What is, is what ought to be

Providence and Benjamin Morgan Palmer’s public theology

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WHAT IS, IS WHAT OUGHT TO BE:
PROVIDENCE AND BENJAMIN MORGAN PALMER’S PUBLIC THEOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Benjamin Morgan Palmer was one of the most prolific and influential Presbyterian pastors in the Nineteenth Century American South. Though his life has been examined, and he is mentioned in passing in many studies of the antebellum South, his writings on public theology have not heretofore been carefully examined. This study undertakes to examine Palmer’s public theology. We focus our attention on the relationship between Palmer’s public theology and his understanding of the Reformed doctrine of providence. We assert that Palmer utilised the Baconian-Realist practice of inductive observation to ascertain the preceptive will of God from history, anthropology, political theory, and sociology. We establish Palmer’s worthiness as an object of study. His writings on the matter of public theology are listed and annotated. We examine the background of his understanding of the doctrine of providence as relates to public theology in the history of Calvinism. We then examine the philosophical and the Biblical-theological foundations of his public theology. We next explain Palmer’s application of the doctrine of providence in his public theological thought on government, the relationship of the Christian and the church to civil society, and the matter of the relationship between various races. It is shown that Palmer built his public theology on the belief that the preceptive will of God was revealed in nature, society, and human history, and could be discerned and interpreted by use of the inductive method of reasoning. Palmer found moral justification for his public theology in the occurrence of events, generally adopting a ‘what is, is also what ought to be’ basis for ethical judgements on matters pertaining to government and society. In Palmer’s view, the pastor occupied the role of public moralist and interpreter of providence, whose source material was natural revelation more than Scripture. Understanding Palmer is crucial to understanding the rationalisations of the mind of the antebellum and post-bellum American South on the entwined topics of race, class, government, and secession. Palmer’s writings give us insight into the Christian justifications for the slave society and its maintenance, even at the cost of sundering the American nation.
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Chapter 1:

Introduction to the Topic and Survey of the Secondary Literature

I. Introductory Issues, Focus, and Definitions

This study seeks to examine the public theology of Benjamin Morgan Palmer [1818-1902], a notable figure in American Southern Presbyterianism. Palmer ministered throughout the time of growing sectional conflict over the institution of slavery, theological conflict in the Presbyterian Church, the American Civil War, and the rapidly changing society of postbellum America. Palmer rose to national prominence, and many have considered him as the finest pulpit orator in the South.\(^1\) He was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans for forty-six years and was elected moderator of the first General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church. Throughout his career, he wrote and spoke extensively on issues of public theology.

This thesis proposes to examine Palmer’s prescriptive, post-millennial view of providence as the centrepiece of his public theology. Palmer’s public theology centred on the conviction that whatsoever came to pass in history was the will of God, and that this gave moral legitimation to the status quo. Palmer’s understanding of providence was primarily rooted in natural revelation, which he believed could be interpreted with certainty by way of careful inductive observation. In the second chapter, we survey the Calvinistic understanding of providence, and examine how American colonists used it to bolster a sense of destiny, creating an American public theology. We will argue this

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became a basis for Palmer’s public thought. In chapter three, we will examine how Common Sense Realism and inductive logic undergirded Palmer’s societal prescriptions and confirmed his sense that God’s providence provided moral legitimation for the social status quo. The fourth chapter will take up Palmer’s understanding of Biblical interpretation, and his post-millennial eschatology. We argue that this demonstrates Palmer’s understanding of the role of human volition in serving God’s providential purposes.

Having laid the theoretical foundations of Palmer’s public theology in chapters two through four, we will proceed to explain how Palmer applied his understanding in various social realms. Chapter five explains Palmer’s view of the God-ordained institution of government and the foundations of the social order. We will explore various affinities between Palmer and prominent philosophers on the nature of government. In chapter six, we look at Palmer’s view of the relationship of the Christian, and the church, to the civil order, and examine similarities and differences between Palmer’s view, and those of other prominent thinkers. Chapter seven is an examination of Palmer’s view of the various races and civilisations of the world, and how they are used by God to achieve his providential purposes; we also inquire into the sources of his thought on matters related to race, and particularly the enslavement of African peoples. We then conclude with a chapter which examines how Palmer’s thoughts on providence and public theology were utilised in subsequent debates, and we interpret the significance of Palmer’s thought.

A.) Public Theology

As we move to consider Palmer’s public theology, we must define what we mean. Eneida Jacobsen notes, ‘there is no univocality in defining its purposes, its theological
foundation or the meaning of the term "public theology."”^2 She traces the beginnings of
cial theology to Martin Marty's 1974 article 'Reinhold Niebuhr: Public Theology and
the American Experience’.^3 Marty contends that 'The main strand of American religious
thought has drawn together the work of various figures who have interpreted the
nation's religious experience, practice, and behaviour in the light of some sort of
transcendent norm.'^4 Marty argues that in the American context, theology and public life
are so interwoven that they become a distinct strand of thought, a 'public theology'. This
is more than an outworking of a Christian theory of public involvement because it
promotes the idea that America has a divine calling. Robert Bellah likewise notes that
'Americans have interpreted their history as having religious meaning. They saw
themselves as being a “people” in the classical and biblical sense of the word,’ on a
'divine errand in the wilderness’ and built upon ‘utopian millennial expectations’.^5
It is our contention that Palmer was a public theologian in precisely this sense.

We propose to limit our reflection on public theology to the sphere that Marty
notes: how did Palmer develop his understanding as a public theologian? How did his
theological commitments shape his understanding of the public life of the nation? We
will limit the discussion to the issues that loomed large for Palmer himself: the doctrine
of Providence, Biblical interpretation and history, the nature of governmental authority,
chattel slavery, and the appropriate role of both the Christian and the church in public
life.^6

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^4 Marty, 'Reinhold Niebuhr,’ 332.
^6 Chattel slavery is type of slavery where persons are the property of another, in distinction from bond slavery, in which a person is enslaved to another to work off a debt. The word ‘chattel’ denotes property in a person.
We hope to highlight why Palmer is a significant figure in history, and how interpreting his thought will further the general understanding of Southern nineteenth-century public theology. The questions we bring to Palmer’s writings are quite different from those for whom Palmer wrote. He dealt with the exigencies of particular crises in a certain time and place, whereas we are critically analysing larger historical, philosophical, and theological questions about the proper role of the Christian and the church in relationship to society. It is our hope that this study will be useful to pastors and public thinkers of our day as they sort through the issues of church and state.

We believe that Palmer is worthy of close examination because of his influence, and because he reflected on the extraordinary changes in the culture of the United States. It is intriguing that Palmer developed his public theology within the rubric of the Southern Presbyterian Church’s particular understanding of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Samuel S. Hill, Jr. briefly defines the spirituality of the church as ‘its deliberate disengagement from secular matters in the interest of “minding its own business.”’ 7 Marthame E. Sanders III explains, ‘It maintained that God’s sovereign power on earth had been divided between church and state. The church was responsible only for spiritual concerns such as evangelism and piety. Therefore, the church had no authority to speak to social or political concerns.’ 8 There appears to be tension in Palmer’s thought between Christian public theology and the church’s essential non-involvement in civil affairs, which we will explore.

Palmer is significant in the development of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, because of his adaptation of his public theology to the rapidly changing world of

the postbellum South, which he was able to do because of his understanding of the doctrine of providence.9

B.) Calvinism

As a Southern Presbyterian, Palmer stood in a theological line that can be traced back to John Calvin. We limit our consideration of Calvinism to those particular areas of thought that bear directly upon Palmer as a public theologian, namely a distinct theology of providence and the divine decree, and a method of Biblical interpretation. The Southern theologians saw themselves of guardians of pure Calvinist orthodoxy, unlike the ‘tainted’ forms that had come to prevail in New England.10 For Calvin, God had predetermined everything that transpires in history according to God’s will, including which human beings would receive salvation from him.

As a Calvinist, Palmer stood in a theological tradition that had long reflected upon what it meant to be a Christian in public life. David VanDrunen notes that, for Calvin, Christ was the ruler of both the civil and churchly realms, but he ruled them in different ways.11 This basic understanding has driven Calvinists to attempt to understand precisely how the church and the individual Christian ought to relate to society. Kenneth Scott Latourette states, ‘[t]he Reformed Churches...were more hopeful that through the labours of those who in faith had accepted the salvation offered by that grace God would effect within history an approximation of his kingdom.’12 Calvinists share a common understanding that Christians have an obligation to the civil sphere, but they have differed over what this means.

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9 Doralyn J. Hickey, *Benjamin Morgan Palmer: Churchman of the Old South* (University Microfilms, 1990), 172.
Calvinism underwent several significant periods of doctrinal development. The one most germane to our current study is the Puritan experiment of the seventeenth century. Originally a ‘purifying’ movement within the Church of England, it quickly became a trans-denominational movement. The Puritan Westminster Confession of Faith, commissioned by Parliament in 1643, remained the doctrinal standard of the Presbyterian Church in Palmer’s day. In particular, Puritanism came to emphasise the subjective nature of the Christian life, while carrying forward earlier Calvinistic concerns about society and doctrine.

C.) American Puritanism and Evangelicalism

Puritanism heavily influenced American emigration, and thereby shaped the American evangelical character. The Puritan emphasis on the individual’s relationship with God, as well as its public theology, was bequeathed to Palmer through his New England Congregationalist roots and via his theological education.

Puritan Calvinism is a strand in what has come to be regarded as evangelicalism. Though elastic in meaning, we will use it to show the areas of concern that Presbyterians of Palmer’s era held in common with other Protestant bodies in the American context.

Richard Carwardine notes its catholicity:

Their creed comprehended a Trinitarian God; the depravity, guilt and condemnation of all mankind; an atonement by the Son of God sufficient to procure man’s salvation; regeneration by the Holy Ghost producing repentance and faith; and the final judgment of all men, resulting in everlasting misery for the wicked and blessedness for the righteous.

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13 It still is the confessional document of many Presbyterian denominations throughout the world, and is included as one of several confessional standards of the PC(USA), North America’s largest Presbyterian body.

14 Presbyterianism in the South was heavily influenced by Princeton University and, later, Princeton Seminary. Princeton began during the Great Awakening as a theological institution friendly to the revival, and that spirit persisted. The seminary at Columbia, where Palmer would briefly teach, was erected on the Princeton model. Edwards’ influence was felt at Princeton through his students and descendants who taught there. Cf. David B. Calhoun, Princeton Seminary: The Majestic Testimony, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1996), 411–12, 193.

Donald G. Mathews defines evangelicalism as a Christian belief system ‘centred on the new birth and a subsequent life of devotion, discipline and missionary zeal.’ Anne C. Loveland adds that evangelicalism is often married to a counter-cultural, reformist impulse. George M. Marsden emphasises that evangelicalism is united by ‘the proclamation of Christ’s saving work through his death on the cross and the necessity of personally trusting him for eternal salvation.’ We contend Palmer was a Calvinistic evangelical. Though Palmer and his contemporaries may have viewed themselves merely as Calvinists and not as theological innovators, we will explore to what extent historical circumstances and the ideological climate of the day shaped Palmer’s public theology.

D.) Providence and Progress

This thesis will argue that B. M. Palmer formed his public theology around an understanding of providence that discerned the will of God from observing history. Palmer applied that doctrine to American public life in such a way as to legitimate the status quo. We will argue that his application of the doctrine of providence was the confusion of what ‘is’ with what ‘ought to be’, or the decretive with the preceptive will of God. Palmer was inconsistent in his application of this doctrine because he believed that many events that happened were wrong. Even so, Palmer’s strident defence of the antebellum Southern way of life was anchored in this application of the doctrine of providence. Later in his life, Palmer’s use of this doctrine allowed him to make peace with the Southern defeat and become a champion of American imperialism and what he viewed as social progress and imperial expansion.

19 For a case study of other thinkers on this point Laura Rominger, ‘The Bible, Commonsense, and Interpretive Context: A Case Study in the Antebellum Debate over Slavery,’ Fides et Historia 38, no. 2 (Summer / Fall 2006): 54.
There are other features of Palmer's public theology that derive from this view of providence. Palmer's life experiences, including family tragedy, the devastation of the Civil War, and the annual yellow fever epidemics in New Orleans ensured that his view of providence did not deny the difficulties of human experience. Palmer conceived of this life as a sanctifying challenge to be faced; God, in his providence, had ordained difficulties for the believer's own spiritual welfare. Life was a trial by ordeal, and matters such as slavery were ordained by God to prepare one for Heaven and thus not to be resisted.\textsuperscript{20} For the Southern Presbyterian, life itself was a mission from God, and its tragic nature was a test of faith. Social rank was only important insofar as it furthered holiness and order served as a way to live a civilised existence in a rebelling world.

In providential wisdom, God had imposed an ideal order on society. Adherence to it led to prosperity. Social stratification, Palmer believed, was the crucial element for social progress.\textsuperscript{21} Order was the only hope for a reasonably secure and happy life in a chaotic world.\textsuperscript{22}

For Palmer, God's providence ordained the family as the basic unit of the orderly society, and each person within the household had a divinely assigned role to play. God had also decreed a form of government that fostered the ideal society, finding in the Israelite judges a model for the supremacy of the states over the federal government.\textsuperscript{23} He argued against the American political ideal of government deriving its authority from

\begin{footnotes}
\item[20] Hickey notes that otherworldly concerns dominated Palmer's sermons. cf. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 157; this can be seen in one mother's bedtime words to her son 'Soon my son you will exchange the bed for the grave, and your clothes for a winding she et.' Wyatt-Brown notes that this led not to despair but a motivation to steward one's life for the good. cf. Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners (Baton Rouge, LA and London: LSU Press, 1985), 50.
\item[21] Bertram Wyatt-Brown contends that the Southern love of order was a product of the Enlightenment, cf. Yankee Saints and Southern Sinners, 15.
\end{footnotes}
the consent of the governed via the social contract. On the contrary, God had instituted government, and had invested authority in patriarchs. Palmer believed that humanity was inherently unequal, and therefore, society was inescapably stratified. This is what perhaps led Palmer to believe that the Confederacy was God's ordained means to preserve a Christian society amid an apostatizing world. In this, Palmer echoed much of the political philosophy of John C. Calhoun, a leading political figure of his day. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese contend that patriarchal authority and wifely submission were the bases for scriptural defences of slavery. Likewise, they argue that class and race distinctions were extensions of patriarchal order, so much so that the individual 'was strictly defined as a social being.' Palmer's emphasis on the social responsibilities of differing peoples bears out their argument.

Fox-Genovese and Genovese define familial order in terms of power and authority, asserting that many Southerners believed a benevolent slaveholding republic was the only guarantee against a proletarian uprising. The slaveholding household was the bulwark of maintaining Southern society, a society inescapably rooted in a set system of superiors and inferiors. Eugene D. Genovese contends that Palmer did not believe slavery was an unmitigated good, but rather that the slave society was the most conducive to Christianity thriving among all classes. The slave society, Genovese maintains, grounded slaveholding in the benevolence of a providing master. The material interest he had in his human property lent itself to treating his slaves well.

