late father, however, Breckinridge shunned the states’ rights viewpoint and sided with the majority in the committee that condemned South Carolina’s actions and instead called for states to be interdependent.

His political career came close to an end in December 1828 when, soon after his re-election, Breckinridge contracted a near-deadly case of typhoid fever, a malady from which he never fully recovered. Once the worst of the illness had subsided, he was informed that one of his children had passed away while he was on his sick bed. The physical and emotional trauma he suffered in the early weeks of 1829 led Breckinridge to turn to religion for comfort and he eventually experienced a religious conversion. In the spring of 1829, he publicly professed his faith at the McChord Presbyterian Church of Lexington, and then joined and became a ruling elder at the Mt. Horeb Church located on his Fayette County estate. When Breckinridge returned to his political career in the summer of 1830, his spiritual transformation informed his choice of issues on which to campaign; he called for the abolishment of Sunday mail delivery and continued to advocate the gradual emancipation of African slaves, characterizing the institution of slavery as abhorrent to biblical principles and, according to articles he published in the *Kentucky Reporter*, “an ulcer eating its way into the very heart of the state.”

---

*the Peculiar Solution: A History of the American Colonization Society* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005). Emancipationist policy could be summarized as follows: “Slavery was a moral evil, and it had to be terminated. Still, it was sanctioned by law, and slaveholders had invested much of their capital in slaves. The abrupt end of slavery would disrupt society and the economy in the southern states, so termination should be gradual to allow time for adjustments. Since slavery was legal, compensation should be paid to the owners” (Harrison and Klotter, *New History of Kentucky*, 175-176).

He soon recognized, however, that his principled stand on what he now considered a national evil was politically unfeasible and withdrew his name before the close of the election. For the next several months, he devoted himself to managing his plantation and speaking on behalf of the state’s temperance and African colonization societies. He also began to increase his involvement in religious activities: studying theology on his own, hosting a religious revival on his plantation, and serving as a lay representative of the Presbytery of West Lexington to the 1831 General Assembly of the Presbyterian denomination. His enjoyment of and success in these pursuits encouraged Breckinridge to become a candidate for pastoral ministry in late 1831.

By April 1832, the Presbytery of West Lexington licensed Breckinridge to preach, asking the promising new minister to attend that year’s General Assembly as their representative and then return to Princeton, New Jersey, this time to pursue theological studies at Princeton Theological Seminary. After only a few months of coursework, Breckinridge accepted a call to succeed his brother John in the pulpit of the Second Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, Maryland, where he remained until 1845. During his tenure, he earned a reputation for confronting those whom he felt espoused sinful beliefs and/or promoted dangerous practices, with his wrath coming down most harshly on Catholics. Many of his confrontations with members of the Roman Catholic Church took place in the pages of the Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine (1835-1841) and the Spirit of the XIX. Century (1842-1843), two hindrance to economic progress, a backwards and enervating system that exhausted the soil, degraded blacks, and robbed white yeomen of opportunities to prosper in Kentucky.” According to Klotter, RJB’s religious conversion also led him to see colonization as “a part of the Lord’s plan for spreading His will throughout the world. … colonization would regenerate Africa as ex-slaves became missionaries overseas” (Breckinridges of Kentucky, 67).

RJB’s land holdings increased in 1830-31 after his father-in-law settled a sizeable estate upon his daughter, which included a tract of land in Louisville that provided “a steady and plentiful source of income” for the family for decades. See Mayse, “RJB,” 82. For an example of an anti-slavery speech given by RJB on behalf of African colonization, see Robert J. Breckinridge, An Address Delivered Before the Colonization Society of Kentucky, at Frankfort, on the 6th day of January, 1831 (Frankfort, Ky.: A. G. Hodges, 1831).

Sandlund, “RB,” 147: RJB “viewed Catholics as ignorant slaves of the Pope, incapable of exercising freedom” of thought. Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 53: Catholicism “with its hierarchies, forms, and authority had no place in the American republic, he [RJB] argued. It was but a plot that threatened both civil and religious liberty.”
publications he helped to both establish and edit.\textsuperscript{387} Although his textual altercations earned him the title of “outstanding Southern protagonist of No-Popery,” Breckinridge also drew the ire and fury of Catholics; one particularly venomous diatribe drew an indictment for libel, causing many in his family and congregation to fear for the life of the “fiery polemicist” and “fierce controversialist.”\textsuperscript{388}

His dislike of the Catholic religion was further strengthened during a one-year leave from his Baltimore pastorate in 1836, during which time he served as a Presbyterian delegate to the Congregation Union of England and Wales. During his travels through Western Europe, Breckinridge attributed that continent’s troubles to its populace’s ill-placed faith in Catholic superstitions. The trip also reinforced his fears concerning the radical nature of abolitionism. During a visit to Glasgow, Scotland, Breckinridge participated in a five-day public debate with the British abolitionist George Thompson, who had helped bring about the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in 1833 and hoped to do the same in the United States.\textsuperscript{389}

Although both men were opposed to the institution of slavery, they differed in the desired pace

\textsuperscript{387} Several of RJB’s anti-Catholic articles from both of these publications were published as Robert J. Breckinridge, \textit{Papism in the XIX Century in the United States} (Baltimore: D. Owen and Son, 1841). See also the 1835 book edited by RJB, titled \textit{Secreta Monita Societatis Jesu: The Secret Counsels of the Society of Jesus} (Baltimore: E. J. Coale). \textsuperscript{388} Eaton, \textit{Freedom-of-Thought Struggle}, 325; Holifield, \textit{Theology in America}, 390; and Eaton, \textit{Freedom-of-Thought Struggle}, 296. During the 1840s, Baltimore served as the metropolitan see of the Catholic Church of America. The 1840 libel trial against RJB ended in a hung jury that voted 10-2 in favor of an acquittal; RJB was furious that he had not been acquitted unanimously and continued to write and speak against the Roman Catholic Church. For further information on RJB’s anti-Catholic activity, including lectures, publications, debates, and the 1840 libel trial, see Mayse, “RJB,” 280-355; Moore, “Earlier Life of RJB,” 102-122; Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, I:458-459; and Wallace, “Bond of Union,” 201-213. \textsuperscript{389} RJB’s debates with George Thompson were published as George Thompson, \textit{Discussion on American Slavery, Between George Thompson, Esq., Agent of the British and Foreign Society for the Abolition of Slavery Throughout the World, and Rev. Robert J. Breckinridge, Delegate from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States to the Congregational Union of England and Wales: Holden in the Rev. Dr. Wardlaw’s Chapel, Glasgow, Scotland, On the Evenings of the 13th, 14th, 15th, 16th, 17th of June, 1836} (Boston: I. Knapp, 1836). For further information on these debates, see Sandlund, “RB,” particularly [145]-148. RJB also published a two-volume record of his European travels as Robert J. Breckinridge, \textit{Memoranda of Foreign Travel} (Baltimore: D. Owen and Son, 1845).
and ultimate aim of the anti-slavery movement. Thompson favored immediate abolition and an integrated society, while Breckinridge favored gradual emancipation and a colonization scheme that would ensure that “race warfare, black degradation, or amalgamation” would not occur. Curiously, although Breckinridge had vowed to set the children of his slaves free after assuming ministerial duties, he waited three years to put those plans into motion. Moreover, those plans ensured that slavery would exist at the Braedalbane plantation until 1865.

Breckinridge returned to the United States in time to play an important role in bringing about the division of the Presbyterian denomination into Old School and New School sections. As the Old School-New School controversy progressed in the 1830s, he became one of the more stringent leaders of the Old School section, helping author the 1834 Old School “Act and Testimony” which identified the main points of disagreement the Old School had with the New. He then went on to play an influential role in the ejection of four offending synods in 1837 and the ensuing denominational schism in 1838, helping prepare a “Circular Letter to All the Churches of Jesus Christ Throughout the Earth” explaining why the division of the denomination was

390 Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 69: “Breckinridge’s inability to find common ground with Garrison abolitionists symbolized the larger national divisions and meant that the small number of antislavery southerners would be further fragmented before a strong opposition.”
391 Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 70. See also Mayse, “RJB,” 239; Noll, Civil War as a Theological Crisis, 55; Sandlund, “RB,” 145; Vander Velde, Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 36; and Weeks, Kentucky Presbyterians, 61. According to Loveland, “most [southern] evangelicals who viewed slavery as an evil were also opposed to abolitionism” (Southern Evangelicals, 212).
392 See Weeks, Kentucky Presbyterians, 60, and Mayse, “RJB,” 236-237. More specifically, according to RJB’s biographer Mayse, “[a] deed of emancipation for twenty slaves was filed in Fayette County Court on January 4, 1835, with the stipulation that all slaves under twenty-one years of age, and those yet to be born to female slaves, be liberated, as they reached their twenty-fifth year” (“RJB,” 237).
393 Moore, “Earlier Life of RJB,” 45: “The ‘Act and Testimony’ denounced the ‘errors’ of New Schoolism. It called for the termination of the Plan of Union, demanded that the Assembly ‘resume the sole direction of missionary operations within the Presbyterian Church’, that it testify against the ‘many errors preached and published in the Church’ and that it decide whether a candidate for the ministry ‘is at liberty to reject as many particular propositions of the Confession of Faith as he pleases’. Thirty-seven ministers and twenty-seven elders affixed their signatures, and all ministers, elders and church courts which subscribed to its statements were called upon to sign, so that the army of the orthodox might be numbered.” See also Weeks, Kentucky Presbyterians, 72.
necessary. He was finally elected to the denomination’s highest leadership position – Moderator of the General Assembly – in 1841.394

After his first wife died in 1844, Breckinridge began seeking a new ministerial position outside of Baltimore. Although he was offered the pulpit at Second Presbyterian Church in Lexington, Kentucky, Breckinridge instead accepted the presidency of Jefferson College in Canonsburg, Pennsylvania, in 1845.395 His tenure as a college administrator was brief and tumultuous. Although he implemented several positive changes, including revising the school’s curriculum and increasing the library’s holdings, he had limited experience in supervising undergraduates, a fact made altogether clear when the student body organized an uprising against him and the college faculty in 1846. Breckinridge left a year later with an honorary Doctor of Laws (LL.D.) degree in hand, returning to his native state and his Bluegrass plantation to become the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church in Lexington, a position he would hold for the next six years. He was eager to return to Kentucky, not only to see his children, whom he had sent away after his wife’s death to live with family members, but to begin a courtship with the caretaker of two of his children, Virginia Hart Shelby. His wealthy and widowed distant cousin had misgivings about marrying him in 1847, and the couple nearly divorced in 1856 after years of living in separate homes and enduring tensions between the children from their two previous marriages.396

395 Jefferson College is now known as Washington & Jefferson College in Washington, Pennsylvania. RJB’s presidential duties also included serving as a pastor at a nearby Presbyterian Church.
396 By 1847, RJB’s estate was worth approximately $150,000; Virginia brought $25,000 to the marriage. The couple had three children together, only one of which survived to adulthood. Virginia lived for much of their marriage in a home in Danville, while RJB resided at his plantation near Lexington. She died in 1859.
Ironically, Breckinridge’s “domestic turmoil coincided with his greatest reform work,” not only in his ministerial duties but also in the labor he undertook on behalf of his state.\textsuperscript{397} Upon returning to Kentucky in 1847, Governor William Owsley appointed him to serve as the state’s sixth Superintendent of Public Instruction. The public school system was in complete disarray: only one out of every ten school-age white children was attending school and at least thirty counties in the state had received no state education funds in five years. By far, Breckinridge’s greatest contributions were in “publicizing the needs [of public schools], pushing legislators to action, and arousing public sentiment favorable to education.”\textsuperscript{398} In 1848, he helped secure the passage of a two-cent property tax for the state’s common schools, which helped increase educational funding from $6,000 in 1847 to $144,000 in 1850. By 1850, only one out of every ten school-age white children was not attending school, resulting in a ten-fold increase in public school attendance from 20,000 to over 200,000.\textsuperscript{399}

Breckinridge also continued to serve as a leader of the Kentucky emancipation movement, running as a Friends of Emancipation candidate in the 1849 election for delegates to the state’s Constitutional Convention, which he hoped would give him an opportunity to provide for the gradual emancipation of slaves in the state’s new constitution.\textsuperscript{400} After months of

\textsuperscript{397} Klotter, \textit{Breckinridges of Kentucky}, 58.
\textsuperscript{398} Klotter, \textit{Breckinridges of Kentucky}, 59.
\textsuperscript{399} See Weeks, \textit{Kentucky Presbyterians}, 60. For more on RJB’s role as Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Kentucky, see Robert Worley Hartness, “The Educational Work of Robert Jefferson Breckinridge,” (PhD diss., Yale University, 1936) and William Hutchinson Vaughan, “Robert Jefferson Breckinridge as an Educational Administrator” (PhD diss., George Peabody College for Teachers, 1937). RJB argued that the state schools should incorporate parochial schools and eventually provide education for all of Kentucky’s citizens, leaving churches to provide only religious instruction. See Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, 1:481, and Weeks, \textit{Kentucky Presbyterians}, 60.
\textsuperscript{400} Lowell H. Harrison, \textit{The Antislavery Movement in Kentucky} (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1978), 58: “The antislavery candidates [of 1849] stressed economic self-interest and humanitarianism. Slaves depressed the economy and held down the wages paid white workers. As humans, slaves were entitled to such basic rights as freedom. Given an opportunity, the slave was capable of self-improvement. But, many emancipationists insisted, he could best make progress in Africa. The linkage of emancipation and colonization was an oft-stated theme.” See also Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, 1:533, and Robert J. Breckinridge, “The Question of Negro Slavery and the New Constitution of Kentucky,” \textit{The Princeton Review} 21:4 (October 1849): 582-607.
campaigning, debates, and fierce confrontations with the likes of fellow slave owner and colonization advocate Robert Wickliffe, the emancipationist party failed completely, indicating “the last time that voters in any southern state would organize a statewide political movement for gradual emancipation.” It also marked Breckinridge’s transition of political allegiance from the Whig party to the nativist Know-Nothing party, a group that shared his dual fears of abolitionism and Catholicism. While he continued to advocate the gradual emancipation and colonization of blacks, the changing social and political mood of Kentucky and the nation at large produced a change in how he viewed and spoke about the institution of slavery. In the 1830s, Breckinridge characterized slavery as a moral evil that plagued the American nation; by the late 1850s, he viewed it as “an embarrassing question which hindered the unity and progress of the white man’s America,” a problem that could result in a greater evil than slavery itself – the disintegration of the American political unit that he and his family had served for decades.402

In 1853, Breckinridge resigned from the pulpit of the First Presbyterian Church in Lexington and from his position as Superintendent of Public Instruction for the state of Kentucky in order to become the first Professor of Exegetical Didactic, and Polemic Theology at Danville Theological Seminary in Danville, Kentucky.403 Breckinridge “served as the seminary’s guiding

---

401 Sandlund, “RJ,” 152. According to Klotter, the Kentucky election of 1849 was “the last major opportunity for slave reform in the South. … [But a]lthough anti-slavery advocates may have had a forum in Kentucky, they lacked the support of a majority or even a very large minority. Not one of the emancipationists was elected statewide, but their 29 candidates polled a total of 10,000 votes” (Breckinridges of Kentucky, 73, 76). See also Weeks, Kentucky Presbyterians, 66. Robert Wickliffe, Sr. (1775-1859) was a Lexington attorney, legislator, and the largest slave owner in the state of Kentucky. He and RJB disagreed on several aspects and phases of the slavery question, and chose to air their differences via stump speeches and the publication of numerous pamphlets. Their dispute grew increasingly vitriolic in the 1840s. Their main point of contention centered on the Kentucky Colonization Society to which they both belonged. Wickliffe believed the organization should focus on sending free blacks to Africa and refrain from interfering in the relationship between a master and a slave. RJB, however, felt that the organization needed to focus on emancipating African slaves. See Tapp, “Slavery Controversy Between Robert Wickliffe and Robert J. Breckinridge,” 156-170.
403 Danville Theological Seminary (DTS) was established by the General Assembly of the Old School section of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) in May 1853. RJB had advocated its creation for several years, finally securing the approval and support of the denomination by promising to raise a large
spirit, financial advisor, and outspoken leader,” helping to further secure the institution’s prominency by publishing a two-volume systematic theology in the late 1850s that he hoped would serve as a “definitive American Presbyterian theology.” During these years, his family name and political connections continued to provide him a public forum for his anti-slavery outbursts, but those statements grew increasingly more cautious and guarded as the presidential election of 1860 approached. Because of his unionist sentiments, the Kentucky lawyer-turned-politician felt impelled to support another Kentucky lawyer-turned-Illinois-politician in the upcoming election. His support for the Republican party candidate, however, placed the “staunch and prickly Unionist” at odds with yet another Kentuckian with whom he shared kinship ties – his nephew and former vice-president John C. Breckinridge, the southern Democratic candidate for president. On November 6, 1860, Breckinridge voted for his

endowment for the new institution. The other two Presbyterian seminaries in the southern region were established and supervised by their supporting local synods: CTS by the Synods of South Carolina, Georgia, and (eventually) Alabama, and UTS by the Synods of Virginia and North Carolina. DTS opened in October 1853, with twenty-three students and four professors; enrollment by 1860 had risen to fifty-two. See Walter A. Groves, “A School of the Prophets at Danville,” Filson Club Historical Quarterly 27:3 (July 1953): 223-46, and Richard C. Brown, The Presbyterians: Two Hundred Years in Danville, 1784-1984 (Danville: Presbyterian Church, 1983). In 1901, DTS merged with Louisville (Southern) Presbyterian Theological Seminary and is now known as Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary. See Smith, Presbyterian Ministry, 188-189. For further information on RJB’s ideas concerning theological education, see Hartness, “The Educational Work of RJB,” 139-185.

Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 61, and Mayse, “RJB,” 533. The first volume of RJB’s theological work was titled The Knowledge of God, Objectively Considered: Being the First Part of Theology Considered as a Science of Positive Truth, Both Inductive and Deductive, (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1858), in which he argued that “[a]ll theology … could be placed in … [a] rational, almost mathematical system … [and] stressed a metaphysical explanation of evil in a rational world” (Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 62). JHT praised the book (“Breckinridge’s Theology,” Southern Presbyterian Review 10:4 (January 1858): 593-622). However, another reviewer, who remained anonymous, accused RJB of plagiarism and critiqued the absence of footnotes in his text (“Dr. Breckinridge’s Theology,” North Carolina Presbyterian, February 12, 1858); RLD also published a critical review (“Breckinridge’s Theology,” Central Presbyterian, March 6 – April 10, 1858). In the second volume, titled The Knowledge of God, Subjectively Considered: Being the Second Part of Theology Considered as a Science of Positive Truth, Both Inductive and Deductive (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1859), RJB responded to the charges made against the first volume. Once again, JHT provided a warm review (“Breckinridge’s Knowledge of God, Subjectively Considered,” Southern Presbyterian Review 12:3 (October 1859): 604-623).

By 1860, Breckinridge had about forty slaves at his Braedalbane plantation. See Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 65, and Eaton, Freedom-of-Thought Struggle, 296.

Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 16. John Cabell Breckinridge was the son of RJB’s oldest brother, Joseph Cabell. After serving as Vice President under President James Buchanan (1857-1861), John C. Breckinridge was one of two unsuccessful candidates nominated for president by a divided Democratic Party; the other was Stephen A. Douglas by Illinois. He was then elected to the United States Senate, but only served a few months before
nephew despite his own support for Abraham Lincoln’s unionist political platform, a decision he
would later come to regret.\textsuperscript{407} The subsequent election of a unionist Kentuckian to the office of
president strengthened Breckinridge’s resolve to risk all – including the goodwill of his family – in hopes that he could play a role in helping to preserve the federal union.

KENTUCKY IN 1860-61

Geographically situated between the lower south slave states and the free states of the
north, the border state of Kentucky had strong political, social, and cultural ties to both regions
and, by 1860, felt increasingly torn between these two regional loyalties.\textsuperscript{408} The presence of
slavery, and a desire to preserve the institution, linked the border state’s economic interests with
the southern region, although Kentucky’s form of enslavement was somewhat distinctive. While
hemp and tobacco crops demanded large slave labor forces, the cotton, sugar, and rice
plantations further south required far larger ones to perform harsher work in crueler climates.\textsuperscript{409}
Many Kentuckians were uncomfortable with even this milder variety of slavery, seeing it as an
evil that had plagued the nation for far too long; several prominent citizens, including a number
of slave owners, criticized the institution and advocated African colonization as the means by

---

resigning and joining the Confederate Army. From January to April 1865, he served as secretary of war, fleeing to
Cuba after the Confederacy collapsed. He finally returned home to Lexington in 1868, steering clear of politics until
III, “Party, State, and Nation: Kentucky and the Coming of the American Civil War” (PhD diss., University of
Virginia, 1982), 394: “Breckinridge Democrats were willing to qualify their love for the Union. As long as the
Union were worth preserving, as long as the rights of the state and the South were fully protected, they would stand
by the nation and the Constitution. They would, however, justify secession if the Republicans came to power and
ran rough-shod over the rights of slaveholders.”

\textsuperscript{407} See Mayse, “RJB,” 545. Despite having a family name that closely identified him with the state of Kentucky,
John C. Breckinridge did not garner the electoral votes of his native state. John Bell, the candidate of the United
States Constitutional Union Party, received a plurality of Kentucky’s votes.

\textsuperscript{408} Kentucky’s population in 1860 consisted of 919,484 whites (79.6% of the population), 225,483 slaves (19.5%),
and 10,684 free blacks (0.9%). See Harrison, \textit{Antislavery Movement in Kentucky}, 2; Harrison and Klotter, \textit{New
History of Kentucky}, 167; and Weeks, \textit{Kentucky Presbyterians}, [53]. The Bluegrass region in Kentucky, where
Lexington (Fayette County) was located, had a higher number of slaves that any other region in the state. See
Harrison, \textit{Antislavery Movement in Kentucky}, 4; Harrison and Klotter, \textit{New History of Kentucky}, 169; Kelley,
“RJB,” 35; and Klotter, \textit{Breckinridges of Kentucky}, [63].

\textsuperscript{409} See Harrison, \textit{Antislavery Movement in Kentucky}, 38; Harrison and Klotter, \textit{New History of Kentucky}, 167-168,
and Klotter, \textit{Breckinridges of Kentucky}, [63]-64.
which to bring an end to slavery. Colonization, however, was a conservative response to the peculiar institution, a “moderate movement that alienated both the strong proponents and the determined opponents of slavery.” Despite attempts to put a stop to this type of labor or at least mitigate its most harmful effects, slavery was “ingrained and convenient” in the state, and there was every indication that the institution would continue on indefinitely. However, crucial commercial ties and transportation routes also linked Kentucky to the northern region and made it likely that citizens of the border state would support the preservation of the federal government and opposed secession as a political maneuver. Thus, in the winter of 1860-61, Kentuckians wanted “both Union and Slavery.”

Their dual desire was displayed clearly in the results of the 1860 presidential election. Although John C. Breckinridge was a Kentucky native with a well-known name and political pedigree, his party’s support for secession doomed his political campaign in the border state. Kentucky’s voters instead cast their votes for John Bell, whose Constitutional Union party hoped to preserve the federal union, even if it meant avoiding discussion of slavery altogether. The election of the Republican candidate, Abraham Lincoln, did not result in calls for secession as it

---

410 According to Weeks, the “Kentucky Abolition Society, formed in 1808 largely by evangelical Christians including Presbyterians, never attracted many members,” especially when compared to the numbers who participated in the Kentucky Colonization Society (Kentucky Presbyterians, 66).
411 Harrison, Antislavery Movement in Kentucky, 38.
412 Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, [63]. See also Harrison and Klotter, New History of Kentucky, 178.
413 See Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 46, and Weeks, Kentucky Presbyterians, [53]. Weeks, Kentucky Presbyterians, [79]: “Sympathy in the state for the Federal government outweighed secessionist sentiments both before and during the Civil War.”
414 Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, [79]. E. Merton Coulter, The Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1926), 17: “Kentucky was neither wholly Northern nor Southern … lying on the borderline of both she partook of both.” Harrison and Klotter, New History of Kentucky, 185: “as a border state its [Kentucky] political sentiments were badly mixed.”
415 John Bell, the United States Constitutional Union Party candidate, received 45.18% of the Kentucky vote and thus won the state’s electoral votes by a plurality. Kentuckian John C. Breckinridge received only 36.35% of the vote, losing most of the counties that held the largest concentration of slaves. Stephen Douglas received 17.54% of the vote, and Lincoln, also a Kentuckian, received 0.93% (1,364 votes). See Harrison, Antislavery Movement in Kentucky, 77 and 98; Harrison and Klotter, New History of Kentucky, 185; and Weeks, Kentucky Presbyterians, 171, note 17.
did in the states of the lower South. The majority of Kentuckians believed that the Republican party, although sectional in their interests, were “powerless to harm slavery in the state” and “still did not control the House, the Senate, or the Supreme Court.”

President-elect Lincoln’s emphatic assurances that fighting would only be waged in order to preserve the federal union resulted in an increased interest in conciliatory measures, particularly the compromise plan put forth by the state’s United States Senator, John J. Crittenden, in December 1860. As negotiations failed, and the possibility of armed conflict increased as the state of South Carolina made preparations to secede, Kentuckians continued to be torn between two regional identities and the political goals each area advocated. Unsure about how to proceed, the border state of Kentucky turned to the nation’s foremost political leader in hopes that he might offer much-needed direction in the midst of that winter’s crisis.