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24 As Snay and others point out, social contract posits that isolated individuals cede a portion of their right of self-government to an authority for the purposes of order and defense. Palmer and others argued that man never existed without society and governance, and that order and submission were inalterable fixtures of human society.


26 Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 38 Calhoun served as vice-president under Andrew Jackson, and subsequently as Secretary of State, Secretary of War, and United States senator from South Carolina.


Self-interest, he argues, thus served the goal of order. Other scholars are less sanguine about the slave society. James W. Silver sees Palmer as a mere propagandist for the cause of slavery and the Southern nation, one who had completely equated the cause of the South with that of the Kingdom. Silver writes, 'Founded on “immutable laws of God,”' the Confederacy was pre-eminently 'the cause of God himself.'

Several scholars note the irony that Palmer’s idealism gave way to the exigencies of the present when Southern culture came under attack. Palmer believed Southern slave culture was the only one in which Christianity could thrive, and yet, as Bertram Wyatt-Brown notes, it was precisely the eagerness of the Southern secessionists to cast off authority that introduced chaos into their lives.

Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. observes an even deeper irony: the life of the plantation household was anything but orderly and predictable. The master-slave relationship was a primary foundation of the Southern social order, and yet it was inherently unstable. Neither slave nor master knew whether good or ill treatment of the other would bring about more desirable circumstances. Slave and master were in a constant contest of wills. Perhaps the supreme irony was that Palmer, who advocated contentedness in bondage to others, preferred death to bondage himself, as Avery Craven notes.

Palmer’s view of Providence likewise explains his antipathy toward the North. Northern society had departed from God’s providential plans and had replaced it with a human-centred utopian ideal. The South, with its orthodox churches and patriarchal

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society, alone retained the blessing of God and was therefore useful to God in pursuing providential purposes. In Palmer’s thought, the spectre of revolutionary France showed just how dangerous the ideas of utopian dreamers were, and vividly displayed how quickly benevolent intentions became bloody.\(^{34}\) To him, the orthodox South was as pleasant a society as possible in a fallen world. The utopian North, in Palmer’s mind, was heterodox and willing to embrace violence as the means to force egalitarianism on an inherently unequal world. Palmer could not see, however, how the slave society was built upon violence, and how violent a patriarchal society would become when it felt its ideals under attack.

II. Palmer in the Context of the Study of Southern Public Thought

In any discussion of Southern historical studies, a limited general study of the nineteenth-century South, and the prevailing theses posited about it must enter the conversation. Palmer’s thought ought to be compared to these prevailing theses to see whether and to what extent they shed light on his thought. There are five basic theses in nineteenth century Southern studies, which we term honour, power, sincerity, guilt, and evangelical.

A.) The Honour Thesis

The honour thesis, advocated by Bertram Wyatt-Brown and others, explains the South in terms of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon presuppositions that lingered beneath a thin Christian veneer.\(^{35}\) As the North became dominated by a bustling merchant class, it


embraced a worldview aimed at social betterment. As concern over personal sin and redemption waned, issues of social justice filled the void, with abolition at the forefront.

The honour theorists argue that the South saw itself as the extension of old Anglo-Saxon values: a hierarchal society, closely tied to the land, that held an essentially conservative view of the world. Wyatt-Brown defines honour this way:

the cluster of ethical rules, most readily found in societies of small communities, by which judgments of behaviour are ratified by community consensus. Family integrity clearly understood hierarchies of leaders and subordinates, and ascriptive features of individuals and groups are guides for those evaluations...honour served all members of society in a world of chronic mistrust, particularly so at times of crises, great or small.\(^\text{36}\)

John Boles and Mitchell Snay offer a version of this view that emphasises religion's central role. Boles agrees that the Northern social ethic was the outgrowth of Puritan public concern, but notes, as others have, how quickly Southern aristocratic religion gave way to a moralistic, pietistic faith that eschewed addressing larger social ills.\(^\text{37}\)

Boles, on the one hand, asserts that Southern secessionism and pro-slavery apologia were anomalies, as Yankee aggression pressed Southerners into a strident defence of privilege.\(^\text{38}\)

Boles points out that Southern religion was susceptible to a particular sort of otherworldly evangelicalism that stressed one's individual relationship with God to the extreme of ignoring societal problems. Snay, alternately, suggests that proslavery apologia was rooted deep in the axioms of Southern thought, highlighting the centrality of Common Sense Realism. The root issue, according to Snay, is more epistemological than spiritual. In the view of Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., the way such a hybrid of philosophy

\(^{36}\) Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, xv.


\(^{38}\) Boles, 'The Southern Way of Religion,' 243.
and evangelical faith was presented shaped the subsequent life of individual and culture. In the North, evangelicalism was married to reform; in the South, it resisted reform.\textsuperscript{39}

B.) The Power Thesis

The power thesis is advanced by Drew Gilpin Faust, Jack Maddex, James Silver, R. Drew Smith, Larry E. Tise, and in the early work of Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, among others.\textsuperscript{40} The assertion that the causes of the sectional strife were largely economic aligns with this view: the capitalist North, fuelled by immigrant labour, versus the agrarian South, more concerned with the maintenance of privilege than cultural advance.\textsuperscript{41} Hesseltine argues that the entire Confederate scheme was to maintain the privilege of the white gentry by dividing those who should have been natural allies, the black and white poor.\textsuperscript{42} David Donald strongly contests Hesseltine’s thesis, arguing that the lives of the gentry and the yeoman were so interconnected that there was scarcely any tension between rich and poor in the old South.\textsuperscript{43} This group of scholars notes that Scripture sanctioned slavery and thus appears to justify the exploitation of an underclass.\textsuperscript{44} Drew Gilpin Faust, however, acknowledges a potential weakness in seeing Southern society as essentially a matter of exploitation of free

\textsuperscript{39} Bruce, Jr., ‘Religion, Society and Culture in the Old South: A Comparative View,’ 410.
\textsuperscript{42} W. B. Hesseltine, ‘Some New Aspects of the Pro-Slavery Argument,’ The Journal of Negro History 21, no. 1 (January 1936): 14.
\textsuperscript{44} The Genoveses and Hesseltine are hard to characterize as their views contain elements of several theses.
labour, and the church as merely a stanchion of the status quo, admitting that the same evangelical ethos that justified the slave society also reformed and undermined it.  

Jack P. Maddex, Jr. is one of the few historians to address the place of the spirituality of the church in the social structure of the South. Maddex argues that the spirituality doctrine was not so much a convenient antebellum cover for slavery, but rather tended to be read back onto the past by churchmen after the war as a means of self-justification, and as a way to continue to ratify the segregated society. He also argues that Southern church life and doctrinal development cannot be understood without understanding how tightly interwoven slavery was with its maturation. In other words, Southern Presbyterianism evolved in such a way that ratified the existing power structures of the time and was completely shaped by them.

Likewise, Samuel S. Hill, Jr. highlights the central role of religion in the power dynamic of the South. He argues that there is a discernible Southern theology, and demonstrates this by way of contrasting Southern piety with that which came to characterise Northern Christianity; both shared the same Calvinistic roots but walked diverging paths. Hill asserts that Calvinistic Christianity has three distinct supporting


46 For a working definition of the spirituality of the church as Palmer understood it, cf. pp. 186 and 220.


49 Maddex, ‘”The Southern Apostasy” Revisited: The Significance of Proslavery Christianity’, 469.

pillars: piety, theology, and ethical responsibility. In the North, ethical responsibility began to take on a far more progressive character, what would later become known as the 'social gospel.' In the South, however, personal piety trumped both doctrine and ethical responsibility, which was recast almost wholly in terms of personal behaviour. The chief concern of Southern evangelicalism became predominately the soul and its relation to God through Christ. Hill notes the deep irony of this brand of Christianity in that it developed, in his estimation, as a way of ratifying and supporting a 'Christian' social order.

C.) The Sincerity Thesis

The sincerity thesis is that the slavery apologists were sincere in their belief that slavery arose from the pages of Scripture, and that it was the highest and most civilised form of human society. The apologists believed slavery was the best way to civilise the black race, and to bring the gospel to them. These scholars include the later Genovese, Christopher Duncan, and Palmer’s early biographer Thomas Cary Johnson. Doraly J. Hickey and others contend that this is far too generous an estimation, for there were orthodox voices in their era decrying African chattel slavery, advancing arguments that the Southern divines, who were assuredly aware of them, never bothered to answer.

D.) The Guilt Thesis

The guilt thesis is asserted by W. B. Hesseltine, Donald G. Mathews, Charles G. Sellers, Kenneth M. Stampp, and others. The essence of this argument is that the South found
itself in an inescapable economic dependence upon slavery. Southern apologists sensed that slavery conflicted with evangelical and American ideals but developed vigorous polemics on behalf of slavery that was, in effect, protesting too much: a brittle defensiveness that developed by knowing, deep down, that they were wrong. Gaines M. Foster demonstrates that this assertion rests upon little evidence, and David Donald agrees. Foster writes, ‘In an evangelical culture, given to public or at least to private confession of sin, southerners with a conscious sense of failing to live up to religious ideals by owning slaves would have confessed that sin more readily than surviving evidence indicates.’ Elsewhere, Foster points to the work of Eugene D. Genovese and Bertram Wyatt-Brown, each of whom contends that the Southern proslavery polemicist, reading his Bible literally, would have no grounds for guilt over slavery; indeed, just the opposite. It seems more plausible that slavery’s defenders rose in number and stridency simply because its opponents grew more numerous and vociferous. As Donald points out, what they were defending was not chattel slavery’s gritty current reality, but rather a halcyon mythic past.

E.) The Evangelical Thesis

John Patrick Daly, Mark A. Noll and E. Brooks Holifield advance what we term the evangelical thesis. Rather than focusing on the South as a whole, and religion as a part of that whole, these historians assert that evangelicalism was culturally predominant, and therefore led the way in the sectional schism. Daly advances the idea that, in its early

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57 Donald, ‘The Proslavery Argument Reconsidered,’ 16.  
days, the United States was united by a prevailing evangelical theology that stressed conversion, the afterlife and the cultivation of piety. Noll, by contrast, charts how the North and South were on very different theological trajectories by the time the sectional crisis arose. The North was bent towards a more activist, socially oriented Christianity that was more inventive and less dogmatic than the South. The South, however, clung to a rigid Biblical literalism that served to justify slavery and fuel the flame of secessionism.

Holifield presents the possibility that historians rightly assume that evangelicalism shaped the Southern worldview, but wrongly assume that what prevailed was a completely otherworldly and simplistic frontier religion. He argues that, on the contrary, Southern thought was shaped by a group of one hundred 'gentlemen theologians' whose knowledge ranged far beyond the Bible and theology, encompassing every field of human endeavour, and seeing a deep unity that transcended the divisions of human knowledge. This is a helpful insight because it gives due prominence to the reign of moral philosophy and helps in understanding apparent contradictions in Palmer's thought: his social and heavenly concerns, and his strict Biblicism and wide-ranging intellectual interests. Though Holifield mentions Palmer among this elite group of opinion-makers, he does not elaborate on Palmer's unique contribution.

Each of these theses will aid our attempt to place Palmer in the overall intellectual and cultural life of the antebellum South as we explore how he employed his understanding of the doctrine of providence in developing his public theology. One scholar deserves note for standing somewhat outside of the prevailing schools of thought. Michael O'Brien, in his *Conjectures of Order*, seeks a more complex explanation for nineteenth century Southern intellectual thought than he sees in other scholars. He argues that too often Southern thought has been viewed as pre-modern, feudal, static,

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and as bound up in the life of the plantation. Moreover, many scholars, he contends, view Southern thought as merely derivative and intellectually shallow. His argument is that Southern life was far too chaotic, and fed by too many streams, to be either static or simplistic. Rather, Southern intellectual thought took on a life of its own, blending and melding disparate philosophical strands, incorporating the pragmatic exigencies of changing times, and therefore deserves to be considered as a discrete intellectual culture. As we shall see, this was certainly true of Palmer. Though Palmer viewed himself as a stanchion of the ancient order, his thinking adapted to changing times and, whether self-consciously or not, incorporated a wide variety of thought. Far from being pre-modern, Palmer's adherence to Realism and the inductive principle led him to embrace the fledgeling social sciences as being able to supply impartial data to support his philosophical claims. Palmer's public thought is the product of far more influences than merely Old School Calvinism or an appeal to a supposed monolithic, stagnant, and unchanging Southern worldview.

III. Background Information for Interpreting Palmer's Public Theology

A.) Palmer’s Life and Times as a Key to His Public Theology

Benjamin Morgan Palmer was born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1818. He was educated at Amherst College in Massachusetts. His biographers all note how set-upon he felt as part of a very small cadre of Southern students in a hotbed of abolitionism.\(^\text{61}\) While there, the faculty pressured Palmer to break confidence about the proceedings of a literary society. Threatened with expulsion, Palmer withdrew, even after the faculty

\(^\text{61}\) Hickey, *Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, 14 Beecher was theologically progressive, an early and foremost abolitionist, and the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* aroused popular indignation over slavery.
relented. All three biographers find it significant that Palmer himself related the incident later in life, justifying his behaviour, even though he was a young teen at the time.

Palmer’s Carolina Low Country roots and his classical education contributed to his public theology. As we noted previously, Palmer received his training in an environment which viewed all knowledge as interconnected, and highly valued empirical data, and where Scripture reigned supreme. South Carolina was the first state to secede from the Union and is therefore often viewed as the cradle of secession. William W. Freehling notes how diverse economic and social forces united to transform South Carolina from an ardently nationalist state into a proudly sectional one. For our purposes, a nationalist state would place priority on the power and identity of the federal government, and a sectional one would favour explicitly regional (in this case, Southern slaveholding) interests.

Erskine Clarke has demonstrated just how vital and vibrant the Reformed presence in the Low Country was during this period. Many of the Southern Presbyterian leaders grew up in this hotbed of orthodox Calvinism and Deep South slave culture. Later, many of these men would found Columbia Seminary in South Carolina’s capital city. They would also exercise a dominant role in the South Carolina College, dethroning the reign of the Enlightenment in the faculty and curriculum. Palmer would pastor First Presbyterian Church in Columbia for twelve years, and served briefly on the seminary faculty, where he would develop a formative friendship with James Henley Thornwell. We will endeavour to show how the intellectual milieu of Columbia was significant in the development of Palmer’s thought.

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62 Duncan, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 21–22.
63 Ibid., 21.
64 Freehling, Prelude to Civil War.
Palmer's idealisation of the Southern way of life may be reflective of his experience as a member of the educated Southern gentry. He had experienced the North and had heard what he considered grossly unfair mischaracterizations of Southern culture. This perhaps contributed to his later defensiveness and his opinions about Northern motivations. We may discover that Palmer's Providence-based public theology was a unique amalgam of nineteenth-century philosophy, orthodox Old School Calvinism, and his Carolina roots.66

A half-century as a prominent pastor in New Orleans likely shaped Palmer's view of how Scripture relates to public life. Palmer arrived in New Orleans nearly a decade before secession. Because New Orleans is a seaport at the mouth of the Mississippi River, the main economic artery of the middle of the American Continent, initially there was significant pro-union sentiment. Many viewed Palmer as the one who shifted public sentiment towards secession.67 New Orleans fell to the Union in the spring of 1862, three years before the Confederacy surrendered. Palmer, believed to be a primary propagandist for secession, was forced to flee. After the defeat of the South, Palmer returned to New Orleans, then under the hated Reconstruction regime.68 His ministry would span Reconstruction and the implementation of segregation in New Orleans. How these massive social upheavals may have affected his views has not been thoroughly examined.