DESCRIPTION AND ANALYSIS OF BRECKINRIDGE’S FAST DAY SERMON

On December 14, 1860, President James Buchanan called on the American people to observe a “Day of Humiliation, Fasting, & Prayer” on January 4, 1861:

Numerous appeals have been made to me by pious and patriotic associations and citizens, in view of the present distracted and dangerous condition of our country, to recommend that a day be set apart for Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer throughout the Union.

In compliance with their request and my own sense of duty, I designate Friday, the 4th of January 1861, for this purpose, and recommend that the People assemble on that day, according to their several forms of worship, to keep it as a solemn Fast.

---

417 Volz, “Party, State, and Nation,” 406: “In Kentucky, Lincoln was not seen as an abolitionist fanatic, and the Republicans were not thought to be a united engine of oppression.” Harrison and Klotter, New History of Kentucky, 185: Crittenden “proposed to reestablish the line of latitude 36°30’, with slavery protected south of it; to let future states decide on slavery as they entered the Union; to prevent Congress from ending slavery in the District of Columbia as long as either Virginia or Maryland had slavery; to reimburse the owner if a fugitive slave was not returned; to provide strict enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Act; and to recommend that northern states repeal their personal liberty laws.” For further information on the Crittenden Compromise, also known as the compromise put forth by the Senate Committee of 13, see Allan Nevins, The Emergence of Lincoln: Prologue to Civil War, 1859-1861 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1950), 385-413.
The Union of the States is at the present moment threatened with alarming and immediate danger; panic and distress of a fearful character prevails throughout the land; our laboring population are without employment, and consequently deprived of the means of earning their bread. Indeed, hope seems to have deserted the minds of men. All classes are in a state of confusion and dismay, and the wisest counsels of our best and purest men are wholly disregarded.

In this the hour of our calamity and peril, to whom shall we resort for relief but to the God of our fathers? His omnipotent arm only can save us from the awful effects of our own crimes and follies -- our own ingratitude and guilt towards our Heavenly Father.

Let us, then, with deep contrition and penitent sorrow, unite in humbling ourselves before the Most High, in confessing our individual and national sins, and in acknowledging the injustice of our punishment. Let us implore Him to remove from our hearts that false pride of opinion which would impel us to persevere in wrong for the sake of consistency, rather than yield a just submission to the unforeseen exigencies by which we are now surrounded. Let us with deep reverence beseech him to restore the friendship and good will which prevailed in former days among the people of the several States; and, above all, to save us from the horrors of civil war and "blood-guiltiness." Let our fervent prayers ascend to His Throne that He would not desert us in this hour of extreme peril, but remember us as he did our fathers in the darkest days of the revolution; and preserve our Constitution and our Union, the work of their hands, for ages yet to come.

An Omnipotent Providence may overrule existing evils for permanent good. He can make the wrath of man to praise Him, and the remainder of wrath he can restrain. -- Let me invoke every individual, in whatever sphere of life he may be placed, to feel a personal responsibility to God and his country for keeping this day holy, and for contributing all in his power to remove our actual and impending calamities.  

A week after the presidential proclamation was published in newspapers around the nation, the state of South Carolina seceded from the federal government, a political action that served as additional confirmation for some that a day of fasting was desperately needed in order

---

418 "A Proclamation for a Day of Humiliation, Fasting, & Prayer. To the People of the United States. A Recommendation. By His Excellency James Buchanan, President of the United States of America," Daily National Intelligencer, December 15, 1860. The proclamation was signed: “James Buchanan. Washington, Dec. 14, 1860.” Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 41: “Perhaps Buchanan’s own failed leadership led him to conclude that only an appeal to the Almighty could save the nation. Abolitionists sarcastically remarked that Buchanan preferred to pray for the Union rather than act against secession, and a doughface’s call for repentance naturally elicited derisive comments.” According to Snay, “Buchanan’s call for a national fast day was apparently more widely observed in the North than the South. This discrepancy can primarily be explained by the fact that the states of the lower South were on their way out of the Union by then and would have been less likely to heed a call from a national official. … In general, the more radical secessionist were inclined to ignore the national fast day” (Gospel of Disunion, 162-163). Rable, God’s Almost Chosen Peoples, 41: “for Upper South moderates, however, Buchanan’s proclamation appeared to be a godsend. Here was another chance – perhaps the last – to save the Union created by the revolutionary fathers. In many communities, the observance was a solemn one.” See also Stout, Upon the Altar of the Nation, [9].
to avoid further disintegration of the nation. Breckinridge responded to that event in his fast day sermon, delivered at the Odd Fellows Hall in Lexington, in which he urged Kentuckians to act on behalf of the preservation of the American nation. Titled “The Union To Be Preserved,” his oration warned that following the path blazed by South Carolina would lead to “intolerable evils,” the greatest of which was the fragmentation of the federal government. A division of the nation would also imperil slavery, an institution that the Constitution and the federal government had spent seventy years successfully protecting. He cautioned his listeners to not be swayed by the extremism of fire-eating southerners and radical northern abolitionists but to instead make moderation and resolve their watchwords. The geographic location of Kentucky would allow it to play a particularly important role in the upcoming months, argued Breckinridge, for it was only the combined action of the border states on either side of the slave line that could bring about a peaceful resolution to the current crisis.

In his public address, Breckinridge critiqued the rights of nullification and secession at length, arguing that both had been taken to their radical extremes. He evaluated the doctrine of states’ rights and various theories of state sovereignty, while also stressing the various differences that existed between the cotton states and the other slave states in the southern region. He also recommended a number of solutions to that winter’s crisis that, though vague on how they would be actualized, were detailed in identifying the central states that should act in conjunction to keep the nation from disintegrating. At the sermon’s conclusion, Breckinridge

419 According to The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church, Containing the ... Directory of Worship (1839), 518: “if at any time the civil power should think it proper to appoint a fast or thanksgiving, it is the duty of the ministers and people of our [Presbyterian] communion, as we live under a Christian government, to pay all due respect to the same.”
420 Fast Day Sermons, 100.
acknowledged that he did not know what God’s purposes might be in that winter’s crisis. His hope, however, was that his native state would choose to align itself with the union cause.\footnote{The contents of RJB’s fast day sermon are mentioned briefly in several books, including Chesebrough, \textit{Clergy Dissent in the Old South}, 44; Chesebrough, “\textit{God Ordained This War}”, 306; Coulter, \textit{Civil War and Readjustment in Kentucky}, 27; Harrison and Klotter, \textit{New History of Kentucky}, 187; Kelley, “RJB,” 52-55; Klotter, \textit{Breckinridges of Kentucky}, 80; Mayse, “RJB,” 549-553; Noll, “\textit{Bible and Slavery},” 72, note 62; Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, 1:559-560; Wakelyn, \textit{Southern Pamphlets on Secession}, xv-xvi, xxv, 247; Wakelyn, \textit{Southern Unionist Pamphlets}, 4-5; Weeks, \textit{Kentucky Presbyterians}, 83; and Wyatt-Brown, “Church, Honor, and Secession,” in \textit{Religion and the American Civil War}, eds. Miller, … [et al.], 100.}

Unlike the other three fast day sermons considered in this thesis, Breckinridge’s oration did not begin with a scriptural reference.\footnote{RJB’s fast day sermon did not cite any scriptural passages whatsoever, a decision that may have been influenced by the setting in which he delivered the oration. Unlike the other three fast day sermons considered in this thesis, RJB’s was the only one that took place in a non-congregational setting; he instead delivered his oration in a civil and/or public hall, a venue that potentially drew more members of the general public than would have attended a weekday Presbyterian church service.} He instead began by noting that it was in “terrible” and “great” solemnity that a humbled United States stood before “all surrounding nations” on that national fast day, awaiting the judgment not only of world history but also of God for actions committed. His objective on that somber occasion would be to demonstrate to his congregated audience that “our duties can never be made subordinate to our passions without involving us in ruin; and that our rights can never be set above our interests without destroying both.”\footnote{\textit{Fast Day Sermons}, [98].}

According to Breckinridge, President Buchanan had made three basic assertions in his fast day proclamation, namely that destruction loomed over the national structures of government, attempts at staving off the aforementioned ominous devastation had so far proven unsuccessful, and the only alternative was to now turn to God humbly and plead for divine intervention concerning the outcome of that winter’s crisis. In his role as a minister of God, Breckinridge’s response to the designation of a national fast day was as follows:

1. That national judgments never come except by reason of national sins; nor are they ever turned aside except upon condition of repentance for the sins which produced them; and, 2. That repentance for sin, as it is the absolute and universal, so it is the infallible condition of divine pardon and acceptance, not only in the case of individuals, but more...
obviously still and more immediately in the case of nations, since nations, as such, have no existence in a future life.\textsuperscript{424}

While chaos threatened to wreak havoc in their midst, Breckinridge believed that the duties required of Americans to ensure their nation’s deliverance were clear: all citizens should endeavor to make amends for past sinful behavior, as well as practice tolerance towards those who affronted them. The solution to that winter’s crisis rested not in the political realm of factions, leaders, pacts, laws, and provisos. Rather, the remedy “must come from God to us,” revealing itself in “a profound movement in the source of all power in free governments,” that is, in an individual’s effort to repent and the creation of “an irresistible impulse” by which God, in His power, would deflect all manner of evils from affecting the nation.\textsuperscript{425}

The “first and greatest of these evils” was the destruction of the nation’s unity by means of state secessions from the federal government. While Breckinridge recognized the existence of genuine grievances on both sides of that winter’s political predicament regarding rights violated, injuries received, and guarantees rescinded, he chose not to dwell on the complaints and accusations but instead detail the reasons why Kentuckians had “overwhelming duties and incalculable interests which dictate a special line of conduct, the chief aim of which should be the preservation of the American Union, and therein of the American nation.” For him, safeguarding the unity of the country would procure “inestimable blessings,” including peace, [freedom], prosperity, independence, [the glory of our example], the power to “do good to all peoples” and “prevent evil” around the world, the opportunity to spread the Gospel nationwide, and, overall, to achieve “the complete possession of freedom united with irresistible national force, and all directed to the glory of God and the good of man.” This ideal condition was at

\textsuperscript{424} Ibid., 99.
\textsuperscript{425} Ibid., 99-100.
stake in the present crisis and it was for its protection that women and men throughout the land gathered on this national fast day to plead to God together for its conservation.  

Breckinridge believed that most, if not all, of these blessings would be revoked if the nation’s partition were allowed to take place. In fact, the “very attempt” to secede by the state of South Carolina a mere fifteen days earlier had already unleashed a number of “intolerable evils” on the country, including the threat of “universal bankruptcy,” the collapse of constitutional government and federal sovereignty by means of a state secession convention, and preparations by that state to arm itself and seek alliances with foreign countries. All these actions were initiated in reckless disregard and contempt of “all counsel, … all consultation and all entreaty,” treating “all ties, all recollections, [and] all existing engagements and obligations” towards the American nation as non-binding.  

This disdain for the country’s shared history was especially apparent in the outrage displayed by South Carolinians when they spotted the American flag flying over federal forts in Charleston’s harbor. But, said Breckinridge, the present calamities were “but the beginnings of sorrows” that would befall the country. In the end, the state of South Carolina – and any other state who chose to secede in its wake – would fall victim to “the reign of lawless passion,” in which all it cherished would be destroyed by its own actions.  

Breckinridge concluded his discussion of “inestimable blessings” and “intolerable evils” by

---

426 Ibid., 100-101.  
427 Ibid., 102, 100, and 102. In this section concerning the actions of South Carolina, RJB referred to the political entity as “one of the least important of the thirty-three States” and a place where “life, liberty and property” were as secure as if in a country “where absolute despotism or absolute anarchy prevails” (Fast Day Sermons, 102).  
428 Ibid., 102.  
429 Ibid., 102.  
430 Fast Day Sermons, 103.
beseeching his listeners to implore God to prevent political disunion, “that most horrible of all national calamities.”\(^{431}\)

Breckinridge then proceeded to describe the rights of nullification and secession, whose exercise unionists like himself viewed as portending disaster for the nation and secessionists claimed were constitutional privileges that could be employed whenever a sovereign state so desired.\(^{432}\) He characterized nullification as “an extreme right within the Union” and one whose power lay not in its complete realization but in the temporary and short-term effect that its threatened use had in resolving political disagreements, either by producing a compromise, begetting a repeal, generating a legal modification or judicial pronouncement, and/or prompting an appeal to voters (“the source of all power in free governments”) during a popular election. Regardless of the decision ultimately reached, “the result necessarily secures the continuance of the preexisting system of government on the restoration of peace, let that peace be by victory on which side you please.” Breckinridge continued by stating that the right of nullification was but “the doctrine of State Rights” pushed to its subversive and “logical absurdity.”\(^{433}\) The original principle of states’ rights, articulated most eloquently in the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions of the 1790s and central to the Republican political party platform of 1801, held that “the will of the greater part should prevail, and that the smaller parts should have the power of appeal to this will, at the polls, and in judgment upon every principle of civil and political liberty.”\(^{434}\) In “its true and original form,” said Breckinridge, the doctrine of states’ rights was vital to the preservation of the country’s mixed and complex political system since it prevented the complete

\(^{431}\) Ibid., 100, 100, and 103.
\(^{432}\) RJB also stated that those who claimed the rights of nullification and secession as constitutional were arguing that the American system of government had “a secret in it, designed expressly to kill it, at the option of the smallest fragment of it” (Fast Day Sermons, 104).
\(^{433}\) Ibid., 104-105.
\(^{434}\) Ibid., 105. RJB’s father, John Breckinridge, introduced the 1798 Kentucky Resolution in the state House of Representatives. See Watkins, Reclaiming the American Revolution, [55]-56.
subjugation of the states to the federal government and, ultimately, to the judicial decisions of the Supreme Court.⁴³⁵

That doctrine, however, had now “assumed a new form and a new life in general opinion.”⁴³⁶ While the original objective had been to secure the rights of the minority against the consolidated strength of the central government, the principle was now referred to in support for the constitutional and “reserved rights of the States.” The right of secession was but the most destructive interpretation of those states’ rights, “an extreme reaction against … [a] Federal interpretation of the relations of the States to each other and to the nation.” The only alternatives posed for the remedy of political disagreements under this new interpretation were “arms, secession, or absolute submission,” which in turn produced an “excitable” condition in the general public that was neither safe nor easy to manage. This scenario was at complete variance with “the idea of the old State Rights party” and the intended right of nullification.⁴³⁷ Instead of securing the continuation of the existing government, secession instead began by:

  tearing to pieces the whole fabric of Government, both social and political. It begins by rendering all redress of all possible evils utterly impossible under the system that exists, for its very object is to destroy that existence. It begins by provoking war, and rendering its occurrence apparently inevitable and its termination well nigh impossible. Its very design is not to reform the administration of existing laws, not to obtain their repeal or modification; but to annihilate the institutions of the country, and to make many nations out of one.⁴³⁸

Breckinridge argued that, if any of the states that now made up the federal union had the constitutional right to so act, “then we have no national Government and never had any.” A new or amended Constitution would “have no more force than the Constitution already despised and

---

⁴³⁵ *Fast Day Sermons*, 105.
⁴³⁶ Ibid., 106.
⁴³⁷ Ibid., 105-106.
⁴³⁸ Ibid., 106-107.
disobeyed,” and any hope of “uniting Republican freedom with national strength” was utterly lost.\textsuperscript{439}

Having declared his belief that the right of secession portended disaster for the American nation, Breckinridge stated that it was “the universal belief of the American people” that the legal and/or constitutional right of secession did not exist “under any form of government, and least of all under such institutions as ours.”\textsuperscript{440} He followed this statement with a detailed discussion of the concept of state sovereignty. The states that made up the federal entity acquired whatever sovereignty they now enjoyed only insofar as they were a part of the “United States.”\textsuperscript{441} Before the creation of this centralized political unit, the states were not sovereign in and of themselves, but rather colonies subject to European powers.\textsuperscript{442} It was as twelve colonial entities that they united to revolt and declare their independence, after which each of them was simultaneously born “a State of the American Union” and “a separate sovereign State,” united into a common constitutional republic.\textsuperscript{443} Although Breckinridge argued that the doctrine of states’ rights was “an integral and indispensable part of our political system,”\textsuperscript{444} it was with the understanding that:

\begin{quote}
the doctrine that we are a nation, and that we have a national government, is, and always was, just as truly a part of our system as the other. And our political system always stood as much upon the basis that we are a nation, as it stood upon the basis that that nation is composed of sovereign States. They were born into both relations; so born that each
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{439} Ibid., 107.
\textsuperscript{440} Ibid., 107. In Southern Pamphlets on Secession, 251, note 3, Wakelyn claimed that RJB drew heavily from Thomas Jefferson’s thoughts on state rights in this section of his fast day sermon.\textsuperscript{441} Fast Day Sermons, 107. Italics in the original.\textsuperscript{442} RJB ridiculed the claims of secessionists who declared that they wanted to return to “their condition as sovereigns in which they were before they were members of the Confederacy called at first the United Colonies and then the United States.” According to RJB, these secessionists “speak of a thing that has no existence – they speak of a thing that is historically without foundation” (Fast Day Sermons, 107).\textsuperscript{443} Ibid., 108. In this section, RJB used the state of Kentucky as an example of the process by which a colony simultaneously became a state and gained sovereignty as a state: “What sovereignty did Kentucky ever have except the sovereignty that she has as a State of these United States, born at the same moment a State of the American Union and a separate sovereign State? We were a district of Virginia. We became a State, and we became one of the United States at the same moment, for the same purpose, and for good and all” (Fast Day Sermons, 108).\textsuperscript{444} Ibid., 108.
State is equally and forever, by force of its very existence and the manner thereof, both a part of this American nation and also a sovereign State of itself.\textsuperscript{445}

This dual classification made it legally impossible for the people of one state to “throw off” either national or state allegiance. It was, in fact, “pure madness” to think that the American nation could “legally absolve the allegiance due by the people” to the nation and the state they lived in. Those who founded the right of secession on an alleged constitutional privilege to “change or abolish the government, which is constitutionally secured to the people of the nation and the States,” were exercising that privilege while comprising “but an insignificant minority” rather than “the greater part of those who are citizens” and in whom the right to “change or abolish” the Constitution resided. Breckinridge retorted: “But what in the name of God, and all the possible and all the imaginable arrogance of South Carolina, could lead her to believe that she is the major part of all the people that profess allegiance to the Constitution of the United States?”\textsuperscript{446} The assumption was not only “absurd” but also “immoral,” since the state’s actions violated “the sacred rights” of the remaining thirty-two states and placed in peril:

the grandest contribution of modern times to the science of government, and therein to the peace of society, the security of liberty and the progress of civilization; namely, the giving constitutional validity to this natural right of man to change or to abolish the government under which they live, by voting, when the major part see fit to do so. It is trifling with this great natural right, legalized in all our American Constitutions, fatally caricaturing and recklessly converting it into the most terrible engine of organized legal destruction.\textsuperscript{447}

The right of secession could not exist since its existence would presuppose that the nation’s laws and government could become “a temporary instrument of evil in the hands of

\textsuperscript{445} Ibid., 109.
\textsuperscript{446} Ibid., 109-110.
\textsuperscript{447} Ibid., 110.
factions as they successively arise,” rather than serve as the principles and institutions charged with the preservation of American society.448

Laws and the timely intervention of the central government served to protect the right of self-preservation of both individuals and the states, while the Supreme Court was tasked with arbitrating conflicts between states. When disagreements emerged between the federal government and a particular state, however, a “serious difference of opinion as to the remedy” emerged. While Breckinridge acknowledged the ambiguity concerning this type of adjudication, he also maintained that the problems currently facing the country had little if anything to do with arguments between the federal government and a state over the right of nullification, but were instead centered on the different views held by northern and southern states concerning the institution of slavery. If the rights of nullification and secession were indeed “perfectly constitutional rights, neither of them should be, under any circumstances, wantonly exercised … except under extreme necessity.” If these same rights were instead illegal seizures of power, as Breckinridge contended, then a state making use of them should make clear that it either had “a just and necessary cause as may not be otherwise maintained” or that it was the victim of “intolerable evils as justify the most desperate attempts.” In the recent case of the state of South Carolina against the federal government, Breckinridge was not convinced that either of those criteria for justified usurpation of power had been met. Rather, the two political entities simply disagreed on the issue of slavery and had yet to agree on an adequate solution that would allay the concerns of either side in the dispute. Breckinridge was convinced that southern secession would prove to be an unsatisfactory remedy to the current situation and possibly even “fatal as regards the avowed object,” the preservation of American slavery.449

448 Ibid., 110.
449 Ibid., 111-112.
Both the Constitution and the institutions of the federal government protected the institution of slavery and, in fact, had done so consistently for over seventy years. That being the case, there was no “reason why States with slaves, and States without slaves should not abide together in peace, as portions of the same great nation, as they have done from the beginning.”

What, then, were the causes behind the national agitation that winter concerning the institution of slavery? Breckinridge listed a number of them:

The unhallowed passions of men, the fanaticism of the times, the mutual injuries and insults which portions of the people have inflicted on each other, the cruel use which political parties have made of unnatural and transient popular excitements, and, I just add, the unjust, offensive and unconstitutional enactments by various State Legislatures at the North; the repeal of the Missouri Compromise by Congress; the attempt of the Supreme Court to settle political principles, deemed to be of vast importance by all parties, in the Dred Scott case, which principles were not in the case at all; the subsequent conduct of the Federal Government, and of the people in Kansas; the total overthrow of the Whig and American parties, the division and defeat of the Democratic party, and the triumph of the Republican party; the ordinance of secession of South Carolina; the agitation pervading the whole nation, especially the greater part of the Southern States; and to crown all and if possible, to make all desperate, the amazing conduct of the President of the United States amidst these great disorders. This is the sad outline of this slavery agitation, the posture of which for a moment is thus exhibited, no one knowing how soon new and fatal steps may hurry us still farther.

Despite the perilous environment created by these terrible events and circumstances, Breckinridge maintained that the present situation did not justify the secession “of any single State of Union,” an assertion he believed “the verdict of posterity” would confirm. Secession would instead create further troubles and would be judged harshly by future generations of Americans:

They who make the attempt will find in it no remedy for the evils from which they flee. They who goad others to this fatal step, will find that they have themselves erred exceedingly. They who have had the lead in both acts of madness, have no hope for good from coming ages, half so great as that they may be utterly forgotten. Posternity will receive with scorn every plea that can be made for thirty millions of free people,

---

450 Ibid., 112-113.
451 Ibid., 113.
452 Ibid., 113.
professing to be Christian, in extenuation of the unparalleled folly of their self-destruction, by reason that they could not deal successfully with three or four millions of African slaves, scattered amongst them. Oh! everlasting infamy, that the children of Washington did not know how to be free. Oh! degradation still deeper, that the children of God did not know how to be just and to forbear with one another.\textsuperscript{453}

Some in the nation claimed that it was “now too late” to find another remedy to that winter’s crisis. After all, the state of South Carolina had already seceded fifteen days earlier and there was a possibility that the state of Florida was following in its stead even as Breckinridge was speaking to the audience congregated at the Odd Fellows Hall. That very month of January might even see the departure of “all the cotton States” from the federal government.\textsuperscript{454} Some said that the slave state of Kentucky should follow soon after, since their destiny, interests, and duties were “bound up” with their southern counterparts.\textsuperscript{455} Breckinridge took offense at these sentiments and charged those of his listeners who held such opinions with deriding the purpose of the national fast day:

If this be your mind, distinctly made up, then the whole services of this day are a national mockery of God; a national attempt to make our passionate impulses assume the dignity of divine suggestions, and thus seduce the Ruler of the universe into complicity with our sins and follies, through which all our miseries are inflicted upon us.\textsuperscript{456}

Breckinridge continued by expounding on the state ratification process described in Article VII of the American Constitution. Delegates from thirteen states had created the original governing document, which stipulated that its adoption by nine of those thirteen states would lead to its enforcement on all thirteen. While the document was adopted unanimously,

Breckinridge stated that if “a minority of States [in this case, four] had not adopted the new

\textsuperscript{453} Ibid., 113-114. The “they” in the third sentence of this block quote refers to the state of South Carolina, which had seceded from the federal government on December 20, 1861.
\textsuperscript{454} Ibid., 114. Florida became the third state to secede from the federal government and not the second one as RJB believed it would be. Mississippi, the second state to secede, withdrew from the federal government on January 9, 1861, followed that very month by Florida on the 10\textsuperscript{th}, Alabama on the 11\textsuperscript{th}, Georgia on the 19\textsuperscript{th}, and Louisiana on the 26\textsuperscript{th}. The remaining cotton state, Texas, seceded on February 1, 1861.
\textsuperscript{455} Ibid., 114.
\textsuperscript{456} Ibid., 114.
Constitution, it would have occurred that they would have passed, by common consent, into a new condition, and, for the first time, have become separate sovereign States.” If this same principle and ratio were applied to the current situation, it would take the approval of eleven of the thirty-three states to “destroy, or affect in the slightest degree, the question as to whether or not the remaining States are the United States of America under the same Constitution.” The twenty-two states left would “be as really the United States of America under that Federal Constitution, as they were before, according to the fundamental principle involved in the original mode of giving validity to the Constitution.” Thus, the “attempt to form a Southern Confederacy” by less than eleven states should no more impel the state of Kentucky to determine whether “her duty, her safety and her honor” required her to withdraw than a secession of a few states in New England.