New Orleans was the South's largest city and had a distinctive culture. Because it was a major seaport, it had long been home to a diverse ethnic population. It had a sizeable free black population, numbering 20,000 (in a city of approximately 170,000), nearly equalling the enslaved population. Roger Fischer argues that both free and

enslaved blacks enjoyed a great deal more freedom of movement and association than either of them did in other portions of the South.\textsuperscript{69} Louisiana was one of three states where blacks outnumbered whites.\textsuperscript{70} After the war, New Orleans embraced legal segregation of the races earlier than any other Southern city, as an effort to bring order to a chaotic situation. We will explore how these factors may have influenced Palmer's thoughts about order and the social upheaval caused by the Northern utopianism that, in Palmer's mind, had provoked the War.

\textbf{B.) Calvinism as a Key to Palmer’s Public Theology}

As we asserted earlier, Palmer derived his view of Providence from his Calvinistic theological commitments. Doralyn Hickey asserts a causal link between Palmer’s Calvinist theological commitments and his understanding of the spirituality of the church. This is a unique argument, distinguishable from David VanDrunen's contention that Calvin and subsequent Calvinists advanced the doctrine of the spirituality of the church.\textsuperscript{71} Hickey's argument is that Calvinistic theological presuppositions about human nature support a stratified view of society. It is our contention, however, that it is more precisely Palmer’s appropriation of the Calvinistic understanding of Providence, not Calvinism’s dim view of human nature, that drove his view of social stratification, and indeed his entire public theology.

Calvinist social thought up to Palmer's time was not monolithic, and yet many Calvinists agreed that the Bible had a significant bearing on the social order. Particularly in its British and New England manifestations, Puritan Calvinism knew little, if any,
distinction between private religion and public life. This adds a key component to Palmer’s understanding of how God’s Providence operated. In Palmer’s understanding, God had a unique mission for every great society and nation. The United States, in Palmer’s estimation, had passed through several phases. It began as an ideal: the American Republic. Vast portions of that Republic had abandoned God’s providential mission, and God’s purposes then resided in a Southern remnant. With the defeat of the South, God’s purposes returned to the nation as a whole, as it expanded across the continent and exerted its civilising influence around the world.

C.) The Place of Slavery and Racial Inferiority in Palmer’s Public Theology

Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, among others, contend that the antebellum South’s defining characteristic was its ‘peculiar institution,’ African chattel slavery. The Genovese’s contend that slavery was not incidental to Southern culture, but rather central to its life and thought. Palmer’s writings demonstrate this as he defended the institution using both Scripture and contemporary race theory.

Southern clerical intellectuals devoted many of their energies to a Biblical defence of slavery. Historical studies note how slavery went from being a tolerable evil to a positive good in the thinking of the Southern religious establishment. Many scholars believe that this increased abolitionist fervour in the North first put the South on the defensive, and then eventually caused them to go on the offensive. Increasing cultural and political pressure is widely acknowledged to have exacerbated the situation.

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74 William Sumner Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1960).
75 These pressures included the following: the Nullification Controversy, when tariffs enacted during the presidency of John Quincy Adams were viewed by the South as punitive, and, under the leadership of John C. Calhoun, South Carolina asserted the right to ‘nullify’ any federal law that encroached upon her constitutional rights. The Missouri Compromise allowed slavery in states in the former Louisiana territory entering the Union, if they were south of the north 36° 30’ parallel, as well as Missouri, though it fell north of the line. The Wilmot Proviso was a failed effort to preclude slavery in any territories obtained
Others, however, see it as a need for the Southern intelligentsia to reassure itself of its morality. Because of Palmer’s commitment to Biblical literalism, we must consider Biblical interpretation and its place in Palmer’s thought. Based on his hermeneutics, Palmer defended the humanity of the African race against those who argued that blacks were an inferior species, even as he believed that black humans were innately inferior to whites. Palmer believed that God in his providence had assigned the black race a perpetually subservient role.

For our purposes, we will define racism as the view that those of a differing race are innately inferior, particularly regarding intellect and moral character. In Palmer’s case, it was the white race and Western culture that were superior to the black race and African and African-American cultures. Palmer’s racism was paternalistic: the black race was child-like, and thus needed to be cared for by benevolent whites. Although Palmer’s racism is typical of the educated Southern clergy of his day, its relative importance in his thought is a matter of some debate. Stephen Haynes explores the place of racial inferiority in Palmer’s thought in *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*. Haynes writes,

> A century after his death, it is impossible to ignore Palmer’s theological myopia. In fact, any honest reckoning of Palmer’s legacy must conclude that despite the respect and recognition accorded him during his lifetime, he was profoundly near-sighted in matters relating to race. Palmer is guilty of ignoring the vision of unity at the heart of the gospel and of replacing it with a myth of racial hierarchy. The infusion of Christian anthropology with racial or national myths has always spelt apostasy, as it did in Palmer’s case.

In the Mexican-American War. The question of self-determination was whether each territory applying for statehood ought to have the right to determine for itself whether they would be slave or free. All of these were viewed by the South as shifting the balance of power in the direction of abolition.

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77 Clarke, *Our Southern Zion*, 190–91.
78 In brief, the ‘Curse of Ham’ doctrine argues that Africans are descended from Ham’s son Canaan, the recipient of the curse on Ham for seeing his father, Noah’s, nakedness (Genesis 9:18-29).
To Haynes, racial inferiority and the ‘curse of Ham’ doctrine used to justify it from Scripture are central to Palmer’s thought. Other historians, the Genovese’s among them, disagree. The disagreement centres not on Palmer’s racism, but on whether such was foundational in Palmer’s worldview. This should be explored. Haynes notes a weakness in his own argument: Palmer never mentions Noah’s drunkenness or Ham’s response in any extant writings. The issue is significant because it goes to Palmer’s motives in his civic and ecclesiastical thought. Haynes agrees that Palmer wanted blacks to believe the gospel message. He highlights a possible conflict in Palmer’s thought: did Palmer believe that slavery was spiritually beneficial to the black race, or did he think slavery necessary because the black race was inherently inferior to the white race? Those two propositions may not be mutually exclusive, and yet one can see how Haynes senses a conflict between them.

Mark Noll argues that the proslavery hermeneutic of Southern Presbyterianism was itself flawed and cites as a counter-example African-American Presbyterian pastor Daniel Coker, who argued against perpetual slavery on the grounds of covenant theology. One finds a similar theologically conservative and exegetical critique by William Hosmer in 1853. Noll contends that proslavery theologians were wrong to equate the slavery practised in Biblical times with American chattel slavery, particularly because American slavery was predicated on the grounds of black racial inferiority. He also contends that the Southern Presbyterian literalist hermeneutic was grounded more

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80 Cf. also Peterson, *Ham and Japheth*.
in the American experience than it was in the Reformed tradition itself.\textsuperscript{85} He links this with Nathan O. Hatch’s contention that American religion ‘democratised’ after the Great Awakening, and that the most nuanced hermeneutic of early Calvinism gave way to a rigid, unmediated application of ancient Scripture to contemporary life, which we explore in chapter 3.

Noll observes that the Reformed literal hermeneutic was taken for granted by both the proslavery and abolitionist thinkers. The proslavery thinkers saw vindication of the slave society in the lives of the patriarchs, the Jewish law, and the teachings of Paul. The abolitionists agreed with the proslavery men that the Bible sanctioned human servitude, but believed Scripture was wrong. Noll points out that it seems to have occurred to very few people that other orthodox hermeneutical alternatives were available. The argument thus degenerated as the Southern divines decried the ‘heterodoxy’ of abolitionism.\textsuperscript{86} Palmer contended that, if one believed the Bible, he supported slavery, if one were against chattel slavery, he was against the literal teaching of Scripture.\textsuperscript{87} Many Northern clergy served this narrative well because, as Samuel S. Hill, Jr. contends, the most vocal of them had abandoned traditional Protestant Christian orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{88}

\textbf{D.) Common Sense Realism in Southern Historical Study}

Several scholars contend that Palmer and his contemporaries were not strictly Biblical in their thinking but derived much of their theology and public thought from Scottish

\textsuperscript{86} James Henley Thornwell thus explains this view, ‘The parties in the conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders. They are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins on the one side, and friends of order and regulated freedom on the other. In one word, the world is the battleground – Christianity and Atheism the combatants; and the progress of humanity at stake.’ in Gordon Rhea, ‘Why Non-Slaveholding Southerners Fought’ (Charleston Library Society, Charleston, SC, 25 January 2011), http://www.civilwar.org/education/history/civil-war-overview/why-non-slaveholding.html.
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Hill, \textit{The South and the North in American Religion}, 85.
Common Sense Realism, which ruled the thought life of the day in America. Palmer was educated in Realism, but Thornwell, a devotee of Dugald Stewart, may have mediated much of it to him. Doralyn Hickey, however, contests this. Mitchell Snay points out the emphasis that Realism placed upon the duties of various relationships in society

made it highly useful to Southern clergymen concerned with the relationship between master and servant....To the nineteenth-century mind, religion and moral philosophy were considered complementary and mutually reinforcing modes of thought...moral philosophy was thus instrumental in articulating the slaveholding ethic.

One can clearly see how this philosophy undergirded Palmer’s emphasis upon hierarchical relationships. Realism’s chief characteristic was a comprehensive vision of the interconnection of disciplines from psychology to political theory. All of these moral truths were examined through the lens of science with rationalistic precision. Mitchell Snay contends that the entwining of the scientific, civil, and theological strands of knowledge made it easy to equate the cause of the South with the cause of God himself.

What most of these scholars miss, however, is how the Baconian principle of induction, embraced by Realist philosophers, was key in understanding the place of Providence in Palmer’s public theology. The principle of induction meant that the careful observer could ascertain truth from history and society just as surely and accurately as a scientist could ascertain physical laws by observation. Palmer believed that it was not difficult, therefore, to determine God’s purposes with some measure of certainty. Scientific observation of humanity and history could show where God was guiding history.

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89 While moral philosophy, or ethics, has been a subset of philosophy itself since its beginnings, 19th century thinkers used the term in a restrictive sense. Perhaps the simplest explanation of it is that it was a Calvinistic realist version of empiricism.
90 Hickey, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 107.
One may observe how moral philosophy developed in the work of Palmer’s friend, Joseph LeConte, the natural scientist and father of sociology. LeConte contended that the social organism is as subject to scientific study as is the natural organism. The social order could be engineered in a way that maximised human good. That time, however, was not at hand, as much as the abolitionist might wish it were. As for all living things, the process of adaptation was slow and ought not to be rushed. One will find Palmer resorting to these sorts of arguments to buttress his ‘Biblical’ understanding of the orderly society. As Faust notes,

for an age increasingly enamoured of the vocabulary and methods of natural science Biblical guidance was not enough. Man could and must determine his moral duties scientifically as well by examining the progressive revelation of God’s designs in history, which would provide...the needed ‘basis of our inductions’ about the proper social order.

Holifield points out that this did not leave traditional Presbyterian piety unchanged, but rather ‘recast the traditional Protestant demand for introspection, pure motivation, and self-control into new scientific forms. The descriptions in the moral textbooks of right willing, pure intention, moral sensibility, and harmony among the faculties translated the language of the prayer meeting into the jargon of a philosophical science.’ Further examination of Palmer’s thought bears out just how much realist philosophy infiltrated Calvinist piety.

E.) Palmer in the Context of Southern Historical Study on the Spirituality of the Church

Palmer’s biographers note that the spirituality of the church forms the underlying rubric of his social thought. The spirituality of the church is also addressed incidentally in many of the histories of the antebellum era. For the amount of attention it has received,
there has been relatively little study of the doctrine itself, and there is apparently little consensus as to a definition. James Henley Thornwell [1812-1862] provides a nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterian understanding of the doctrine:

The provinces of Church and State are perfectly distinct, and the one has no right to usurp the jurisdiction of the other. The State is a natural institute, founded in the constitution of man as moral and social, and designed to realise the idea of justice. It is the society of rights. The Church is a supernatural institute, founded in the facts of redemption, and is designed to realise the idea of grace. The State aims at social order; the Church at spiritual holiness.\(^{96}\)

Thornwell was Palmer’s closest friend, and arguably his chief influence. Though Thornwell was a leading intellectual, Richard T. Hughes and Doralyn Hickey argue that Palmer should not be slighted in this regard.\(^{97}\) Hughes argues that Palmer made unique contributions to a distinctly Southern public theology: American culture was singularly preserved in the South, that it was the product of providential history and Biblical thought rather than Enlightenment principles, and that it ‘trembled on the brink of chaos whose demonic agent was deistic infidelity’.\(^{98}\) In this Hughes echoes John Miller Wells, who calls Palmer ‘The Christian Statesman,’ and notes ‘he stood foursquare for civic righteousness. He stood so uncompromisingly for civic righteousness and so unyieldingly for the spirituality of the church that his position was a difficult one.’ However, Wells notes, ‘He felt that he held for himself the key to this dilemma. The church, as such, had no right to appear in the arena of political affairs...She should quicken the consciences of her members so that they shall have nice perceptions of duty.’\(^{99}\)

Although Hickey asserts that Palmer was no mere parrot of Thornwell’s views, she does not explore what makes Palmer an original public theologian. Palmer was the

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\(^{97}\) Hickey, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 107, 109–10.


product of an era in which Christian ministers were educated and regarded to be the foremost public intellectuals, whose writings were widely read. Thornwell devoted most of his writing to academic theology, and Robert Lewis Dabney [1820-1898], arguably the South’s other leading Reformed theologian, limited the scope of his public theology to particular narrow practical issues. Palmer, on the other hand, addressed a broad spectrum of public issues at the level both of philosophy and practicality before diverse audiences. According to several historians, the writings and sermons of antebellum pastors from both the North and the South hastened the sundering of the nation, a sentiment echoed by the Southern politician John C. Calhoun and the abolitionist newspaper editor William Lloyd Garrison.100 B. M. Palmer stands out significantly in this estimation, as he leant his rhetoric to Southern secession, and was credited by many as a motivating force for the shift in opinion in Louisiana towards secession.