The reason Kentucky was being urged to consider secession was entirely due to its being a slave state and, as such, believed to have a different kind of relationship with “other slave States, as compared with the free States, or with the nation at large.” Breckinridge’s response to this view was two-fold. First, he stated that there were, in fact, three distinct forms of enslavement in the country. The first was practiced by states that grew rice, sugar, and cotton (the so-called “cotton States”), the second by states that grew these staples only in a few sections of their land (“the mixed portion of the slave States”), and the third by those states that did not produce these staples whatsoever (“non-cotton States”). The involvement that these three

---

457 Ibid., 115-116.
458 Ibid., 114 and 116. Eleven states would ultimately join the Confederate States of America: South Carolina, Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Texas, Virginia, Tennessee, Arkansas, and North Carolina. Concerning the hypothetical secession of New England states, RJB said the following: “It may sound harsh, but I am very much inclined to think that there are many thousands of men in Kentucky, who might be apt to suppose that the secession of the New England States would be a capital reason why nobody else should secede” (Fast Day Sermons, 116-117).
459 Ibid., 117.
460 Ibid., 117; last quote from 119.
groups of slave states had with the institution of slavery differed markedly each from the other, affecting their relationship with the federal government in different ways. The states of Kentucky, Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware had a distinct form and relation towards slavery and the national government, as compared to “cotton States” like Louisiana and South Carolina, or the “mixed States” of Arkansas, Tennessee, Texas, and North Carolina. Breckinridge recognized that “certain [common] ties and sympathies” existed between all of the slave states, but warned that it was “extremely easy to carry this idea to a fatal and a false extent.”

It was important to remember that there were also “innumerable diversities” between them, including the working conditions of their slaves, the crops they cultivated, and their “relative influence in the body politic.”

Breckinridge warned Kentuckians in his audience that permitting one factor in common with the seceding states – owning slaves – to “swallow up every other consideration” concerning that winter’s crisis was a grave mistake. He also urged them to seek the facts concerning the effects of secession on the state of South Carolina:

Inform yourselves of what is passing of an opposite character throughout South Carolina, and reflect on the change that must pass on you, before you would be prepared to tear down the most venerable institutions, to insult the proudest emblems of your country’s glory, and to threat constitutions and laws as if they were playthings for children; before you are prepared to descend from your present noble posture, and surrender yourself to the guidance and dictation of such counsels and such statesmen as rule this disunion movement.

461 Ibid., 117-118. RJB further developed his argument concerning distinctive forms of slavery by mentioning the difference slave-to-white population ratios in the states of South Carolina and Kentucky. The population of South Carolina had about five slaves per three white people, with the slave population growing at an increasingly higher rate than the white population. Kentucky had only one slave per four white people, with “the gap between the two races … widening at every census.” RJB argued that Kentuckians should not feel the need to “resort to any desperate expedient” concerning the preservation of slavery, but that it was “the duty of the nation to protect and defend” cotton states like South Carolina in their attempt to keep “the present relation of the negro to the white man” intact (Fast Day Sermons, 118).
462 Ibid., 118.
463 Ibid., 119.
464 Ibid., 119.
Breckinridge believed that all of the slave states, regardless of the form of slavery practiced within its borders, could continue to enjoy peace, prosperity, and the protection of rights and interests connected to slavery by remaining in the federal union, particularly because the interests of mixed and non-cotton states would not be adequately represented in a confederacy “where cotton is the great idea and end.”\textsuperscript{465} He then declared the following:

If your design is to accept the principles, purposes and policy which are openly avowed in the interest of secession, and which you see exhibited on a small scale, but in their essence, in South Carolina – if that is your notion of regulated freedom and the perfect security of life and property; if that is your understanding of high national prosperity, where the great idea is more negroes, more cotton, direct taxes, free imports from all nations, and the conquest of all outlying land that will bring cotton; then, undoubtedly, Kentucky is no longer what she has been, and her new career, beginning with secession, leads her far away from her strength and her renown.\textsuperscript{466}

The second part of Breckinridge’s response to the view that Kentucky, due to its being a slave state, should consider seceding along with other slave states, was to suggest that, if all the slave states seceded and all the free states remained in the Union, “the possibility of the perpetuity of negro slavery in any border States” would be finished. It was the actions of the border states on either side of the line demarcating slave and free states that would determine whether the federal union could be preserved or not; extremism, whether in the guise of southern violence or northern fanaticism, would extinguish any hopes of continued unity. The states of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, along with Maryland, Delaware, Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, and – Breckinridge dared to hope – Tennessee and North Carolina, were the

\textsuperscript{465} Ibid., 119. RJB predicted that mixed and non-cotton states who joined the southern confederacy would be required to “servilely [sic] follow the lead, and bow to the rule of the cotton States.” He posed a number of rhetorical questions to his audience, asking them to consider what joining this future confederacy might demand of them: “Do you want the slave trade re-opened? Do you want free trade and direct taxation? Do you want some millions more of African cannibals thrown amongst you, broadcast throughout the whole slave States? Do you want to begin a war which shall end when you have taken possession of the whole Southern part of this continent, down to the Isthmus of Darien [Isthmus of Panama]?” (Fast Day Sermons, 120).

\textsuperscript{466} Ibid., 120.
only ones “competent to save this Union” by acting “in concert” with each other.\textsuperscript{467} In order to accomplish this, however, the border slave slaves needed to retain “the sympathy and confidence of the border free States.” Breckinridge believed there was no better way for the border slave states to do this than by evincing “a patriotic devotion to the Union, and a willingness to do all that honorable men should do, or moderate men ask in order to preserve it.”\textsuperscript{468} He was adamant that the fate of the nation rested entirely on the states on either side of the slave line:

Fronting on the Atlantic Ocean through many degrees of latitude, running back across the continent so as to include an area larger than all western Europe, and finer than any of equal extent upon the globe, embracing a population inferior to none on earth, and sufficiently numerous at present to constitute a great nation, it is this immense power, free, to a great extent, from the opposite and intractable fanaticisms of the extreme States on both sides of it, that is charged with the preservation of our national institutions, and with them our national power and glory.\textsuperscript{469}

If the border states failed to achieve “the great mission committed to them,” and/or the cotton states continued their radical course of action, then “secession by peaceful means” would be unachievable.\textsuperscript{470} Even if this were the result, however, the border states would continue to have a mission, albeit a revised one:

If under the curse of God and the madness of the extreme Northern and Southern States, the preservation of the Union should be impossible, then it belongs to this immense central power to reconstruct the nation upon the slave line as its central idea, and thus perpetuate our institutions, our principles and our hopes, with an unchanged nationality. For even they who act in the mere interests of slavery, ought to see, that after the secession of the cotton States, the border slave States are obliged, even for the sake of slavery, to be destroyed, or to adhere to the Union as long as any Union exists; and that if the Union were utterly destroyed, its reconstruction upon the slave line is the solitary

\textsuperscript{467} Ibid., 121-122.
\textsuperscript{468} Ibid., 121. In this section, RJB argued that the division that would result if any of the border slave states decided to follow in the path blazed by the cotton state of South Carolina would compare to the biblical character of Sampson being “shorn of this strength … [by] the enemies of Israel and of God … [who then proceeded to] make the land desolate” (Fast Day Sermons, 122). Sampson was one of the judges of the ancient Israelites whose supernatural strength was dependent on his never having shaved or cut his hair, as divinely mandated. Once the Philistines were able to cut his hair, Sampson became powerless. See Judges 13-16. This was the first reference in RJB’s fast day sermon to a biblical character and/or event.
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{470} Ibid., 122.
condition on which slavery can exist in security anywhere, or can exist at all in any border State.\textsuperscript{471}

According to Breckinridge, that winter’s crisis had only three possible outcomes: the federal union could be preserved as it was, the secession of the cotton states could continue and ultimately affect the political and military course of both free and border states, and the federal union could be destroyed and be reconstructed as two or more new sovereignties. President Buchanan had made clear that he believed the federal government was powerless “to prevent, by force, its own dissolution by means of the secession of the States,” a stance Breckinridge characterized as utterly “helpless.” Kentucky and other border slave states thus had two other options to consider. The border slave states could form their own separate confederacy as “an alternative to be preferred to more dangerous arrangements” or the state of Kentucky could “assume a separate sovereign position.”\textsuperscript{472} Obviously, neither of these solutions appealed to Breckinridge, who believed that “the union of free and slave States, in the same Confederacy” could ensure “the peaceful and secure existence of slavery.”\textsuperscript{473}

Breckinridge began the conclusion of his fast day sermon by stating that the state of Kentucky had three duties before it. The first was to “stand by the Constitution and the Union of the country to the last extremity,” the second was to prevent any and all attempts to intimidate her into “the taking of any step, inconsistent with her own Constitution and laws,” and the third was to determine, once and for all, that disunion was “the most fatal issue that the times can

\textsuperscript{471} Ibid., 122-123.
\textsuperscript{472} Ibid., 123-124. With regards to “the possible isolation of Kentucky,” RJB stated it should only “occur as the alternative to evils still greater” and that the change should be embraced “with calmness and dignity, and awaiting the progress of events,” Kentucky should show by her wisdom, her courage, her moderation, her invincible rectitude, both to this age and to all that are to come, how fully she understood, in the midst of a gainsaying and backsliding generation, that no people ever performed anything glorious who did not trust in God, who did not love their country, and who were not faithful to their oaths” (“Fast Day Sermons,” 124).
\textsuperscript{473} Ibid., 124.
have.”

God had long-ago promised that “all things shall work together for good to them that love him.” Who was to say that it was not God’s providential plan for the nation to break up and form other nations “more powerful than it, unitedly, would have been”? Breckinridge did not pretend to know or say how God would choose to work in the midst of that winter’s crisis.

What he was sure of was that:

all [the] nations that have gone before us, and all that will follow us, and we ourselves, by our rise, by our progress, and, alas! by our decay and ruin, are but instruments of His infinite purpose, and means in His adorable providence, whereby the everlasting reign of Messiah, the Christ of God, is to be made absolute and universal.

Breckinridge concluded his fast day sermon with words he hoped would “stir the heart of Christian Kentucky to loyalty”:

Great, then, is our consolation, as we tremble for our country, to be confident in our Lord! Great is our comfort as we bewail the miseries which have befallen our glorious inheritance, to know that the Lord God Omnipotent reigneth! Infinitely precious is the assurance, amidst the trials now impending, and the woes which threaten us, that the heroic self devotion with which our personal duty is discharged, is one part of our fitness to become partakes of the inheritance of the saints in light!

Within days, the sermon was published in several newspapers, periodicals, and as a pamphlet, all of which circulated widely. Senator John J. Crittenden, who was attempting to put forward his compromise plan to the American electorate, made use of Breckinridge’s discourse in his speeches before Congress. In mid-January, the oration was also published in *Fast Day Sermons* (1861), by which time the states of Mississippi, Florida, and Alabama had

---

474 Ibid., 124-125. RJB added that any scenario in which secession led to the subjugation of Kentucky to “the dominion of the cotton States” would be “the very worst form of that fatal issue” (*Fast Day Sermons*, 125).
475 Ibid., 125. This was a reference to Romans 8:28 (KJV): “And we know that all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.”
476 *Fast Day Sermons*, 125.
479 See Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, xv-xvi.
followed the example of South Carolina and seceded from the federal government, with Georgia and Louisiana following close behind them that very same month.\textsuperscript{480} Despite Breckinridge’s “sharp rebuke of disunion,” the cotton states decided to declare their secession from the United States before Abraham Lincoln took office on March 4, 1861.\textsuperscript{481} The winter crisis of 1860-61, unresolved by the efforts of fasting American citizens and the pleas of their ministers, would now be prolonged for four long and devastating years.

\textsuperscript{480} The state of Mississippi seceded on January 9, 1861, Florida on the 10\textsuperscript{th}, Alabama on the 11\textsuperscript{th}, Georgia on the 19\textsuperscript{th}, and Louisiana on the 26\textsuperscript{th}.
\textsuperscript{481} \textit{Fast Day Sermons}, viii.
CONCLUSION

“THE BELIEF THAT THEY WILL HAVE A HISTORICAL INTEREST”

The editors of Fast Day Sermons (1861) believed that the eleven sermons they “collected in a volume” and published in January 1861 would lead “thoughtful men” to “pause and review the causes” that had brought the nation to “the very brink of dissolution.” They offered readers a variety of orations from both northern and southern pulpits, knowing full well that clerical “voices,” regardless of regional origin, held great sway over Americans, particularly during calamitous times like the one they were then experiencing. As both authoritative religious figures and public orators, antebellum clergy in the winter of 1860-61 articulated the “religious ideology” of their respective communities and provided both listeners and readers with “a religious interpretation of the crisis of the Union.” Ministers derived their powerful social influence from their respective denominations and churches, highly respected institutions that shaped “the common experiences and folkways of large numbers of American citizens nationwide” and were “significant influences on public opinion and popular feeling.” During that particular winter of crisis, the fast day ritual and sermon genre provided ministers and their corresponding communities an opportunity to pause, reflect, and consider future actions.

Religious leaders addressed the fears and worries of northern and southern congregants by

---

482 Fast Day Sermons, [vii], including the quote in the conclusion’s title.
484 Goen, Broken Churches, Broken Nation, 55 and 5.
485 See Wakelyn, Southern Pamphlets on Secession, xiii; Loveland, Southern Evangelicals, 128; and Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 160.
assuring them that God had only momentarily turned away from them and would bless them anew once individual, regional, and national sins had been confessed and repented of.

It is unknown how many antebellum readers of *Fast Day Sermons* (1861) actually gained “broader views and a kindlier charity” from “reviewing these discourses.”486 This group of readers, however, was not the only target audience for this collection. In the preface to *Fast Day Sermons* (1861), the editors indicated that the volume was published not only to influence the mindset of antebellum Americans, but in the belief that the eleven fast day sermons it contained would be of “historical interest” to future generations.487 Unfortunately, the “historical interest” the editors hoped to garner for these fast day orations has yet to fully materialize. Antebellum American sermons, in general, have gone understudied by scholars, despite the fact that these primary documents are rich with social, political, and cultural information. The reasons given for this oversight range from the length of these texts to the difficulty of deciphering their often-dense theological language, and the belief that other documents from the same historical period offer more relevant information.488 While some antebellum sermons may fit this description, many fast day sermons – and particularly the four examined in this thesis – belie any categorization as long-winded and obscure theological tracts. Instead, these orations are often “highly political, deeply passionate about various social issues and examples of powerful and beautiful rhetoric.”489 The creators of these fast day sermons were ministers who were shaped by their surrounding geographic, social, and political context and were intent on speaking

486 *Fast Day Sermons*, viii.
487 *Fast Day Sermons*, [vii].
488 See Chesebrough, “Civil War and the Use of Sermons,” 26; Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South*, 89-90; and Chesebrough, “Sermons as Historical Documents,” [275]. Another possible reason for this scholastic lacuna is “the problematic nature of religion’s role in our personal, societal and national lives in recent generations” (Miller, *Both Prayed to the Same God*, xiii).
489 Chesebrough, “Civil War and the Use of Sermons,” 26. Rable refers to antebellum and wartime sermons as “vitaly important, often revealing, and occasionally even stimulating sources for understanding how American interpreted the war through a religious lens” (*God’s Almost Chosen Peoples*, 5).
eloquently about and give meaning to issues that were time- and place-specific. This combination of factors makes these particular texts of the fast day sermon genre during the winter of 1860-61 particularly revealing of the diverse “clerical perceptions of the sectional crisis.”

**APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF SOUTHERN FAST DAY SERMONS**

Thus far, the only scholar to have studied the southern fast day sermon genre to any great extent is historian Mitchell Snay. In a 1981 conference paper, Snay described seven structural and thematic elements common to some forty fast day sermons, drawing particular attention to “the words and concepts chosen [by the ministers in question] to explain the meaning of events.” He later incorporated these findings into a book on the role of religion in bringing about southern separatism, arguing that “[a]lthough these addresses do not adhere to a uniform and rigid style, they do constitute an oratorical genre that generally followed a prescribed pattern of rhetoric and structure.” Snay argued that a rhetorical analysis and “close explication” of these sermon texts could “shed light on ‘the deepest values of southern society on the eve of the war’” by highlighting the religious-themed logic used by the region’s ministers in their “explanation and justification of separation from the Union.” As an example, Snay used the 1860 fast day sermon preached by Benjamin Morgan Palmer at the First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, Louisiana, to show how a southern argument for secession “unfolded in one mind

---

491 Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 163. The seven common features were as follows: “(1) Acknowledgement of a providential design in human affairs. (2) The conception of the nation as having a relationship with God, just as an individual does. (3) The conclusion that God blesses and punishes nations based on the collective behavior of their people. (4) Recognition of the sin of America. (5) Characterization of this sin as the neglect and perversion of religion. (6) Designation of the main sinner as New England, and the secondary sinner as the Southern slaveowner. (7) Proposal of the solution: secede to avoid further contamination, and then reform Southern society” (Snay, “Religion, Rhetoric and the Growth of Southern Nationalism,” as quoted in Farmer, *Metaphysical Confederacy*, 261). See pages 151-180 of *Gospel of Disunion* for a fuller discussion of these seven elements.
and one place." After a few sentences of biographical and church background, Snay dedicated the rest of his sermon analysis to the argumentative and stylistic devices employed by Palmer, concluding that the sermon’s language reflected “the major corpus of Southern fast day sermons.”

This thesis has expanded on Snay’s approach to the study of southern fast day sermons by featuring both rhetorical and contextual analysis in its examination of four texts. Rather than focusing almost solely on what was said, each chapter included information on the venue in which the fast day sermon was delivered, a biographical background of the minister who authored and published the sermon, a description of the socio-political context of the geographical area in question during the winter of 1860-61, an outline of the specific events that led to a fast day being proclaimed by a religious body or civil leader, an analysis of the specific text, and a brief mention of the immediate media coverage that each sermon received. The intent behind this approach was to draw attention not to the shared structures and themes in these four texts but to how four different minds in four distinct places produced unique examples of the fast day sermon genre. This emphasis on the particularities of biography and locale acknowledged the variety of factors that helped shape the diverse religious expressions and intellectual production of antebellum southern ministers with regards to both community and national events in the winter of 1860-61. Ultimately, the combination of rhetorical and contextual analysis attempted to “freeze [the fast day sermon] in time” and place in order to view the southern minister in question “confronting friends, neighbors, and opponents and accommodating his

\[494\] Snay, *Gospel of Disunion*, 175. BMP’s fast day sermon was the focus of chapter two in this thesis. Snay’s analysis of the sermon can be found in *Gospel of Disunion*, 175-180.

speaking” to “the demands of the time, place, and persons” he addressed. In order to fully appreciate the clerical diversity of these timely confrontations, the following are brief biographical accounts of the wartime and post-bellum activities of the four southern Presbyterian ministers highlighted in this thesis, including information on the political course of action chosen by the states in which they delivered their fast day sermons.

THE SOUTHERN MINISTERS OF FAST DAY SERMONS (1861) AFTER JANUARY 1861

The editors of Fast Day Sermons (1861) described Thornwell as “the leading minister, if not the leading man, of South Carolina” and regarded his sermon as being representative of a southern minister’s thoughts concerning the winter crisis of 1860 and 1861. Thornwell’s actions in the spring and summer of 1861, however, surpassed those of many of his fellow southern ministers. His January 1861 article defending southern secession was followed by a request from fellow southern Presbyterians that their leading scholar once again put into writing his support for Confederate secession and the southern way of life, this one to be delivered at the General Assembly of the Old School section of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). However, after the firing on Fort Sumter in Charleston’s harbor on April 12-13, and President Abraham Lincoln’s call for troops to suppress the southern insurrection on April 15, none of the commissioners elected by South Carolina’s four presbyteries – including James Henley Thornwell – attended the denominational meeting in Philadelphia in May. In

496 Seymour, “Pulpit in the Prow,” 148; Braden, Oral Tradition in the South, 23; and Morrissey, “Interdisciplinarity,” 1121. Harold A. Bosley in Preaching in American History, ed. DeWitte T. Holland, 18: Sermons are “shaped by the total social context as they seek to shape that context and direct it into new forms.”
497 Fast Day Sermons, [vii]. Farmer, one of JHT’s biographers, agreed with this assessment by the editors of Fast Day Sermons (1861). Metaphysical Confederacy, 6: “His [JHT’s] mind epitomized the Calvinistic outlook and the conservative sociopolitical position of his region.”
499 See Calhoun, The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It, 100. In 1861, the Synod of South Carolina was made up of four presbyteries (South Carolina, Bethel, Harmony, and Charleston Union), ninety-seven ministers, one hundred
fact, that year’s General Assembly would be marked by an almost complete absence of southern Presbyterians.\textsuperscript{500} During the meeting, the Rev. Dr. Gardiner Spring, a New York minister, introduced a controversial resolution, later adopted by a vote of 156 to 66:

\textit{Resolved}, That this General Assembly, in the spirit of that Christian patriotism which the Scriptures enjoin, and which has always characterized this Church, do hereby acknowledge and declare our obligation to promote and perpetuate, so far as in us lies, the integrity of these United States, and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage the Federal government in the exercise of all its functions, under our noble Constitution; and to this Constitution, in all its provisions, requirements, and principles, we profess our unabated loyalty.\textsuperscript{501}

Southern Presbyterians in the eleven states that had already officially withdrawn from the federal government – the government they were now being enjoined by the Spring Resolution to defend – were outraged by this political pronouncement and felt that it effectively expelled them from the denomination.\textsuperscript{502} In the summer and autumn of 1861, a total of ten synods, comprising forty-seven presbyteries and approximately 72,000 communicants, severed their connections with the denomination;\textsuperscript{503} the Presbytery of Charleston, to which the Presbyterian Church of Columbia belonged, voted to end their association on July 24, 1861, and elected representatives twenty-eight churches, and thirteen thousand seven hundred and forty-six members. See Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, I:422.

\textsuperscript{500} For example, of the eighteen presbyteries in the South Atlantic states (Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia), only the Greenbrier Presbytery in western Virginia sent representatives to the General Assembly of 1861. See DesChamps, “Union or Division?” 497, and Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, I:563.

\textsuperscript{501} As quoted in Palmer, \textit{Life and Letters of JHT}, 501. Vander Velde, \textit{Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union}, 105: “The Old School Assembly’s adoption of the Spring Resolution may have hastened the breaking away of the Southern element – it was not the cause of that defection.”

\textsuperscript{502} On the day the General Assembly approved of the Spring Resolution (May 16), the following southern states had already seceded: South Carolina (December 20), Mississippi (January 9), Florida (January 10), Alabama (January 11), Georgia (January 19), Louisiana (January 26), Texas (February 1), Virginia (April 17), Arkansas (May 6), and Tennessee (May 7). The state of North Carolina would follow four days later on May 20. Delegates from the first seven states to secede had formed a provisional government, adopted a constitution, and appointed Jefferson Davis as president of the newly-formed Confederate States of America in February 1861.

to attend a preliminary meeting in August that would discuss the formation of a new
denominational organization.\textsuperscript{504}

The Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America (PCCSA) convened for its
first General Assembly on December 4, 1861, at the First Presbyterian Church in Augusta,
Georgia.\textsuperscript{505} In attendance were thirty-eight ruling elders and fifty ministers; by far the most
prominent of the group was Thornwell, who, despite having just recently resigned the pulpit of
the Presbyterian Church in Columbia due to mounting health problems, would play a significant
role in establishing the new denomination.\textsuperscript{506} A month before the General Assembly, Thornwell
had described the need for a separate organization in a report submitted to the Synod of South
Carolina.\textsuperscript{507} The reasons he provided in that report were further elaborated in “An Address to all
the Churches of Jesus Christ Throughout the Earth,” an “explanatory letter” composed by a
committee headed by Thornwell and read by him to the General Assembly delegates on
December 14, 1861.\textsuperscript{508} The unanimously accepted document justified the creation of a new
denomination on two grounds: northern Presbyterians had improperly involved themselves in

\textsuperscript{504} See Calhoun, \textit{The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It}, 101. On August 15, 1861, thirty-four delegates representing
seventeen southern presbyteries met in Atlanta, Georgia. They agreed to hold the first General Assembly of their
new denominational body – The Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America – in Augusta, Georgia,
that December. See Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, I:567, II:14. For further information on this
Presbyterian division, see DesChamps, “Union or Division?” 497; Patton, \textit{Popular History of the Presbyterian
Church}, 473; Street, \textit{Story of Southern Presbyterians}, 54-55; Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, I:563-567,
II:14; Vander Velde, \textit{Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union}, 42-87; and White, \textit{Southern Presbyterian
Leaders}, 319-320.

\textsuperscript{505} For further information concerning the creation of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America,
see Patton, \textit{Popular History of the Presbyterian Church}, 473; Palmer, \textit{Life and Letters of JHT}, 503-509; Thompson,
\textit{Presbyterians in the South}, II:[13]-29; Vander Velde, \textit{Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union}, 102-107; and
White, \textit{Southern Presbyterian Leaders}, 322.

\textsuperscript{506} See Calhoun, \textit{The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It}, 101-102, and Palmer, \textit{Life and Letters of JHT}, 409. Street,
\textit{Story of Southern Presbyterians}, 48: “Though he lived less than a year after the later formation of the Presbyterian
Church in the Confederate States, he [JHT] probably exercised more influence on that body than any other person.”