Other scholars discount the influence of religious thought in the sectional crisis, noting that large swaths of the Southern populace and political leaders were irreligious. They assert that the churches were filled with women and slaves, and the preacher had little direct influence on society.101 As noted above, religious periodicals and secession sermons were widely circulated. Others argue that the primary impulse of American Christianity was populist and democratic –men like Palmer, and Presbyterians in general, were anachronisms in the age of democratic religion. Thus, those who hold such a view argue that the effect of men like Palmer was limited to a very privileged and small class of people.102 Many scholars contend, however, that Palmer and others of his cohort

100 Snay, Gospel of Disunion, 100; Smith, A Question of Authority, 8; Genovese, "Religion in the Collapse of the American Union," 78.
exercised massive influence among societal leaders, even amid the ‘democratising’ of American religion.\footnote{Lewis George Vander Velde, \textit{The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union, 1861-1869} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1932), 61.}

Christopher Duncan mentions Palmer’s adherence to the spirituality doctrine and notes that many scholars see it as a mere moral screen for slavery. Duncan, however, dismisses this claim, stating that it ‘fails to consider fully the rich heritage the doctrine enjoyed within the Reformed tradition.’\footnote{Duncan, \textit{Benjamin Morgan Palmer}, 125.}

John H. Leith explains:

\begin{quote}
The church has a right and under certain circumstances is bound to bear testimony in favour of or to condemn [moral reform] societies. Yet the church is limited by the authority of Scripture and cannot identify ambiguous political and social cases with the will of God. Individual Christians have the liberty to sponsor causes that as the church they cannot advocate. The doctrine does not separate Christian faith from the political, social, and economic life. It does deny the church the role of advocate for secular causes or the right to go beyond what is perceived to be the explicit teaching of Scripture in its proclamations.\footnote{John H. Leith, ‘Spirituality of the Church,’ in \textit{Encyclopedia of Religion in the South} (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1984), 731.}
\end{quote}

Jack Maddex argues that, if the spirituality doctrine itself were not new, then the Southern Presbyterians implemented it in a novel way. In theory, they muzzled the church against speaking out against any moral ill that happened to be ‘social’ and not ‘spiritual,’ though Thornwell himself notes that the church may humbly petition against wicked laws. This begs the question of who gets to define the line between sacred and secular. Ernest Trice Thompson asserts that Palmer made an important distinction for himself: when Palmer spoke on social issues, he did so as a citizen and not as a pastor.\footnote{Ernest Trice Thompson, \textit{Presbyterians in the South}, V. 3: Presbyterian Historical Society. Publication Series 13 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 262.}

Maddex questions whether that distinction existed anywhere else but in Palmer’s mind. He argues that the Southern divines did not believe in any separation of the state from the church, calling them ‘pro-slavery social activists who worked through the church to defend slavery and reform its practice.’\footnote{Maddex, ‘From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State,’ 438–39.}
definition, which we quoted earlier, was more a debating point than a settled position. Maddex contends that the Southern divines were theocrats who only later appropriated Stuart Robinson’s doctrine of the spirituality of the church, and read it back into Thornwell’s, and their own, stated positions.

In his examination of Stuart Robinson, Preston Graham gives another definition of the spirituality of the church. He asserts that the doctrine of the spirituality of the church can only be understood by distinguishing between a non-political and an apolitical church. The non-political church is completely silent on matters in the civil realm, while the apolitical church may speak to civil matters if the Bible did: Presbyterians were a-political. However, for many historians, the juxtaposition of this separatist doctrine and the defence of slavery and secession are too convenient. The doctrine was nothing other than a justification for refusing to stand against the prevailing evil of a culture. Dwight Lowell Dumond summarises,

A people who, over a long period of years, practice injustice as a part of their daily routine, who feel themselves commissioned by the Creator to develop a superior type of culture, who become so presumptuous of their lily-whiteness of character that the slightest aspersion must be atoned by the blood of the offender ... who are so everlastingly sure they are right, that they will not brook discussion -such a people come eventually to have a distorted view of everything. Especially do they feel that those who oppose them are obnoxious and hate them for being so.

This raises questions of historians and moral judgments that we must address. It could be that Palmer was self-deluded, believing that his prolific engagement in Southern causes was not a contradiction of his convictions. There is evidence to suggest, however, that this is not the case, in that he at times expressed regret about his political

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108 Ibid., 441–42.
109 The pastor in the ‘border states’ was in a precarious position. These were states that did not secede, yet allowed slaveholding. The allegiances of the population were, therefore, mixed, and there are notable cases of pastors who were unable to survive amid such conflicting currents. Robinson’s doctrine charted a possible way of survival, namely by the church saying nothing at all about the civil realm.
110 Preston D. Graham, A Kingdom Not of This World: Stuart Robinson’s Struggle to Distinguish the Sacred from the Secular During the Civil War (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), 104.
involvement. Some have argued that Palmer was simply steamrolled by the times, and lost perspective. This is certainly a possibility, yet Palmer, to the end of his days, continued to speak and organise, as a pastor, in support of the Old South and public opposition to civic ills. One historian argues that Palmer’s views transitioned from the defence of the Old South to a forward-looking embrace of the progressive, modern nation-state, yet notes that Palmer, paradoxically, remained unrepentant of his earlier secessionism and proslavery views. Bobbie Malone, in her biography of Palmer’s friend and Reform Rabbi Max Heller, numbers Palmer among the liberal-minded pastors of the South. Likewise, David Donald argues that the maintenance of the slave society was not ‘a freakish aberration’ but rather a search for order ‘in a rapidly changing world.’ Thus, we search for an adequate definition: what did Benjamin Morgan Palmer understand the spirituality of the church to mean?

The answer to the question may perhaps be found in Palmer’s view of the relationship between church and state. To Palmer, church and state were distinct institutions that each had a role to play in establishing and maintaining the social order. When one intermeddled with the other, chaos resulted. In Palmer’s estimation, the genius of the American experiment was the disestablishment of the church. The slave society was the apex of order and thus fulfilled the Christian ideal. It was ‘law’ and therefore the province of the public sphere. It had a moral component, which the church should address. The church could speak to how slaves were treated, but it must not call slavery a sin, because the Bible, in Palmer’s estimation, sanctioned slavery. The church could speak out on the matter of overweening governmental power because the Federal

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government was overstepping its bounds in threatening to abolish slavery. The church had the duty, in the name of order, to rouse the citizenry to opposition. Palmer could always appeal to Calvin’s understanding, expressed in *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, that ‘lesser magistrates’ may overthrow tyrant overlords, for theological justification.\(^{116}\)

Palmer’s ‘Thanksgiving Sermon’ and other public declarations have attracted a fair amount of scholarly attention, are often cited as examples of fire-breathing secessionist oratory, and noted as examples of hypocrisy regarding the spirituality of the church, but they do not seem to have been examined as to their underlying public theology. Though these are crucial documents, other neglected writings of Palmer deserve attention as well: journal articles, and his book, *The Family in its Civil and Churchly Aspects*, where he lays out his understanding of social superiors and inferiors, as well as a skeletal political theory. All of these serve to illuminate his public theology.

The question of the criteria for judgment is a large one when looking at any culture complicit in what is today regarded as a monstrous evil. Here there is much debate. Some scholars believe that historical figures ought only to be judged against the backdrop of their time and experience—the vast majority of the educated world had few qualms, they say, about slavery until the late eighteenth century.\(^{117}\) Others argue that such institutions are clearly repugnant to all thinking people. This is an appeal to a transcendent moral norm, but that assertion raises problems. To which transcendent norm ought one to refer? Is it simply an emerging cultural consensus as to what things are reprehensible? There seems to be no sure footing here: cultural consensus shifts over time and varies from culture to culture. Without a moral arbiter to sort the good from evil, the argument that some things are self-evidently repugnant appears to fall to


\(^{117}\) Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class*. 
the ground. Thus, we must examine how to assess Palmer. How does Palmer stack up against his confessional standard, his denominational heritage, his political convictions, his personal moral code, and his commitment to an inerrant Christian Scripture, in light of the times in which he lived?\textsuperscript{118}

The question of the clergy’s proper role towards society cannot be ignored even as we endeavour to assess Palmer according to his norms and the norms of his day. James O. Farmer raises this question, writing, ‘Christian theology, while it was helping to shape the ideology of our region was being shaped –most moderns would say perverted- to accommodate the social and economic realities of Southern life.’\textsuperscript{119} Farmer’s argument is that the Confederacy, more than being a physical nation, was a metaphysical idea, bound by a series of transcendent ‘truths.’ This relates closely to our assertion that Palmer was a public theologian in the sense Martin E. Marty uses the term. Why Palmer, who appears to have subscribed to the Confederate metaphysical creed, may not have sensed the tension between the current social order and the Kingdom of God is a question to explore.\textsuperscript{120}

Palmer lived a long life spanning an extraordinary series of historical upheavals. How the world changed around him, and how he responded to those changes is key to understanding his public theology. Charles Reagan Wilson argues that Christianity so fused itself to the Confederate cause that, when that cause was lost, the ‘lost cause’ became its religion: an idealisation of the past and a wistful longing for the Christian society that was the old South.\textsuperscript{121} This is key to understanding both Palmer’s

\textsuperscript{118} Stout, Upon the Altar of the Nation, xii.
\textsuperscript{120} In Christian theology, the Kingdom (or City) of God denotes how the ideal society would function and what it would value. It is often used as a standard by which to judge social norms and practices. Cf. Saint Augustine, The City of God, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: The Modern Library, 1993); John Bright, The Kingdom of God: The Biblical Concept and Its Meaning for the Church (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1980).
intransigence in the decades following the War, and his paradoxical adaptability to changing circumstances. The world was changing around him, and Palmer welcomed much change, even while he claimed to adhere strictly to the antebellum social order.

Many regard Benjamin Morgan Palmer as one of the most influential public intellectuals of his day. He was also a deep and original thinker, but much of his worldview has been unexplored. What were the roots of his public theology? How, exactly, did a particular view of Providence that looked to historical events to derive moral norms form the basis of his public thought? How did this principle appear in relation to Palmer’s philosophical commitments, his Biblical interpretation and view of history, his thoughts on the nature of government, the church and its relation to the civil order, and race and civilisation? Moreover, what was the influence of his thought upon others, and upon subsequent history? These are the questions we seek to answer.
Chapter 2:

From Providence to Public Theology

In this chapter, we examine the doctrine of providence, upon which B. M. Palmer constructed his public theology. We will briefly define the doctrine and examine how it developed from Calvin through Reformed scholasticism, and in the American Old School Presbyterian tradition until Palmer’s time. We will see the cautious definition and use of the doctrine within the Calvinistic systematic theological tradition. We will then examine how some colonial American Puritans began to use the doctrine of providence to examine God’s purposes in history, particularly as they came to view the American colonies as possessing a unique role within God’s redemptive plan for the world. We then trace the beginnings of American public theology, particularly as it began to understand providence as discernible by the observation of historical phenomena. We sketch out Palmer’s providential view in brief and summary fashion, which we examine in more detail in Chapter 4.

I. The Doctrine of Providence in the Reformed Systematic Theological Tradition

A. The Doctrine of Providence in Calvin and The Westminster Confession of Faith

As an Old School Southern Presbyterian, B. M. Palmer subscribed in full to The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646). Created at the behest of the English Parliament, Westminster was intended to unify England and Scotland around a single creed. While Parliament never accomplished that goal, Westminster did become the confessional
standard of Presbyterianism worldwide. By Palmer’s day, however, many within Presbyterianism took exceptions to Westminster’s doctrines, Palmer did not.¹

In Reformed theology, the doctrine of God’s immutable decree, which concerns God’s divine eternal plan, was closely entwined with the doctrine of providence. The Confession explains that God’s providence is how the decree then works itself out in time:

God from all eternity, did, by the most wise and holy counsel of His own will, freely, and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass; yet so, as thereby neither is God the author of sin, nor is violence offered to the will of the creatures; nor is the liberty or contingency of second causes taken away, but rather established.²

Westminster was noted for its affirmation of God’s sovereign control over all things, qualified by a denial that God was the author of sin, or that sovereignty negated human choice. God sovereignly ordained whatever comes to pass, and yet, paradoxically, human beings made real, accountable choices:

God the great Creator of all things does uphold, direct, dispose, and govern all creatures, actions, and things, from the greatest even to the least, by His most wise and holy providence, according to His infallible foreknowledge, and the free and immutable counsel of His own will.

The almighty power, unsearchable wisdom, and infinite goodness of God so far manifest themselves in His providence, that it extends itself even to the first fall, and all other sins of angels and men; and that not by a bare permission, but such as has joined with it a most wise and powerful bounding, and otherwise ordering, and governing of them, in a manifold dispensation, to His own holy ends; yet so, as the sinfulness thereof proceeds only from the creature, and not from God, who, being most holy and righteous, neither is nor can be the author or approver of sin.³

Westminster presented God as intimately concerned with the specifics of history. God subsumed everything that happens under God’s sovereign, decretive will, which was fixed in the mind of God before time began. That created philosophical problems that the

¹ Cf. p. 71.
² The Westminster Confession of Faith, 3.1.
³ Ibid, 5.1 & 5.4.
scholastic Calvinists would attempt to solve, namely the relationship of the ideas in
God’s mind to the real existence of things, and whether or not those thoughts themselves
had a cause or a beginning.  