\textsuperscript{507} The document, titled “Reason for Separate Organization,” is available in volume four of JHT’s \textit{Collected
Writings of JHT}, 439-445. JHT’s report was unanimously adopted by the Synod of South Carolina in November
1861 in their meeting in Abbeville. See Palmer, \textit{Life and Letters of JHT}, 509.

cloak and high-heeled boots … Weakened by illness, and weighing now little more than a hundred pounds …, he
[JHT] leaned against the pulpit for support. For nearly an hour he read.”
political matters and the new Confederate political entity required a separate church that would acknowledge not only its geographic boundaries but also its distinct social order.\textsuperscript{509} Firmly convinced of the rightness of the Confederate course, Thornwell declared himself resolutely and repeatedly in favor of the new political undertaking.\textsuperscript{510} But his role as spokesperson would be quite brief. His health continued to deteriorate rapidly, particularly after hearing that his son, a Confederate soldier, was wounded in the Battle of Williamsburg in May 1862. Thornwell traveled to North Carolina to aid in the young man’s recuperation, but took to his final sick bed once his son had departed to rejoin his regiment. On August 1, 1862, James Henley Thornwell died from a bout with tuberculosis in Charlotte, North Carolina, still hoping and believing that the Confederate cause would emerge victorious in the American Civil War.\textsuperscript{511}

The editors of \textit{Fast Day Sermons} (1861) were correct when they credited the “earnest and eloquent” sentiments of Palmer’s sermon with serving as an “appeal to the South to maintain its rights.”\textsuperscript{512} Three weeks after he delivered his fast day oration, Palmer’s native state of South Carolina became the first to secede from the federal government, setting the course for the ten states that would follow its example, including Louisiana on January 26, 1861. That very same month, he published a review of both Breckinridge’s fast day sermon and a forthcoming \textit{Danville Quarterly Review} article in which the Kentuckian articulated many of the same unionist sentiments he had expressed in his January oration in Lexington. Palmer’s analysis and critique centered on Breckinridge’s central argument concerning state versus federal sovereignty. The South Carolinian native thought it ludicrous to insist that sovereign states were in any way

\textsuperscript{509}See Calhoun, \textit{The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It}, 103. The address is available in volume four of JHT’s \textit{Collected Writings of JHT}, 446-464.

\textsuperscript{510}See Clarke, \textit{Our Southern Zion}, 212-214, for further information regarding Thornwell’s role in the creation of the new denomination.

\textsuperscript{511}For further information on JHT’s life and career after the winter of 1860-61, see Palmer, \textit{Life and Letters of JHT}, 484-522.

\textsuperscript{512}\textit{Fast Day Sermons}, [vii].
subject to federal institutions or officials, seizing the opportunity to make a fervent and passionate plea for secession in the pages of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. Palmer continued to speak on behalf of secession in 1861, delivering the farewell addresses to both the Crescent Rifles and the Washington Artillery in the month of May as they departed New Orleans to confront the Union Army and presenting yet another celebrated fast day sermon in June.

In December 1861, Palmer was elected moderator of the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA) and delivered the opening sermon, titled “The Supreme Dominion to which Christ is Exalted Head of the Church, and the Glory of the Church in that Relation, as Being at Once His Body and His Fullness,” in which he “set forth the purpose of the new church.” Furthermore, his November 1860 fast day sermon, which was printed in its entirety in the official minutes of that year’s General Assembly, served to not only “set the tenor of the immediate occasion” regarding the new denomination’s earliest meeting, but also as a pronouncement of the spiritual and political principles that “guided the southern assembly [of Presbyterians] for decades.” When the port of New Orleans fell to federal troops under Commodore David Farragut and General Benjamin Butler in April 1862,

---


515 Calhoun, *The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It*, 102. See also Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, II:15-16.

516 Eubanks, “BMP’s Thanksgiving Sermon,” 308. Johnson, *Life and Letters of BMP*, 223: “The time came when the wisdom of his course in preaching that [November 1860 fast day] sermon seemed less apparent; indeed, he is said to have repented preaching the discourse, though the day never came when he took an essentially different view of the great subject discussed.”
Palmer and his family fled to Columbia, South Carolina. For the next three years, Palmer taught at Columbia Theological Seminary, preached at Columbia’s Presbyterian Church, and served as a roving chaplain with the Army of Tennessee. In February 1865, Palmer once again fled as federal troops under General William Tecumseh Sherman made their way to Columbia and ultimately captured the state’s capital. After the surrender at Appomattox, Palmer returned to the now financially devastated Crescent City to once again take charge of First Presbyterian Church.

For the next thirty-seven years, Palmer dedicated himself to a “ministry of consolation,” intent on rebuilding that which had been destroyed by four years of civil strife, including housing structures, church membership rolls, and parochial school systems. In the words of one of his biographers, Palmer served as “a pastor to the entire South, encouraging the hopes of a rising Confederacy, providing comfort after it collapsed, and working to resurrect what he believed to be its enduring principles.”

During the latter part of the Reconstruction period, Palmer spoke out in opposition regarding a number of political and social issues, including the persecution of Jews in Russia in 1882 and the launching of the Louisiana Lottery in 1891. He also remained active in the southern Presbyterian denomination, helping to found the School of Theology at Southwestern Presbyterian University in 1884, delivering the principal sermon at the 1886 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS), and publishing

---

517 Federal forces regarded BMP as “a fomenter of treason,” thanks in large part to the sentiments of his fast day sermon; “his outspokenness had made him a marked man.” See Calhoun, The Glory of the Lord Risen Upon It, 105, and Chesebrough, “God Ordained This War”, 197.
519 White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 379.
collections of sermons as well as articles in a number of publications, including the *Southern Presbyterian Review* and *The Presbyterian Quarterly*. Although his recalcitrant stand against denominational reunification of the two regional branches of the church ultimately undermined his influence in the southern denomination, his reputation in New Orleans continued to grow.

In 1898, the entire city came to a standstill in order to celebrate Palmer’s eightieth birthday; over ten thousand people made their way to his home in order to greet him. Four years later, a streetcar struck Benjamin Morgan Palmer and the indefatigable orator died from the injuries he sustained on May 25, 1902.

Although the editors of *Fast Day Sermons* (1861) had declared that Dabney, due to his sermon’s “milder counsels and gentler tones,” sounded less like “a Southern man than as a minister of the Prince of Peace,” the expressions of the native Virginian and his state grew increasingly strident and divisive as the winter of 1860 turned into the spring of 1861. After casting its electoral votes for John Bell in the presidential election of 1860 and decrying the hasty secession of South Carolina in December 1860, the state of Virginia proceeded to take a hesitant but steady path towards secession. In January 1861, Virginia’s General Assembly declared that the federal government did not have the right to declare war against seceding states, while also agreeing to attend the upcoming Peace Conference in Washington, D.C., where it was hoped that representatives from fourteen free states and seven slave states would be able to find a

---

521 Southwestern Presbyterian University is now known as Rhodes College. The denomination known as the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA) became the Presbyterian Church in the United States (PCUS) after 1865.

522 See Bonner, *Mastering America*, 324.


525 *Fast Day Sermons*, viii.

526 The vote in Virginia was 74,701 for John Bell, 74,379 for John C. Breckinridge, 16,292 for Stephen A. Douglas, and 1,929 for Abraham Lincoln. All fifteen of Virginia’s electoral votes went to Bell under a plurality vote. See Bradshaw, *History of Prince Edward County*, 377.
compromise to the sectional crisis. On February 4, 1861, the doomed conference convened at the same time as seven southern states formed the Confederate States of America and voters in Virginia cast their votes for delegates to a state secession convention in Richmond. Nine days later, the state convention began deliberating secession, continuing its discussions and debates well into the month of April. While immediate secession was voted down on April 4, the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter on the 12th of that month, followed by President Abraham Lincoln’s call for 75,000 troops to recover the captured forts on the 15th, made it increasingly clear that civil war was set to begin and that Virginia had to finally give up its attempts at conciliation and decide which section of the ensuing conflict to support. Later that same month, the state convention voted for an ordinance of secession, which was ratified by overwhelming popular vote in May 1861.\(^527\) The state of Virginia was now part of the Confederate States of America.

This slow transformation from unionist sentiments to secessionist action corresponded to the change in Dabney’s views concerning the withdrawal of southern states from the federal union. As indicated in the conclusion of chapter three, Dabney continued to pray for peace and call for moderation in January and February of 1861. But, along with most Virginians, the events of April 1861 served to sever his hopes for peaceful resolution. Interpreting President Lincoln’s call for troops as a promised attack and invasion of sovereign states, Dabney and many other Virginians chose to join their fellow southern slave-holding states in an impassioned and armed defense of their way of life.\(^528\) Casting aside his hopes for peace, Dabney immediately

---

\(^527\) See Bradshaw, *History of Prince Edward County*, 378-380; Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 59-60, 136-140, 340-341. That same month, the capital of the Confederacy was moved from its first location in Montgomery, Alabama, to Richmond, Virginia, where it remained until the Confederate government fled from invading Union forces in April 1865 to Danville, Virginia.

\(^528\) Crofts, *Reluctant Confederates*, 136: “Of all the states in the upper South, Virginia had the strongest inclinations toward secession. A web of social, political, and cultural ties linked her to the deep South.”
became one of the Confederacy’s most adamant, passionate, and fiery spokesmen. That summer, he obtained a commission as a Confederate Army chaplain to the 18th Virginia Infantry, later serving on the staff of fellow Presbyterian Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson during the Valley and Seven Days campaigns. During these periods of military service, Dabney began writing an apologia for the southern cause, which he would publish after the American Civil War had concluded and he had resumed his teaching, preaching, and writing duties in Hampden-Sydney.

In A Defence of Virginia: and Through Her, of the South, in Recent and Pending Contests Against the Sectional Party (1867), Dabney defended the recent conflict and the institution of antebellum slavery it sought to protect.

Appalled at the political and social reconstruction taking place in his state, and the acquiescence of many in the South to the industrial changes advocated by “New South” proponents, the conservative Virginian developed into “an acidic jeremiad,” a veritable “Cassandra of Yankeedom” by his own description. Dabney grew ever more isolated in his outrage, however, especially in the Presbyterian denomination. His opposition to the ordination of African-American ministers and the reunification of southern and northern factions of the Old School section of the Presbyterian Church marked him as an obstructionist in the denomination; his refusal to adopt and teach from new and revised textbooks increasingly set him at odds with fellow faculty members at Union Theological Seminary. Frustrated by “Yankee” intrusions in the region, and sensitive to his decline in influence, Dabney considered emigrating to South

---

529 RLD published a biography of the Confederate general in 1866 titled Life and Campaigns of Lieut.-Gen. Thomas J. Jackson, (Stonewall Jackson) (New York: Blelock & Co.).
530 Robert Lewis Dabney, A Defence of Virginia: and Through Her, of the South, in Recent and Pending Contests Against the Sectional Party (New York: E. J. Hale, 1867).
531 Noll, “Bible and Slavery,” 64; second quote from a letter to Thomas Cary Johnson, dated July 1, 1894, as quoted in Overy, “RLD,” 311. See Groce, “Cassandra of Yankeedom.”
America, Europe, or Australia. He only succeeded in making it as far away as Texas, where he served as Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin between 1883 and 1894. With his reputation still on the decline, Robert Lewis Dabney died on January 3, 1898, and was buried in the Union Theological cemetery in Hampden-Sydney, Virginia.

Breckinridge’s sermon, characterized by the editors of Fast Day Sermons (1861) as “a sharp rebuke of disunion,” was followed by concerted efforts by the Kentuckian unionist to keep his border state from seceding. Starting in March 1861, and continuing on through most of the American Civil War, Breckinridge used the pages of the newly formed Danville Quarterly Review, which he helped co-found and edit, as a platform for both his religious and political views. In its inaugural issue, he published “Our Country: Its Peril and Its Deliverance,” in which he lamented the secession of several southern states in reaction to Lincoln’s election and called for “an end to all extreme opinions, and all violent proceedings” regarding political withdrawal. Kentucky’s legislators took heed of Breckinridge’s recommendations, refusing to...

533 See DesChamps, “Union or Division?” 495.
534 The Austin School of Theology is now known as the Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.
535 For further information on RLD’s life and career after the winter of 1860-61, see Johnson, Life and Letters of RLD, [235]-540; Lucas, RLD, 108-215; Overy, “RLD,” 102-314; and White, Southern Presbyterian Leaders, 388-392. In reference to the southern Presbyterian triumvirate of JHT, BMP, and RLD just discussed, Moses D. Hoge, who for over fifty years served as the minister of the Second Presbyterian Church in Richmond, was quoted in Lucas, RLD, 14, as saying the following at RLD’s funeral on January 7, 1898: “No church on this continent has been more favored of heaven in having at its very organization three such men as Thornwell, Palmer, and Dabney – each fitted by splendid genius, profound scholarship, and consecration to the noblest ends, to give direction to its future life and to enrich it for all time by their published contributions to theological science.”
536 Fast Day Sermons, viii.
537 The Danville Quarterly Review changed its name in January 1862 to the Danville Review; the Danville-based periodical ceased publication in December 1864. During its almost four years of publication, RJB published several unionist articles and sermons in its pages, many of which were reprinted by local and national newspapers and/or published as separate pamphlets. See Kelley, “RJB,” 58-60, and Vander Velde, Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 141. For examples of this kind of wartime publication, see RJB’s “The Civil War: Its Nature and End,” Danville Quarterly Review 1:4 (December 1861): 639-672, which was later published as a pamphlet under the same title (Cincinnati: Office of the Danville Review, 1861); and Two Speeches on the State of the Country (Cincinnati: Press of E. Morgan and Co., 1862). See Wakelyn, Southern Unionist Pamphlets, 27 and 375-376.
convene a special session to determine whether the state should secede and instead waiting to see if any of the compromise efforts yet being contemplated would be able to resolve the political crisis. Once fighting broke out, however, the legislature approved a resolution of official state neutrality in May 1861, viewing this measure as the only way with which to deal with the indecision and uncertainty of the populace regarding the civil conflict. The state’s neutrality was breached only four months later by Confederate troops when they seized Columbus, an action that led Kentucky’s legislature to proclaim their loyalty to the United States government in September 1861.

Although heartened by his state’s decision to seek the preservation of the federal union, Breckinridge was dismayed when his own family divided over the conflict. While two of his sons and three son-in-laws remained loyal to the federal government, another two sons and one son-in-law joined the Confederate Army. Breckinridge’s ardent support of the union and contempt for secessionists, however, continued unabated and he became “as powerful a figure for the Union as Palmer was for the Confederacy.” By 1862, his advocacy for federal war

---


539 Due in part to the influence of RJB, the Presbyterian Synod of Kentucky sent delegates from all six of its presbyteries to the 1861 General Assembly of the Old School section of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA). Although the Synod expressed its disappointment with the Spring Resolutions, they disapproved of the denominational schism that resulted and urged fellow Presbyterians to reconcile. See Thompson, Presbyterians in the South, 1:568, and Weeks, Kentucky Presbyterians, 80.

540 Although Confederate troops briefly captured Lexington in the summer of 1862, the state remained under the Union Army’s control during the entire American Civil War. For further information on Kentucky’s course from neutral to loyal state, see Crofts, Reluctant Confederates, 355; Harrison, Antislavery Movement in Kentucky, 98; Harrison and Klotter, New History of Kentucky, 187-189; Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 81; and Volz, “Party, State, and Nation.”

541 One Confederate daughter-in-law was particularly outraged by RJB’s support for the union and did not allow her two children to see their grandfather until 1867. However, RJB’s connections in the federal army allowed him to intervene on behalf of his Confederate son-in-law and prevented the young man’s execution by Union forces for his work as a guerrilla raider. See Klotter, Breckinridges of Kentucky, 80-81, 87, and 89.

542 Silver, Confederate Morale, 22. In 1862, RJB was awarded a Doctor of Laws (LL.D.) degree from Harvard University for his support of the Union cause.
aims earned him the attention of Republican political leaders, who sought to remain in
Breckinridge’s good graces in hopes that it would result in an increase in Union support from
Kentucky’s citizens.\textsuperscript{543} His cooperation with the Republican administration rested solely on the
political party’s desire to preserve the unity of the nation, a cooperation that was severely tested
after President Lincoln issued a preliminary announcement in September 1862 of the following
year’s Emancipation Proclamation.\textsuperscript{544} While the pronouncement did not affect the loyal slave
state of Kentucky, Breckinridge did not believe that the federal government should interfere to
bring an end to slavery and also feared that the immediate liberation of slaves would delay a
resolution to the civil conflict by providing Confederate soldiers with yet another reason to take
up arms for their southern cause.\textsuperscript{545} Ultimately, Breckinridge’s desire for union overrode his
qualms concerning emancipation and he continued to speak and write in favor of Republican
policies, activities that led to his selection as a delegate and temporary chairman of the 1864
Union (Republican) National Convention that re-nominated Lincoln.\textsuperscript{546}

After the American Civil War came to an end, support for the Republican administration
sharply declined in Kentucky. Four years of federal blunders and interference, as well as the

\textsuperscript{543} President Lincoln believed it was crucial to his war aims for his native border state of Kentucky to remain loyal
to the federal government. He was “well aware of Kentucky’s divided sentiments and the attachment of many
Unionists to slavery,” and so made continued efforts to “maintain good relations with Kentuckians [like RJB] after
the state position on neutrality was abandoned” (Harrison, \textit{Antislavery Movement in Kentucky}, 100).
\textsuperscript{544} President Lincoln had “tried several times to get Kentucky to adopt a scheme of compensated emancipation,” but
all attempts failed. This was particularly surprising, given that many Kentuckians supported gradual and
compensated emancipation, as well as colonization (Harrison and Klotter, \textit{New History of Kentucky}, 179).
\textsuperscript{545} The Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 only applied to slaves in states that were “in rebellion against the United
States,” thus excluding, among other areas, the Union slave states of Delaware, Kentucky, Maryland, and Missouri.
The Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery throughout the nation, was adopted in 1865; the Kentucky
legislature, however, refused to ratify it and the other two Reconstruction Amendments until 1976. See Degler, \textit{The
Other South}, 85. RJB’s initial response to Lincoln’s proclamation can be seen most clearly in his article titled
\textsuperscript{546} For further information on the impact of the Emancipation Proclamation on RJB in particular and Kentuckians in
general, see Harrison, \textit{Antislavery Movement in Kentucky}, 101, and Klotter, \textit{Breckinridges of Kentucky}, 83-84. RJB
delivered a well-received address at the 1864 convention, in which he denounced anti-union Kentuckians. George
B. McClellan ultimately carried the state of Kentucky in the 1864 election, although Lincoln received over 27,000
votes or approximately 30.2\% of the vote (compared to 0.93\% in 1860). See Klotter, \textit{Breckinridges of Kentucky}, 85-
86.
Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, had turned loyal citizens into southern sympathizers.

“Those who had waged war on the Union – [and] not the majority who fought for its preservation – became the idols” of Kentucky during Reconstruction. The majority of Kentuckians now viewed Breckinridge as “a black abolitionist, a bloodthirsty Radical Republican, [and] an outcast” because of his outspoken views before and during the American Civil War.\(^{547}\) After marrying for the third time in 1868 and resigning from his position at Danville Theological Seminary in 1869, his health began to decline and he lived, according to one of his biographers, “in much anguish, both physical and mental.”\(^{548}\) On December 27, 1871, Robert Jefferson Breckinridge died and was buried in Lexington, certain that the passage of time would prove his political stance to be right.\(^{549}\)

**FAST DAY SERMONS (1861): A BOOK OF REVELATION**

The four southern fast day sermons featured in *Fast Day Sermons* (1861) reveal that southern clerical responses to political events in the winter of 1860-61 were diverse. Each of the ministers highlighted in this thesis was influenced by his upbringing, schooling, and professional development to think, speak, and act in ways that differed from his ministerial counterparts. Each of them presented a different analysis of the national crisis and called on individual Christians, congregations, and citizens of the American nation to act in different ways to resolve it. And each of them participated, to different degrees, in American Civil War efforts, as some of them were “converted by time, circumstances, and political/social forces” to a different stance towards both slavery and secession.\(^{550}\) This brief analysis questions any attempt to characterize – in the case of this thesis – southern Presbyterians as being of one mind concerning the winter

\(^{547}\) Klotter, *Breckinridges of Kentucky*, 88.

\(^{548}\) Klotter, *Breckinridges of Kentucky*, 89. The name of his third wife was Margaret Faulkner White.

\(^{549}\) For further information on RJB’s life and career after the winter of 1860-61, see Klotter, *Breckinridges of Kentucky*, 80-91, and Mayse, “RJB,” 555-741.

\(^{550}\) Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent*, 22.
crisis of 1860-61. It also challenges scholars to continue the study of southern fast day sermons, in the belief that further research into the history of the ritual and sermon genre in the region will reveal that the southern clerical landscape on the eve of the American Civil War was far more diverse than presently acknowledged.

A study of all eleven orations included in *Fast Day Sermons* (1861) would serve to highlight the “historical interest” of the seven northern sermons alongside their four southern counterparts. Interdisciplinary studies that incorporate audience and reader reception theory into their analysis of antebellum fast day and other sermons would help to further reveal not only what was said by the minister, but what was understood by congregants and members of the general public. An anthology containing a variety of antebellum sermon pamphlets would serve to illustrate both common themes and clerical diversity, and, depending on its content, could potentially find its way onto a class syllabus on the religious etiology of the American Civil War. The creation of an online database in which fast day and other sermons of the antebellum period could be made available for perusal and could be searchable by biblical texts, congregational venue, minister, date delivered, etc. would also prove incredibly useful. These and other projects would serve to draw much-needed attention to documents that have “germinated the symbols, beliefs, and questions” that Americans have used to define who they were, who they are, and who they hope to be.

---

551 *Fast Day Sermons*, [vii].
552 See Wakelyn, *Southern Pamphlets on Secession*, 380.
553 In “Interdisciplinarity,” 1113, Morrissey suggests the need for a similar database to enhance and further the study of early modern sermons in England.
WORKS CITED
PRIMARY SOURCES


Breckinridge, Robert J. Hints on Slavery. Lexington, 1843.

Breckinridge, Robert J. The Knowledge of God, Objectively Considered: Being the First Part of Theology Considered as a Science of Positive Truth, Both Inductive and Deductive. New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1858.


Cartwright, Thomas. The Holy Exercise of a True Fast. 1580.
The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Containing the Confession of Faith, the Catechisms, and the Directory for the Worship of God: Together with the Plan of Government and Discipline, as Ratified by the General Assembly, at their Sessions in May 1821; and Amended in 1833. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1839.


Dabney, Robert Lewis. A Defence of Virginia: and Through Her, of the South, in Recent and Pending Contests Against the Sectional Party. New York: E. J. Hale, 1867.


Holland, Henry. The Christian Exercise of Fasting, Private and Publicke. 1596.


Palmer, Benjamin Morgan. *The Family Companion; or, Prayers for Every Morning and Evening of the Weeks, and for Various Special Occasions.* Charleston: Burges and James Printers, 1848.


Thompson, George. *Discussion on American Slavery, Between George Thompson, Esq., Agent of the British and Foreign Society for the Abolition of Slavery Throughout the World, and*


**NEWPAPERS AND OTHER PERIODICALS**

American Publisher’s Circular and Literary Gazette (New York, N.Y.)
The Baltimore Literary and Religious Magazine
The Central Presbyterian (Richmond, Va.)
Charleston Observer
The Charleston Tri-Weekly Courier
The Columbia Hive
The Courier (New Orleans, La.)
Daily Atlas and Bee (Boston, Mass.)
The Daily Delta (New Orleans, La.)
Daily National Intelligencer (Washington, D.C.)
The Daily Picayune (New Orleans, La.)
The Daily South Carolinian (Columbia, S.C.)
Danville Quarterly Review
Danville Review
De Bow’s Review (New Orleans, La.)
The Evening Post (New York, N.Y.)
Jeffersonian Republican (Charlottesville, Va.)
Kentucky Reporter (Owensboro, Ky.)
Mobile Daily Advertiser
New Orleans Daily Crescent
North Carolina Presbyterian (Fayetteville, N.C.)
The New York Times
The Presbyterial Critic and Monthly Review (Baltimore, Md.)
The Princeton Review
Richmond Enquirer
Richmond Examiner
The Southern Field and Fireside (Augusta, Ga.)
The Southern Planter (Richmond, Va.)
Southern Presbyterian (Columbia, S.C., and Milledgeville, Ga.)
Southern Presbyterian Review (Columbia, S.C.)
Southern Quarterly Review (New Orleans, La.)
The Southern Whig (Sumterville, S.C.)
The Sunday Delta (New Orleans, La.)
The Tri-Weekly Southern Guardian (Columbia, S.C.)
Watchman and Observer (Richmond, Va.)
Watchman of the South (Richmond, Va.)
The Weekly Mississippian (Jackson, Miss.)

SECONDARY SOURCES

BOOKS


**DISSERTATIONS**


DesChamps, Margaret B. “The Presbyterian Church in the South Atlantic States, 1801-1861.” PhD diss., Emory University, 1952.


Henry, H. M. “The Police Control of the Slave in South Carolina.” PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1913; Emory, Va., 1914.


ARTICLES


Xaris A. Martínez was born in Fresno, California, in 1983, and lived in Guatemala City, Guatemala, from 1992 to 2001. She attended Azusa Pacific University and Glendale Community College before graduating *summa cum laude* with a Bachelor of Arts degree in History from the University of California, Los Angeles, in 2008. In 2009, she enrolled in the graduate program in Southern Studies at the University of Mississippi.