The Calvinistic doctrine of providence had roots that pre-existed the writing of
Westminster and continued to be expounded upon by prominent theologians after its
writing. The doctrine of providence was not new in John Calvin’s [1509-1564] day, but
he made it a prominent motif. Calvin wrote that God directed his entire creation down to
the most intricate details, ‘even to the least sparrow’, and that ‘all events are governed
by God’s secret plan.’ He rejected the idea that God’s governance of these things was
somehow merely general or permissive. God’s sovereign control extended even to the
wicked acts of evil persons: ‘From this we declare that not only heaven and earth and
the inanimate creatures, but also the plans and intentions of men, are so governed by his
providence that they are borne by it straight to their appointed end.’ In Calvin’s mind,
nothing happened by chance or contingency, though he did not deny the secondary
causes of natural law or human will. God was able to turn the hearts of human beings
however he willed to accomplish his purposes. He did so in such a way that exculpated
himself from evildoing, and upheld the moral responsibility of the creature, however.
Calvin did not address precisely how this happened, as Jonathan Edwards would later in
his *Freedom of the Will*. It was enough for Calvin that Scripture taught that God was
sovereign, yet free from evil moral taint and that humans beings were responsible for
their wicked actions. At the same time, Calvin strongly cautioned against using God’s
secret, decrative will as a moral standard for action. This is a very important point when
it comes to Palmer. Calvin argued against equating existing conditions or the actions of

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4 Cf. subsequent discussion, pp. 45-54.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid., 1.16.8, 1.17.9.
8 Ibid., 1.18.2.
free moral agents with the ‘good’ revealed will of God. For Calvin, Scripture and God’s revelation of his character in nature, not the unfolding events of history, were the means of determining God’s will. Temporal blessings may be a mark of God’s favour, and calamities a mark of his judgment or chastening hand, but to attempt to interpret such events went beyond what God permitted humanity to know.\(^9\)

### B. The Doctrine of Providence in Post-Reformation Calvinistic Scholasticism

Francis Turretin [1623-1687] was one of the most influential of the great post-Reformation Calvinist scholastic theologians. His *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* [1679-1685] was the standard nineteenth-century American systematic theology text. Turretin located a form of the doctrine of providence even in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, Seneca, and Cicero. Though Turretin followed the same general outline as Calvin in his understanding of providence, he explained the doctrine more thoroughly. He attempted to solve the thorny problem of the freedom of the will, arguing

> Predetermination does not destroy, but conserves the liberty of the will. By it, God does not compel rational creatures or make them act by a physical or brute necessity. Rather he only effects this—that they act both consistently with themselves and in accordance with their own nature...Hence these two can at the same time be true: man wills spontaneously, and, with respect to providence or promotion, he cannot help willing."\(^{10}\)

Turretin thus located responsibility for human actions solely within their responsibility and will, contending that God brought about human actions by enticing or provoking particular responses from humanity, by their natures and desires, 'by turning the will in a manner suitable to itself.'\(^{11}\) He likewise added more nuance to Calvin's understanding of how God can be sovereign over sin, and yet humanity be culpable for its wickedness, in that 'God wills not to hinder [sin] which is an efficacious affirmation. Thus, the

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\(^9\) Ibid., 1.18.2-3.
\(^{11}\) Ibid., 1:511, 513.
permission involves a positive act of the secret will by which God designedly and willingly determined not to hinder sin.'\textsuperscript{12} He argued that, despite appearances, his position was not at odds with Calvin’s view that God’s providential sway over sin is not merely permissive.\textsuperscript{13} At the same time, Turretin cautioned,

> No mortal...can either conceive or sufficiently explain what the efficacy of providence is. Three things most especially belong to it: (1) the offering of occasions; (2) the delivering over to Satan; (3) the immediate operation of God in the heart...God does not infuse wickedness into the minds of men, but draws out into action the wickedness latent there.\textsuperscript{14}

Turretin, like Calvin, was quick to differentiate between God’s revealed will and all that occurred in the world. God’s commands in Scripture, and not what had come to pass, were the bellwether for determining what was right and wrong.\textsuperscript{15}

Other Post-Reformation Calvinist scholastics echoed these sorts of cautions. Though their debates may seem arcane, they serve to illustrate their indebtedness to ontology and philosophical idealism, particularly in its Platonic form. This fact is particularly significant because we contend that Palmer’s view of providence is greatly affected by his embrace of Common Sense Realism, which sidestepped ontological debates, and emphasised epistemology and the Baconian inductive method as the way to determine truth from human history. For instance, the Calvinist scholastics debated in what sense the future history of the world existed in the mind of God: did all potentialities have real existence, in some sense, in the ideal world of God’s mind ‘before’ creation? Did all potentialities thus exist, or merely those that would become actualities by God’s effectual will? How do the realities of the present, created world correlate with the formal world inside God’s eternal mind? For example, Johann Heinrich Heidegger [1633-1698] contended:

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\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 1:516.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 1:517.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 1:520.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 1:527–28 Cf. also 538.
Preservation is not an act distinct from creation but is continued creation... If creation and preservation were two distinct actions, creation would first cease and preservation begin, either the same moment creation ceased or another succeeding moment. Yet (1) it would not begin the same moment; because since as regards God creation is an instantaneous action (for if it could last some time, it could last long enough for the thing to perish), so the thing would be said to be preserved at its own very first moment in which it was created, which is absurd. (2) Not at a moment following creation, because since time intervenes between any two moments, in the intervening time the thing would be neither created nor preserved. So just as creation is God’s eternal and effective order that the thing exists, so preservation is the same order of God’s that the thing previously ordered to exist exists forthwith. Both involve the same will and command of God and have the same end, namely that the actual esse of things, which is first produced in creation, continued when produced in preservation.16

One can see in the above paragraph something of the nature of the philosophical problems with which the post-Reformation scholastics wrestled: namely, how did what existed in God’s mind from eternity relate to what occurred in history? Moreover, how did God bring such ideas into the realm of real existence? These are the sorts of questions raised by philosophical idealism and essentially are concerned with theological ontology and the relationship of ideas to that which exists in time.17 Moreover, the post-Reformation scholastics affirmed that, though humanity could distinguish between into the ‘hidden’ and ‘revealed’ aspects of God’s will, in its essence, it was simple and undivided against itself. This could create problems because if God’s will is un-conflicted, then could God be said to be legitimating evil and rebellion against his revealed will? In general, they drew the line at such speculation, because Christian Scripture clearly states that God is not the author or approver of sin.18 Richard Muller notes,

The [Reformed] orthodox insist that the preceptive will of God is effectual in the sense that God does reveal all of his precepts—so that there is no barrier to or limit on the will to reveal or lay down a rule of conduct. God does in fact establish the precepts according to which righteousness is determined and according to which salvation might be merited. Yet, his perceptive will is often ignored by his

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17 Ibid., 140.
18 ‘When we say that all things are effects of God’s eternal decree, we mean both substances, and created accidents, and their results good and bad; but we exclude sin because it is not a res.’ Johannes Wollebius [1589-1629], quoted in ibid., 143.
rational creatures. As Mastricht indicates, the decretive or effective will of God determines events de facto while the preceptive, moral, or legislative will of God establishes the rules of conduct de jure. The Reformed orthodox here cite the passage in Augustine's *Enchiridion* where a contrast is made between a good son who prays for the health of his dying father and an evil son who wishes the death of his dying father: the former is obedient to the preceptive will of God and, unwittingly, out of accord with the decretive will—whereas the latter stands, just as unwittingly, in accord with the decretive will, but is consciously disobedient to the divine precept. The former son is righteous, but the latter is sinful and will be held accountable before God.\(^\text{19}\)

Likewise, the post-Reformation scholastics took pains to distinguish themselves from Stoic fatalism, in particular by upholding second ‘free’ causes and the real choices made by humanity. Petrus van Mastricht [1630-1706] wrote,

> The Reformed are of opinion that all effects, whether they be contingent or necessary, happen surely and undeviatingly, provided their causes have been aroused and predetermined by the divine influx. From these they conclude that since on the one hand the predetermining influx of providence is necessary to operation –on the other hand many things turn up here and there, both in Scripture and in daily experience, which are truly contingent, this predetermining influx does not abolish contingency or import universal necessity. In fact they hold that this influx is the cause of all contingency, so far as it constructs such causes for such effects and predetermines the things that happen outwith the intention of the causes and which by their nature have no necessary nexus. I shall add that neither in respect of subordinate causes is it unusual for the same effect to be contingent and necessary in different respects. Suppose two servants sent out by one master to return by the same road by themselves: these servants will meet of necessity as regards the master who sends them out, but contingently as regards the servants.\(^\text{20}\)

It may appear that Mastricht is speaking paradoxically here, and yet he could find Scriptural support for his position, including Peter's Pentecost speech in Acts 2:23, ‘This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men.’ There, Peter upheld God's sovereign control over the events of the crucifixion, and yet placed blame for the crucifixion on both Jew and Gentile. This illustrates that the post-Reformation Calvinistic scholastics did not look to the events of history as in any way an authoritative moral judgment on


\(^{20}\) Quoted in Heppe, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 266.
the actions of humanity. Though the scholastics' debates were over the nature of God's sovereign decree and its outworking in history, they appear far more concerned with the doctrine as it concerns God's being and knowing, rather than as it concerned interpreting contemporaneous historical events beyond the bounds of Scripture.\(^{21}\)

The post-Reformation Calvinistic scholastics looked for practical ways of applying the doctrine of providence to the lives of ordinary people. However, they did so in a way that was more personal and devotional than the more speculative application of Palmer in his public writings. Gisbertus Voetius [1589-1676] addresses the pastoral import of the doctrine of providence, cautioning that, just because God had established man's hour of death, this did not mean

> that [man] must rest, or look after his life in a more careless way, or neglect intermediaries but do what he is able to according to the prescription of the divine will...For if God should think it fit to provide effects for the preservation of life, He will provide them by means of the intermediaries He Himself prescribed; if not, then will He do what is good in His eyes.\(^{22}\)

Such pastoral advice is designed to comfort consciences that may be troubled by the determinism of Calvinism. Voetius often upholds the moral agency of the human will, and God's use of human's decisions in accomplishing his ultimate purposes. This is important to note because this sort of use of the doctrine of providence would be the view that Palmer expressed almost exclusively in his preaching. Voetius' purpose appears to be to provide practical guidance to the individual, but this is altogether different from the speculation about providence that characterises the doctrine in American Puritanism.

Palmer was schooled in these debates, although he nowhere reflects upon them. Nonetheless, they bear heavily upon Palmer's understanding of providence; they

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legitimise the ‘what is, is also what ought to be’ view that defined his public theology. If the will of God is simple and undivided against itself, then what occurs in the world must not just be by God’s bare permission, but by his active decree, and therefore morally good. In Palmer’s public theology, this extended to the enslavement of Africans and the extinction of North American tribal peoples, as well as the extension of the American empire. As those who were writing in a philosophical milieu formed by Plato and Aristotle, it was natural that the post-Reformation Calvinistic scholastics were concerned about the ideal forms and how they existed in God’s mind. Palmer’s realism, by way of contrast, was far more concerned with God’s work in human history. His use of the principle of induction and the influence of the nascent social sciences upon his thinking become evident in how he reads the hand of God in the events of human history.

C. American Old School Calvinistic Systematic Theology

1.) Charles Hodge [1797-1878]

Princeton seminary professor Charles Hodge was a highly influential theologian of nineteenth-century American Old School Presbyterianism and was formative in the thinking of Southern Presbyterians. Like the other theologians we have surveyed, Hodge urges caution when it comes to the doctrine of the decrees of God, and their providential outworking:

> It must be remembered that theology is not philosophy. It does not assume to discover truth, or to reconcile what it teaches as true with all other truths. Its province is simply to state what God has revealed in his Word, and to vindicate those statements as far as possible from misconceptions and objections. This limited and humble office of theology it is especially necessary to bear in mind, when we come to speak of the acts and purposes of God...In treating, therefore, of the decrees of God, all that is proposed is simply to state what the Spirit has seen fit to reveal on that subject.23

In this, Hodge distanced himself from the more philosophical debates of the past, and his subsequent discussion of the doctrine is notably simpler than is found in many of the post-Reformation scholastics. He did this, we discover, because he found them overly concerned with matters of ontology, over and against the revelation of God. Here, Hodge demonstrates the turn away from Idealist ontology and towards Realist epistemology. He asserted that it was a mistake for J. H. Heidegger and other Calvinist scholastics to speculate about continuous creation because Scripture clearly differentiates God’s actions of creation, preservation, and governance. He argued against the ‘continuous creation’ arguments of the Scholastics because he believed they destroyed all continuity of existence, and the evidence of the existence of an external world, the existence of second causes, and human responsibility. He contended that such views were indistinguishable from pantheism because in them only the mind of God could be said to have real existence.24 Hodge followed this with a lengthy discussion of just how God’s providence related to the material world, matter, plant and animal life, and physical law.25 In this, he gave wide scope to natural processes, which made fellow Old School theologian Robert Lewis Dabney uncomfortable. What this illustrates is the essential friendliness of Realist Calvinism to the insights of scientific observation and its utter impatience with philosophical speculation. For Hodge, science was useful as a tool for discerning God’s purposes from the natural realm. We will see the importance of this when it comes to exploring Palmer’s Realism and use of the principle of induction in chapter 3.

Hodge’s exploration of the doctrine of providence is key in coming to understand Palmer’s use of the doctrine. Palmer is not inclined to speculate about the ontological question. He is solely concerned with how providence works itself out in history. His

24 Ibid., 1:579–80 Cf. also 529-605.
interest is not in the relationship of ideal forms within the mind of God to external existences, but rather how God has revealed himself in the created order. What is more, Palmer believed he could determine such things by simple, scientific, inductive study of nations and their histories, as we discuss in chapter 7.

Hodge did address the practice of reading God’s purposes from history. He urged caution: ‘God is in history, and although we cannot trace his path step by step, yet it is plain in the general survey of events, through long periods, that they are ordered by God to the accomplishment of his divine purposes.’ Here, Hodge distanced himself from trying to read providence from current events. He said one could clearly see God’s work in the history of Israel recorded in the Old Testament because God had seen fit to record it. It was ‘no less true regarding all history.’ He then asserted that the early Christian martyrs, ‘the apostasy of the man of sin’ [perhaps the rise of the papacy], the destruction of the Huguenots, and the persecution of the English Puritans, were all acts that furthered God’s providential purpose of ordering all things for his glory. They did this by laying ‘the foundation for the planting of North America with a race of godly and energetic men, who were to make this land the land of refuge for the nations, the home of liberty, civil and religious.’ Here we see hints of the place of providence in public theology that would come to characterise Palmer’s public thought. God had ordered events of history to give Christians the beacon and the refuge of a tolerant nation, where Christians could practice their religion without fear of persecution. We see echoes here of what Palmer would expand into a full-blown and life-long pursuit of determining just what God was attempting to accomplish in current events, and through the realisation of America’s destiny.

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26 Ibid., 1:544.
27 Ibid.
28 Ibid., 1:545.
2.) Robert Lewis Dabney [1820-1898]

Southern Presbyterian theologian Robert Lewis Dabney, Palmer’s close friend, expounded at length on the doctrine of providence in his *Lectures on Systematic Theology*. Dabney attempts to strike a *via media* between ‘Augustinian Scholastics, the Cartesians and many of the stricter Calvinistic Reformers’, who believed in continual, spontaneous re-creation, and the ‘pantheistic’ view, which equated God with the universe, and the more *laissez-faire* view of providence he read in Charles Hodge. Dabney answered by way of analogy. Humanity functioned within the inviolable laws of nature, but these still allowed a great measure of freedom: a person cannot fly, but he can choose where to walk. Likewise, in God’s providential plan, God generally operated within the laws of nature to accomplish the miraculous and guide the course of events. When it came to the individual’s moral choices, God worked on them by appealing to appetites and volitions, as Jonathan Edwards had contended. Humanity had free choices, but God manipulated the human will.

3.) Palmer’s Variation from Calvinistic Systematic Theology on Providence

Palmer’s view of providence, however, was not so nuanced and precise. He saw the hand of God in all the events that surrounded him. Confederate victories in battle were vindications from God of the Southern cause; defeats were chastisements for failure to uphold Christian ideals. Christian clergy and laity alike had long looked for God’s specific purposes in calamity or victory, but what sets Palmer apart is that he constructed an entire public theology around this understanding of providence. In Palmer’s public theology, he often conflated what ‘is’ with what ‘ought to be.’ The status quo thus became a centrepiece of Palmer’s moral arguments. Palmer was guilty of a categorical


31 We examine Dabney’s theology in greater depth in subsequent chapters.

32 Cf. pp122-125 and 224-225.
mistake. As we have seen, earlier Reformed scholastics were very careful to limit their
speculations on the hidden will of God, for in Scripture, God had explicitly told humanity
what was right and wrong, and by this, God judged all the actions of humanity. Much of
human behaviour went against God’s revealed will and was thus under his
disapprobation. Palmer, however, was using the secret, or decretive will of God,
attempting to interpret right or wrong merely by what already existed in the world. This
he did by enlisting the Baconian principle of the inductive method, which we explore in
chapter 3. Certainly, Palmer was here inconsistent. He did believe that there were things
in the existing order that were wrong, and yet often his argument was that because
something had happened, therefore it ought to have happened. Such a view had its roots
in some British Protestant and Colonial American Puritan natural theology. Perry Miller
describes such a view thus:

If the Puritan theory of nature was hindered from viewing things as they are by
the desire to behold moral lessons in them, it also set up a thoroughly utilitarian
standard. Since nature was seen as the revelation of God’s will in action, then
what ever necessity dictated or apparently offered could be justified on the
grounds that it had been decreed by God and whatever would work could be held
to that extent ordained from on high.\textsuperscript{33}

Since nature was a way that God chose to reveal himself, both natural phenomena and
the events of history became ways in which God made himself known. What was
missing, however, was propositional revelation. Scripture, though its meaning could be
debated, contained statements about God’s nature and will. Nature and history, on the
other hand, were open to far broader interpretation. Even though the more speculative
among Reformed theologians gave lip service to Scripture as the bellwether for
interpreting the events of nature and history, often it seemed that providential
happenstance trumped the clear revelation of God’s moral will that was revealed in

Scripture. We contend that this is the interpretive key to understanding Palmer's public theology: the providential events of history reveal the moral will of God.

II. From the Doctrine of Providence to Public Theology in American Protestantism

‘this our Common-wealth seems to exhibit a little model of the Kingdom of Christ upon Earth, wherein it is generally acknowledged and expected. This work of God set on foot and advanced to a good Degree here...will be...the Kingdom of Jesus Christ so much spoken of’\(^\text{34}\)

–Urian Oakes

B. M. Palmer’s writings demonstrate that he was not overly concerned with the careful nuances of the doctrine of providence that we find in Reformed theologians from Calvin to Dabney, nor did he heed their cautions against its abuse.\(^\text{35}\) In Palmer’s understanding, God’s providence is an active force that gives moral credibility to events as they occur in history. Palmer believed that evil events occurred in the world; not everything that transpired was a moral good. However, he frequently appealed to either the status quo or the occurrence of events as moral legitimation, instead of weighing such events by the moral norm of Christian Scriptures. This, in and of itself, was not a new phenomenon among Calvinists. It found clear expression in the works of some New England Puritan leaders, in ways that set them somewhat at odds with their co-religionists in Great Britain, particularly after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660.\(^\text{36}\) It forms something of an alternate stream to that exemplified by the Reformed systematic theological tradition. Palmer stood within the alternate stream of the Reformed view of providence, one that he had inherited from pre-restoration English Protestantism, but also had a distinctly American flavour, which we explore presently. The application of the doctrine


\(^{35}\) Cf. pp. 113–141, where these writings are critiqued.

of providence to the interpretation of history became what historians term an American public theology.\textsuperscript{37}

**A.) The Puritan ‘Divine Errand in the Wilderness’**

The settlement of the New World was from the beginning tied to the hopes of worldwide Christianisation. Columbus and the early Spanish \textit{conquistadores} described their adventures as being driven by the desire to advance Christendom.\textsuperscript{38} Particularly germane to our present topic is how this view took place in the Puritan settlement of New England. Sacvan Bercovich contends that the early colonial Puritans began to morph traditional Reformed understandings of the typological significance of the Old Testament into a literal recasting of their experience as that of the beginnings of the New Jerusalem. They thus confused the promises of God made to the church in the New Covenant, with those made to Israel in the Old Covenant. In other words, as America developed its identity, some colonial and early American pastors and theologians began to see themselves as an integral part of redemptive history: God’s kingdom coming to earth. In short, they conceived of their society not simply as a theocracy, but as a realisation of the perfect theocracy that would accompany Christ’s millennial kingdom.\textsuperscript{39} Such a view had its roots in British Protestantism. John Foxe [1516-1587] had seen in the lives of Wycliffe and King Edward III the beginnings of the final period of God’s work of redemption.\textsuperscript{40} For instance, John Milton wrote in the \textit{Areopagitica},

\begin{center}
Now once again by all concurrence of signs, and by the general instinct of holy and devout men, as they daily and solemnly express their thoughts, God is
\end{center}

\textsuperscript{37} Cf. chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{38} Leonard I Sweet, ‘Christopher Columbus and the Millennial Vision of the New World’, \textit{The Catholic Historical Review 72}, no. 3 (July 1986): 369–82.
\textsuperscript{40} Sacvan Bercovitch, \textit{The Puritan Origins of the American Self} (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1975), 74; Cf. also William Haller, \textit{Foxe’s Book of Martyrs and the Elect Nation} (London: Cape, 1963); Peter Toon says, ‘preachers at this time were prone to describe England (or Britain) as enjoying a relationship with God similar to that enjoyed by the Israelites of old.’ In \textit{God’s Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen, Pastor, Educator, Theologian}. (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1971), 47.
decreeing to begin some new and great period in His Church, even to the
reforming of Reformation itself: what does He then but reveal Himself to His
servants, and as His manner is, first to His Englishmen; I say as His manner is,
first to us, though we mark not the method of His counsels, and are unworthy.\footnote{John Milton, ‘Areopagitica’, 1644,
https://www.dartmouth.edu/~milton/reading_room/areopagitica/text.shtml.}

With the fall of Cromwell, however, theologians on the island of Great Britain began to
reconsider their earlier view and turned their hopes towards heavenly deliverance. In
the meanwhile, New England theologians, abandoning hope for England becoming a
holy commonwealth, shifted their attention to what God was doing in America.\footnote{Nathan O. Hatch, ‘The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America’, The William and Mary Quarterly 31, no. 3 (July 1974): 408–9.}

The leaders of Massachusetts Bay did not see themselves as perfect, but they did
assert that their experience very much mirrored that of ancient Israel. Wayward saints
and flawed leaders were duly chastened by God through cataclysm and promised
military triumph and earthly prosperity insofar as they fulfilled the terms of God’s
covenant. Some colonial Puritans began to depart from classic Reformed theology in
their understanding of the rewards of the Kingdom of God.\footnote{For instance, Increase and Cotton Mather, cf. pp. 60-65.}

Whereas the scholastic theologians viewed the earthly blessings of the Old Covenant made with Israel as
prefiguring the greater spiritual blessings of the New Covenant made with believers in
Christ, colonial theologians began to assert that allegiance to the New England Way
would surely result in the same sort of material blessings Israel experienced when she
obeyed God.\footnote{‘The New England Way’ was the title of a work by John Cotton that soon became a shorthand way to
explain the separate, but interlocking, functions of church and civil polity in the New England ‘holy
commonwealth’. The church, though congregationally governed, was established by law and exclusive.
Full church membership was only granted to those professing regeneration, covenanted together in local
congregations with no formal connections to other bodies, as distinguished from Presbyterian and
Episcopalian polity. These visible saints were pledged to the reform both of society and the church, and
citizenship was dependent upon church membership.}

For some American Puritans, eternal salvation was by grace through faith
alone, but God guaranteed material prosperity to a holy commonwealth that kept
covenant with God. John Winthrop’s ‘A Model of Christian Charity,’ delivered in 1630
aboard the \textit{Arbella} before the Puritans landed in New England, explicitly cast the
settlement’s lot in terms of a divine covenant, with guarantees of prosperity if they kept covenant with God, and curses on them should they disobey:

Thus stands the cause between God and us, we are entered into covenant with him for this work, we have taken out a commission, the Lord has given us leave to draw our own articles we have professed to enterprise these action upon these and these ends, we have hereupon besought him of favour and blessing: now the Lord shall please to hear us and bring us in peace to the place we desire, then hath he ratified this covenant and sealed our commission, [and] will expect a strict performance of the articles contained in it but if we shall neglect the observation of these articles…the Lord will surely break out in wrath against us, be revenged of such a perjured people and make us know the price of the breach of such a covenant.45

Some contemporary divines who observed this shift likewise concluded that these Puritans were departing from earlier Reformed reticence to apply the doctrine of providence to current circumstances. For instance, Roger Williams [c.1603-1683] saw early on the dangers of civil religion: the mingling of the identities of the true believer in Christ with the citizen of the commonwealth. To Williams, the spiritual blessings of the New Covenant belonged only to the invisible church, those who were believers in Christ. The temporal welfare of New England rested not upon their being the New Israel, with whom were made irrevocable promises of prosperity, but upon general blessings and trials common to humanity. In other words, for Williams, New England had no special status in God’s eyes. It was merely a place in the world, with all the temptations and difficulties for God’s people that any other place would hold. God’s people were always aliens and strangers wherever they were.46 This was likewise true for William Bradford, the founder of the Plymouth colony, who maintained a dichotomy between sacred and secular.47 Bercovich comments, 'For Bradford, the Plymouth settlement was part of a secular experience from which he tried to infer the meaning of providence. For the Mathers, the New World errand was part of church history; he deduced its

45 John Winthrop, 'A Model of Christian Charity', 1630, sec. 46.
providential meanings from the preordained scheme of redemption.'

B. M. Palmer’s take on America’s role in God’s plan had far more affinity with Mather than it did with Bradford.

It is no stretch, then, to see the emergence of an American self-understanding developing, an understanding of itself in theological terms, which came to be called American public theology. Even as the Puritan movement died out, the sense of the American continent being chosen by God to advance his redemptive purposes would be pressed forward in multiple religious streams, from the rhetoric of nineteenth-century New England Transcendentalism to the Biblical allusions and apocalyptic metaphors of American political leaders. Arguably, it would find its most remarkable form in Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, which added ‘another Testament of Jesus Christ,’ chronicling the appearances of Jesus to early American peoples and clearly incorporated America into God’s providential plan. While in New England, and in Mormonism, public theology became divorced from Calvinist orthodoxy, in the South the two often remained firmly united. Indeed, it became part of the Southern argument that it was only the South that truly retained God’s purposes for America because so many in the North had departed the faith of the settlers.

B. M. Palmer was a descendant of the Puritans both by blood and conviction. His family had deep roots in the Massachusetts Bay colony. His ancestor William Palmer had emigrated to New England in 1621, a year after the founding of the Plymouth colony. B. M. Palmer’s grandfather, Job Palmer, followed New Light minister William Tennent to Charleston, South Carolina. Job Palmer’s son, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, the uncle of our current subject, would become minister of the Circular Congregational Church in

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49 Interestingly, B. M. Palmer explores this phenomenon himself, which we will explore more fully later in chapter 4. In ‘Mormonism’, *Southern Presbyterian Review* 6, no. 6 (April 1853): 559–90; Cf. also Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 175–86.
Charleston. Congregationalists in the South were few, and the Charleston congregation and its sisters sought to retain New England orthodoxy and polity in the midst of a vastly different culture. B. M. Palmer's father, Edward, was born in Charleston, but educated at Phillips Andover Academy and then Andover Seminary, both in Massachusetts. Palmer's beloved mother, whom he cited as a chief influence in his life, also had deep New England Puritan roots, as the descendant of a prominent Connecticut family. B. M. Palmer would be sent North for education too, though his experience there was short and unhappy. Though Palmer would assert throughout his life that he was a Southerner by birth and at heart, this does not negate the fact that his New England forebears bequeathed to him his public theology. We now examine precisely what this public theology entailed and how it developed.

1.) Increase Mather [1639-1723]

Increase Mather was born in the Massachusetts Bay Colony early in its history. He graduated from Harvard University but sought further education at Trinity College, Dublin. Licensed as a Commonwealth minister by Oliver Cromwell, he served several churches in Britain before his return to North America in 1661. Mather thus forms a bridge between British and American Puritanism. Increase Mather stood within the tradition of those English Protestants that believed they could perceive very clearly God's hand in current events. Mather wrote *Remarkable Providences Illustrative of the Earlier Days of American Colonisation*, in 1683-4. Mather begins his work by stating what sorts of things qualify as acts of providence worthy of remark and interpretation:

> Such Divine judgements, tempests, floods, earthquakes, thunders as are unusual, strange apparitions, or whatever else shall happen that is prodigious, witchcrafts, diabolical possessions, remarkable judgements upon noted sinners, eminent deliverances, and answers of prayer, are to be reckoned among illustrious providences.\(^{51}\)

\(^{50}\) Duncan, *Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, 20–24; Johnson, *Life & Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*.  
\(^{51}\) Increase Mather, *Remarkable Providences Illustrative of the Earlier Days of American Colonisation* (London: Reeves and Turner, 1890) The 1890 edition of Mather's work has no page numbers in the
Mather insisted it was the minister’s duty to declare the works of the Lord, and indeed that they are the ones best equipped to determine what God is doing in current events. Much of the narrative concerns personal deliverances from calamity, but Mather does speculate about God’s purposes in nature. The chapter entitled ‘Some Philosophical Meditations’ begins with the heading,

That thunder-storms are often caused by Satan, and sometimes by good angels. Thunder is the voice of God, and, therefore, to be dreaded...The miserable estate of wicked men on this account, and the happiness of the righteous, who may be above all disquieting fears with respect unto such terrible accidents.\(^{52}\)

One might be tempted to think these are the speculations of a man unversed in the recent discoveries of science, and a simplistic appeal to the ‘God of the gaps’ as the immediate cause of natural events not yet understood. However, Mather expressed friendliness to the discoveries of science, citing with approval Kepler, Kircher, and Cabeo, among others.\(^{53}\) Instead, what Mather did was to look for divine purpose in natural phenomena, not argue that God was their immediate cause. Elsewhere, he asserted, ‘But though it be true, that both natural causes and angels do many times concur when thunder and lightning, with the awful effects thereof, happen, nevertheless, the supreme cause must not be disacknowledged: the Eternal Himself has a mighty hand of providence in such works.’\(^{54}\) Where Mather affirmed that God is sovereign over nature, and saw the miraculous at work in times when God preserved the faithful amid calamity, he stood well within the parameters and cautions developed by Reformed theologians. Where he began to depart is in his interpretation of these events. Mather

\(^{52}\) Ibid., 70.
\(^{53}\) Andrew Williams notes that late seventeenth century cosmology ‘was balanced between...rationalism and mysticism...For the Puritans, the natural world, though a visible sign of God’s creation was both mysterious and orderly. Although science could prove useful in explaining the physical nature of God’s creations, it was limited in its scope.’ In ‘Shifting Signs: Increase Mather and the Comets of 1680 and 1682’, *Early Modern Literary Studies* 1, no. 3 (1995): 3–4.
was careful to note, 'We may not judge of men merely by outward accidents which befall them in this world, since all things happen alike unto all, and no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them. We have seen amongst ourselves that the Lord's faithful servants have sometimes been the subjects of very dismal dispensations.'

'Nevertheless,' he added, 'a judgment may be so circumstanced as that the displeasure of Heaven is plainly written upon it in legible characters.' He cited as an instance, 'All wise men that are acquainted therewith observe the blasting rebukes of Providence upon the late singing and dancing Quakers in signal instances, two or three of which may be here recorded, that so others may hear and fear, and do no more so wickedly.'

What Mather illustrated with personal accounts in *Remarkable Providences*, he did with astronomical events in his 1681 sermon 'Heaven's Alarm to the World'. A comet appeared in the sky over Boston in November 1680, and lingered for several months. In the sermon, Mather marvelled at the insights of astronomy in explaining how the heavens worked, but attributed theological meaning to the appearance of the comet:

'Now when God is angry then public judgments come, as testimonies of Divine Displeasure. Personal afflictions are not always evidences of God's anger, as we see in Job, but public judgments are ever wont to be so.' Mather was cautious about exactly what sins had provoked this divine displeasure, although he did indicate that perhaps the pride of Boston women, with their frivolous hairstyles with 'false locks, their borders, and towers like comets, about their heads...How then shall we think to escape the Lord's anger, if a reformation, so much as in these externals, which it is so easy to reform, will not be obtained?' Mather here exemplified the shift away from affirming God’s providential control over all things in general, to determining the meaning of

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55 Ibid., 239.
56 Ibid., 240.
57 Ibid., 241.
58 Increase Mather, 'Heaven's Alarm to the World, or a Sermon, Wherein Is Showed, That Fearful Sights and Signs in Heaven, Are the Presages of Great Calamities at Hand.', 20 January 1680, 14.
59 Ibid., 37.
particular events. Certainly, the writers of Scripture did this, but, in the thinking of Reformed theologians and others, Scripture was God’s interpretation of the events he caused, which is altogether different from human beings understanding God’s purposes in either calamity or bounty.

2.) Cotton Mather [1663-1728]

Whatever nuance or reserve Increase Mather had retained in interpreting the will of God from the events of history was abandoned by his son, Cotton Mather. Mather, who succeeded his father as pastor at the influential North Church in Boston, believed he could read the will of God quite clearly not merely in cosmological happenings, but also in human history. In Cotton Mather, we see the beginnings of American public theology, a clear and simple equation of the colonial settlement with the purposes of God’s kingdom, and a harbinger of the millennial reign of Christ. He wrote,

Weymouth, an historian, as well as an undertaker of these adventures...reports, that one main end of all these undertakings, was to plant the Gospel in these dark regions of America...I am now to tell Mankind, that as for One of these English Plantations, this was not only a main end, but the sole End upon which it was erected...This at last is the spot of Earth, which the God of Heaven spied out for the seat of such evangelical, and ecclesiastical, and very remarkable transactions, as require to be made an history, here ‘twas that our Jesus intended a resting place must I say? Or only an hiding place for these Reformed churches, which have given him a little accomplishment of his eternal Father’s promise unto him...of having the utmost parts of the Earth for his possession?\

Cotton Mather began to understand the purposes of America in terms of the millennial hope for the Christianisation of the globe, a belief that Palmer would echo, and expand upon, in similarly heady days of technological advance and American imperial power at the end of the nineteenth century.\[61\] Cotton Mather wrote,

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61 Cotton Mather’s eschatology is a subject of some debate, with many scholars believing his view was premillennial. Such a view finds credence in this passage, which indicates that somehow America may escape the ‘Great Tribulation’ that antedates the second coming. Nonetheless, Mather’s optimism about Christian progress mirrors that found in Jonathan Edwards’ post-millennialism.
The learned Joseph Mede conjectures that the American Hemisphere will escape the conflagration of the Earth, which we expect at the descent of our Lord JESUS CHRIST from Heaven: and that the people here will not have a share in the blessedness which the renovated world shall enjoy, during the thousand years of holy rest promised unto the Church of God: and that the inhabitants of these Regions, who were originally Scythians, and therein a notable fulfilment of the Prophecy about the Enlargement of Japhet, will be the Gog and Magog whom the Devil will seduce to invade the New-Jerusalem, with an envious hope to gain the angelical circumstances of the people there. All this is but conjecture...However, I am going to give unto the Christian reader an history of some feeble attempts made in the American Hemisphere to anticipate the state of the New Jerusalem, as far as the unavoidable vanity of human affairs and influence of Satan upon them would allow of it; and of many worthy persons whose posterity, if they make a squadron in the fleets of Gog and Magog, will be apostates deserving a room, and a doom with the legions of the Grand Apostate, that will deceive the nations to that mysterious enterprise.\(^\text{62}\)

What Mather appears to be saying here is that, though Joseph Mede thought of North America as outside of the grace and kingdom of God, the English Reformed colonists were going to attempt, however feebly, to build God’s kingdom there, despite the dangers of being led astray by Satan. Mather described the New England settlement in terms of a new exodus: ‘Accordingly when the noble design of carrying a colony of chosen people into an American wilderness, this eminent person [John Winthrop, first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony] was, by the consent of all, chosen for the Moses...and indeed nothing but a Mosaic spirit could have carried him through the temptations...must needs expose a gentleman of his education.’\(^\text{63}\) He went on to liken Winthrop to Nehemiah, Jacob, and Joseph. In all fairness, Mather was speaking metaphorically, but clearly, he viewed the New England settlers as a holy commonwealth, one that had a key role to play in the eschatological realisation of the kingdom of heaven on earth. Bercovich observes that Mather’s thought on ‘this prospect...is neither wishful thinking or mere similitude. It is based on a long study of scriptural texts pertinent to both the covenant of grace and the work of redemption, all


of them leading to the same inescapable significance: “AMERICA is legible in these promises.”64 This comes through more clearly in Mather’s account of a skirmish between Native tribes and settlers in Gloucester, Massachusetts:

I entirely refer it unto thy judgment, (without the least offer of my own) whether Satan did not now set ambushments against the good people of Gloucester, with demons in the shape of armed Indians and Frenchmen appearing to considerable numbers of the inhabitants, and mutually firing upon them for the best part of a month together. I know the most considerate gentlemen in the neighbourhood unto this Day believe this whole matter to have been a prodigious piece of the strange descent from the invisible world...and the publication of this prodigy, among other wonders of the invisible world among us.65

These sentiments must be weighed against other places where Mather contends for the evangelization of native peoples. However, here we clearly see the language of holy war: the people of Christ are engaged in a battle, not so much for territorial claims, but against the forces of darkness, represented by the French, and Native tribes. Palmer later would come to echo these very sentiments, when he trumpets how America drove the ‘wild red man’ from much of the land, and church bells had taken the place of war whoops, across the North American continent.66 The English colonists were coming to believe they had a divine mandate to establish God’s holy commonwealth in the wilds of the New World, the same way the children of Israel did in the land of Canaan. The vast expanse of the New World, and its population by Reformed Christians, could very well presage the establishment of Christ’s millennial kingdom, in the thinking of the Mathers. Much of Palmer’s public writing is strikingly similar to the sentiments of Increase and Cotton Mather.

3.) Jonathan Edwards [1703-1758]

Scholars are divided on whether, and to what extent, Jonathan Edwards embraced American civil religion.\(^6^7\) There are comments in Edwards’ writings that lend credence to the view that Edwards propounded the American triumphalism of the Mathers. For instance, Edwards wrote,

> It is not unlikely that this work of God’s Spirit, so extraordinary and wonderful, is the dawning, or, at least, a prelude of that glorious work of God, so often foretold in Scripture, which, in the progress and issue of it, shall renew the world of mankind. If we consider how long since the things foretold as what should precede this great event, have been accomplished; and how long this event has been expected by the church of God, and thought to be nigh by the most eminent men of God in the church; and withal consider what the state of things now is, and has for a considerable time been, in the church of God, and the world of mankind; we cannot reasonably think otherwise, than that the beginning of this great work of God must be near. And there are many things that make it probable that this work will begin in America.—It is signified that it shall begin in some very remote part of the world, with which other parts have no communication but by navigation, in Isa. [60:9]...It is exceeding manifest that this chapter is a prophecy of the prosperity of the church, in its most glorious state on earth, in the latter days; and I cannot think that any thing else can be here intended but America by the isles that are far off, from whence the first-born sons of that glorious day shall be brought... And what is chiefly intended is not the British Isles, nor any isles near the other continent; for they are spoken of as at a great distance from that part of the world where the church had till then been. This prophecy therefore seems plainly to point out America, as the first-fruits of that glorious day\(^6^8\).

Here, Edwards indicated he believed that America played a role in Biblical millennial prophecy and that he believed that the events of the Great Awakening indicated that the millennium must be near. Gerald McDermott, however, contends that this is a fundamental misreading of Edwards. He asserts that the bulk of Edwards’ writings indicate that he thought the American colonies had broken the divine covenant, and were under God’s wrath. He suggests that the millennial reign of Christ, in much of Edwards’ writing, was independent of the fate of the American colonies. Thus,

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McDermott sees Edwards as standing more in the classic Reformed strain of providence.\textsuperscript{69} It is beyond our current purview to decide this debate; it may well be that Edwards' view was inconsistent, or that it changed over time. Insofar as Edwards viewed the American colonists as having broken the divine covenant, and thus forfeited whatever role they may have played in God's ultimate plan to bring about the universal reign of Christ on the earth, he serves as a counterpoint to later American public theology, and to B. M. Palmer, in particular. Insofar as Edwards believed America had a special destiny related to the millennial reign of Christ, his view paved the way for the providential view of Palmer, and in fact for all American civil religion and public theology.\textsuperscript{70}

As we shall explore in detail later, Palmer's view was that, though certainly, America had on occasion strayed from God's providential purposes, God had nonetheless irrevocably promised that America would lead the march towards global Christianisation. To Palmer, this was no different from the triumph of Western civilisation and industrial and military might. As we shall demonstrate in subsequent chapters, Palmer saw God's plan as the inevitable upward march of progress; Palmer's postmillennial American public theology put forth the idea of inevitable social progress.


B. Post-Puritan American Public Theology

‘This great continent is soon to be filled with the praise, and piety, of the Millennium.’

--Timothy Dwight

The decline of Reformed theology in New England after the death of Edwards and Cotton Mather is well-documented. It continued to be believed and promulgated by Princeton Seminary in the North, but retained a far greater presence in the South, particularly in Old School Presbyterianism. While Calvinism lost its nationwide influence, the public theology which it spawned did not. Biblical metaphors filled political speeches and were inscribed on public edifices. Alexis de Tocqueville, on his tour of America, remarked upon what he believed to be the unique phenomenon of the American religious and political character:

Religion in America takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must nevertheless be regarded as the foremost of the political institutions of that country; for if it does not impart a taste for freedom, it facilitates the use of free institutions. Indeed, it is in this same point of view that the inhabitants of the United States themselves look upon religious belief. I do not know whether all the Americans have a sincere faith in their religion...but I am certain that they hold it to be indispensable to the maintenance of republican institutions. This opinion is not peculiar to a class of citizens or to a party, but it belongs to the whole nation, and to every rank of society.

Tocqueville wrote that Americans shared a pervasive understanding that their nation was entrusted with a unique divine mission. In coming decades, many of its leaders would speak of ‘Manifest Destiny’, the idea that the continent was destined by God to belong to the fledgeling nation. This sort of divine triumphalism, a secularised millenarianism, can be seen in the sentiments of the founding documents. Even though many of the American founders had departed from New England orthodoxy, they were convinced they were establishing ‘a new order for the ages’. They sought a unique

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71 Timothy Dwight, *A Discourse, in Two Parts, Delivered August 20, 1812, on the National Fast, in the Chapel of Yale College* (Boston: Cummings and Hilliard, 1813), 56.
national identity based on the ideals of 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,' which had been endowed upon them as inalienable rights by their Creator, and continued to evoke the sort of language of divine mission that the Mathers and others had. Protestant Christianity and republican virtues entwined to forge the American public conscience.\(^7\)

Nearly a century after the American founding, Abraham Lincoln would masterfully cast the values of his nation in Biblical metaphor. As noble as many of those sentiments are, they present a subtle danger that we will see come to fruition in Palmer's thought, namely an equation of the purposes of God with the often gritty and self-serving politics of the nation. The ancient prophets often chastised the Hebrew kings, calling them back to God's standard, but American public theology was facile enough to equate national interest with the purposes of God. Progress was the theme that unified American public theology. It forged a national religion that was vaguely Christian but shorn of doctrinal particularities. The one certainty of American civil religion was that God had blessed America, and given it a unique mission.\(^7\)

Such a belief could be used to justify any action taken by the nation as the will of God, from wars for territory to the removal of native peoples. B. M. Palmer's civic writings are dominated by these sorts of sentiments, as we shall explore. As the United States fragmented over sectional concerns and slavery, Southern public theologians developed the idea of a remnant, replete with anathemas for those who had squandered the godly mission of the United States. Only the South, where Protestant orthodoxy was still the predominant cultural force, were the true ideals of America preserved. Republican government, popular sovereignty, Christian patriotism, a love of liberty, the American


Constitution, and the institution of slavery were the hallmarks of the American experiment, to the mid-nineteenth century Southern mind. The North, rife with Enlightenment infidelity, Unitarianism (or worse, Transcendentalism), and ‘atheistic’ abolitionism, was guilty of heresy against the American creed. To Palmer's mind, God would see his purpose through the faithfulness of his American Southern remnant, just as he had done in the ancient nation of Judah returning from its chastening captivity in Babylon. After the Civil War, Palmer reconciled himself to the emerging American empire and believed that it reclaimed its mantle as God's nation to bring Christian civilisation to the globe.

**Conclusion**

We have here examined the roots of Palmer's Calvinistic view of providence, and suggested that he departed from the chaste definition of providence developed in Reformed systematic theology. We asserted that he was more concerned with the practical application of the doctrine to history in a way similar to that which developed among the early New England divines, and later in Jonathan Edwards. We will presently examine the philosophical, hermeneutical, and eschatological aspects of Palmer’s providential public theology, and then explore how this view impacted Palmer’s understanding of government, the secession of the Southern states, the relationship of the church to society, and the roles of respective races in God’s divine plan.

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75 Cf. esp. 113-140.
Chapter 3:
Common Sense Realism in the
Public Theology of B. M. Palmer

In this chapter, we will examine how B. M. Palmer’s philosophical convictions bolstered his view of the role of God’s providence in public theology. As an Old School Southern Presbyterian minister, Palmer strictly held to the Puritan Calvinism of The Westminster Confession of Faith, ‘a creed drawn out over the whole circle of divine truth...prepared by the wisest men the Church of God has ever known...Such a creed is not to be lightly added to, or taken from, and, least of all, to be superseded by a rival.’

We will endeavour to demonstrate, however, that Realist thought, more than Puritan Calvinism, shaped his public theology. We will evaluate how Realism undergirded his understanding of providence, both in ways affected by his cultural context and out of a desire to reform the culture of which he was a part.

We will also explore Realism’s relationship to sociology, and examine how it ratified Palmer’s understanding of God’s providential purposes for white Southern culture. Contrary to Doralyn Hickey’s assertion that Palmer ‘expressed his philosophical presuppositions only obliquely, through his discourses on matters of faith,’ and ‘primarily confined his energies to homiletics,’ Palmer was greatly concerned with the role of philosophy both in understanding and shaping the world. Palmer believed a minister must also be a philosopher:

So far as philosophy is concerned...it is simply impossible for one to be a complete theologian, without being in almost an equal degree a logician and a metaphysician. A fair preacher a man may be...but he cannot compass the science

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2 Doralyn J. Hickey, Benjamin Morgan Palmer: Churchman of the Old South (University Microfilms, 1990), 116.
of theology and soteriology, without an acquaintance with the very truths which fill the speculations of every philosophic school.³

I.) Realism: The New Moral Philosophy

Common Sense Realism, sometimes called the New Moral Philosophy, is often associated with Scottish philosophers Thomas Reid [1710-96] and Dugald Stewart [1753-1828]. The Realists adopted Francis Bacon’s [1561-1626] inductive method as the means of discovering the truth in every realm of human endeavour. Realism formed the intellectual foundation of generations of American thinkers through the influence of Princeton University president John Witherspoon [1723-1794].⁴ It was the predominant American philosophy throughout the nineteenth century, replacing Enlightenment rationalism.⁵ Michael O’ Brien notes that Reid’s Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense was the predominant textbook of Southern collegians.⁶ Moses Waddell utilised it in Palmer’s instruction at the University of Georgia.⁷

Sydney E. Ahlstrom highlights the tension between Realism and Calvinism, noting that Realism led many American thinkers towards rationalistic deism; he cannot make sense out of why it did not do the same for Witherspoon and the American divines who

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³ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, "The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered (A Review), Southern Presbyterian Review 27, no. 3 (July 1876): 490.
⁴ The legacy of Realism would be continued by Witherspoon’s son-in-law, Samuel Stanhope Smith, who succeeded him as president of Princeton upon his death and served till 1819, and flourished again under the presidency of James McCosh, who served from 1868-88.
⁷ Ibid., 2:1001.
followed him.\textsuperscript{8} We will explore this tension in Palmer’s public theology. Whatever their reason, the Southern divines adopted Realism with seemingly little qualm.\textsuperscript{9}

The Realists’ chief concern was epistemology: how we come to know what we know.\textsuperscript{10} Realism’s basic axiom is that human senses are reliable in how they perceive information. As Palmer wrote, ‘there is an established congruity between the truths objectively revealed, and the mind which subjectively receives them.’\textsuperscript{11} In the estimation of the Realists, the Sceptical Idealists hindered the practical use of philosophy by doubting the real existence of anything beyond their own minds, while Realists believed in applying philosophy to the science of social progress. Colin Brown notes that Realist epistemology concerned itself with the question of how can we be certain that we know anything at all, or that anything exists beyond our minds.\textsuperscript{12} Reid’s answer was that God had implanted in the mind certain predilections towards beliefs about reality. These were not archetypal ideals to which both reality and perception corresponded, nor conferred upon sensory experience by the mind. Rather, they were latent ways of thinking that form conceptions, identical from person to person, when confronted with sensory data, including attention, conception, abstraction, association, memory, imagination, judgement, and reasoning.\textsuperscript{13} Common to all humanity, these ‘intuitions’ were beyond the realm of philosophic speculation.\textsuperscript{14}

At the same time, Common Sense Realism rejected the deductive method. Palmer, like his fellow Realists, embraced induction, believing that knowledge advanced by

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\textsuperscript{8} Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, 355–59.
\textsuperscript{11} Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘Christianity Vindicated from the Charge of Fanaticism’, Southern Presbyterian Review 4, no. 2 (October 1850): 201–2.
\textsuperscript{12} Brown, Christianity and Western Thought, 1:264.
\textsuperscript{14} Wolterstorff, Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology, 184.
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examining particulars and then carefully drawing general conclusions from them.\textsuperscript{15}

Realist philosophers applied induction to every arena of life. From Empiricism, they drew the principle that all of reality was quantifiable and explicable by natural laws. Bacon wrote, 'Does any one doubt...whether we speak merely of natural philosophy or of other sciences also, such as logic, ethics, politics, as about to be perfected by our method?'\textsuperscript{16} Likewise, Newton wrote. 'And if natural philosophy, in all its parts, by pursuing this method, shall at length be perfected, the bounds of moral philosophy will also be enlarged.'\textsuperscript{17}

Norman Fiering notes that the predominance of Realism in American thought has sometimes been overlooked, 'Because there is no science that unifies nature, law, politics, ethics, divinity, psychology, and economics, and because before 1700 there also was none, we assume there never was.'\textsuperscript{18} We will see how such an integration of all knowledge forms Palmer's public theology. Every arena of human endeavour and morality, not just the sciences and maths, could be tested by induction, measured empirically, and engineered to predictable results. Most importantly, this allowed Palmer to determine God's providential plan with supposed certainty, merely from observing the events of history and human behaviour. James McCosh noted, 'In order to estimate the character of the age, it must also be taken into account that there was a strong expectation that results were to follow, from the application of inductive science, to mental phenomena, similar to those which had flowed from its application to physics.'\textsuperscript{19}

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\textsuperscript{15} Later philosophers would realize similar flaws in the inductive method. \\
\textsuperscript{16} quoted in James McCosh, \textit{The Scottish Philosophy, Biographical, Expository, Critical, from Hutcheson to Hamilton} (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1890), 2–3. \\
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 3. \\
\textsuperscript{18} Norman S. Fiering, 'President Samuel Johnson and the Circle of Knowledge', \textit{The William and Mary Quarterly} 28, no. 2 (April 1971): 233–34. \\
\textsuperscript{19} McCosh, \textit{The Scottish Philosophy, Biographical, Expository, Critical, from Hutcheson to Hamilton}, 279.
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Eugene D. Genovese points out that Realist moral philosophy was ‘the one generally required course in both northern and southern colleges,’ and that it ‘grounded a comprehensive social science in Christian doctrine.’ Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese note how Realism was ‘propagated with special force by the Old School Presbyterians.’ Moreover, they credit Southern Realism with ‘forg[ing] an original and distinctly modern view of the proper place of religion in the analysis and defence of the social order.’

E. Brooks Holifield demonstrates the thoroughgoing reign of Realism, noting that Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell [1812-1862] mediated it to the South, and developed from it a general morality by induction from natural law. In Realism, the source of virtuous action was principles revealed in nature and discerned via the inductive method. According to Noll, this was ‘an approach to ethics self-consciously grounded upon universal human instincts.’ As we will see, this is an apt description of Palmer’s public theology. Moreover, it also is one potentially at odds with Calvinists’ low estimate of human nature.

Palmer himself appears conflicted. As a Calvinist, he believed that a human was opposed to God in every part of his being. Even so, his Realism came to the fore when he wrote, ‘It would be captious and illiberal not to allow the many excellent traits

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23 ‘The guiding assumption...was the belief that God’s intentions for man, His expectations of human beings as moral creatures, could be discovered independently of traditional sources of religious authority, through a close investigation of human nature.’ America’s God, 94.
24 Ibid.; Townsend, Dugald Stewart on Beauty and Taste’, 271–72 Townsend adds that realism is ‘a fundamental distinction between the internal world of the mind and the external world of material objects and sense data...Any connection between the two remains mysterious and beyond the competence of philosophy. Philosophy should concern itself only with establishing the general rules and laws of thought that are open to investigation by induction.’; Holifield, The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795-1860, 111. Holifield credits the appeal of realism as being that it ‘was not so much a set of conclusions as it was a way of thinking.’
possessed by those who are not the subjects of grace.'

This is a much higher estimate of human nature than found in Westminster 6.4, which says that humanity is 'utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil.' This supports our assertion that, in general, Palmer’s social analysis and prescriptions were not drawn from the Bible or his Calvinistic beliefs, but rather from Realist appeals to a general moral sensibility, or inductively derived propositions.

Likewise, Westminster 26.4 states that, after Adam’s fall, humanity 'became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the faculties and parts of soul and body.'

Whereas earlier Calvinistic thought had emphasised the necessity of the new birth for any true virtue and opposed any epistemological self-sufficiency, Realism stressed the universality of human moral sense, and the ability to reason from nature and empirical observation.

Noll notes that, in Scotland, Realism was propounded by theological moderates, and resisted by theological conservatives, including Witherspoon before his emigration.

Realism faced initial opposition from later Puritans because it emphasised human self-sufficiency and downplayed the importance of special revelation. Many American theologians had modified their Calvinistic commitments in light of new philosophical or scientific information.

Palmer, however, did not view himself as having deviated at all from traditional Presbyterian doctrine. Indeed, throughout his life, he would remain staunchly opposed to any theological compromise.

In the South,

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26 Noll notes that previous Reformed theology emphasized human inability, whereas the new philosophy emphasized human ability and social progress. Cf. America’s God, 95–98.


28 Noll, America’s God, 98.

29 The ‘New Divinity’ championed by Samuel Hopkins, Joseph Bellamy, Nathaniel W. Taylor, and others, which jettisoned earlier views of the necessity of a penal substitutionary atonement and total depravity, while claiming the revivalist inheritance of Edwards. Cf. p.67, n.69.

30 Palmer, ‘The Proposed Plan of Union between the General Assembly in the Confederate States of America and the United Synod of the South’.
despite the inherent tension between Old School Calvinism and Realism, the two combined to shape the worldview of Southern Presbyterians.

Within a very short time after its arrival in America, public thinkers adapted Realism to the American context. Noll speculates that this was because Americans were looking for philosophical justification for overthrowing authoritarian tradition, while still clinging to religious values. Fred J. Hood contends that Realism’s emphasis on natural laws known via observation ‘made it particularly attractive to the basically pragmatic Americans,’ while, of all extant philosophies, it ‘appeared most congenial to traditional beliefs.’ Moreover, James Oscar Farmer contends Scottish philosophy clashed with Calvinist orthodoxy, robbing it of ‘the fervent theocentricity of Calvin,’ in its reduction of things spiritual to matters for scientific observation. We see this in Palmer, who devoted the bulk of his public writing, not to God and his requirements for human behaviour, but rather social observations arrived at by the inductive method. Palmer determined God’s will by what had occurred in history, and by the insights of social science, not by God’s prescriptive will revealed in Scripture. Realists believed that their philosophy marched hand in hand with scientific advance and social progress, ideas that were very prominent in Palmer’s thought.

In keeping with their confidence in induction, the Southern Presbyterian Realists embraced the findings of science and sought to integrate them into their comprehensive worldview. Moreover, as we shall see, they took science far beyond the realm of observable natural phenomena and applied it to the study of human nature and society. James O. Farmer explains that the Southern Presbyterian clergy thus chose to meet 

31 Noll, America’s God, 103.
science on its territory by embracing the inductive method. He contends that ‘the liberally educated clergy needed a subject matter suited to their particular perspective and a method of inquiry that would ensure their not threatening the integrity of God’s word.’

Still, it appears that Realism often did find itself at odds with Calvinist belief. Our examination of Palmer will highlight some of these tensions, and help us understand why, at least in part, Presbyterians of the next generation would largely abandon Realism for varying forms of Transcendental Idealism.

II.) The Providential Realism of B. M. Palmer

A.) Realism in Philosophical Context: ‘Christianity Vindicated from the Charge of Fanaticism’

It appears that Palmer chose Realism over Transcendental Idealism because he saw his belief in divine revelation as incompatible both with scepticism and Kant’s wall of antinomy, which put religion beyond the grasp of the intellect. Though there are affinities between Kant’s categories of thought and Realism’s latent ways of thinking, they part company when it comes to how a human’s religious nature operates. For Kant, it was futile to attempt to explain the immaterial realm, because it is that ‘to which we have no access either by sense or by intellect, and which cannot be described under pain of uttering nonsense.’

For Palmer, though the content of the immaterial realm contained things beyond what could be known when God revealed his will, he could be understood. Palmer wrote,

> If there were no God, or there were no intelligent beings beside Himself, the idea of religion would not be extant in the world...But if both exist, there must also be a law, answering to the nature of Deity, as a medium of intercourse between the two... these great principles of all religion are no sooner revealed to man than they are instantly received, and can never be discharged from his

34 Farmer, The Metaphysical Confederacy, 88.
35 The Presbyterian Church, both North and South, would be rocked by the post-Kant German theology. Old School Calvinism would continue to exist, but, in time, the influence of Realism upon American Calvinist thought receded.
cognizance...They seem to shine by their own light, and are admitted upon the evidence they themselves afford of their own truth.\textsuperscript{37}

Here we see why Palmer viewed Realism as congenial to his Christian convictions. God created humans in the divine image, and God implanted latent ways of thinking that resonated with divine revelation. God could not be comprehended by reason alone, but God had communicated plainly enough to be known truly, and obeyed.\textsuperscript{38}

Palmer favoured a philosophic system that linked sense perception to reality without speculation about what metaphysical substance might lie in between. Realism sidestepped thorny ontological problems simply by denying them. Noll writes that the American Calvinists were aware of the sea change in Western philosophy, yet ‘the European voices that drew most American attention in the first half of the century seemed dangerously subjective.’\textsuperscript{39} If God could make known his character and will in such a way as to be understood, as Realism contended, then Palmer could draw provable conclusions about God’s will from history and society. He thus critiqued the sceptical Idealists,

In metaphysics, the search was after abstract being and the whole science of ontology, to the neglect and disparagements of the facts of their inward consciousness. How opposed this psychology and its method of inquiry are to that productive philosophy which has been advocated by the English and Scotch metaphysicians, it is almost superfluous to remark.\textsuperscript{40}

Palmer viewed induction as a way to chart a certain course anchored in certain knowledge in an uncertain world. At least in Palmer’s public theology, that anchor held, not in God’s intelligible self-revelation in Scripture, but rather in the inductive study of the natural order.

\textsuperscript{37} Palmer, ‘Christianity Vindicated from the Charge of Fanaticism’, 201.
\textsuperscript{38} Holified notes that Realists ‘recognized that primal tendencies in the mind made knowledge possible, but unlike the idealists...these inherent principles were merely the conditions of knowing rather than the sources of truth.’ \textit{The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture 1795-1860}, 121.
\textsuperscript{39} Mark A. Noll, \textit{The Civil War as a Theological Crisis}, The Steven and Janice Brose Lectures in the Civil War Era (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 258.
\textsuperscript{40} Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘Baconianism and the Bible’, \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review} 6, no. 6 (October 1852): 238.
On the matter of ethics, Palmer also diverged from the Idealists. Kant had rejected Reid’s ethics: ‘To appeal to common sense when insight and science fail...is but an appeal to the opinion of the multitude.’\(^{41}\) He was dismissive of Realism’s simple appeal to an ethics built upon shared values. Kant proposed a four-fold test for every ethical decision. From these tests, one developed categorical imperatives: universally true ethical principles. Palmer, contrariwise, believed in a universal moral sense, innate to human beings as God’s image bearers.\(^ {42}\) Kant thus uncovered a problem with Palmer’s ethics. If the source of ethics is a universally-understood natural revelation, it would, therefore, follow that ethics are determined by what most people believe to be right. This problem will recur in many places in Palmer’s thought. Particularly, it enabled Palmer to declare whatever condition prevailed in society as ‘God’s will’ made evident by history and popular opinion. Though Calvinists believed that God sovereignly ordained all that happen, most mitigated the problem of confusing ‘is’ with ‘ought’ by retaining human responsibility and denying that God was the author of sin. Moreover, they asserted that God’s law, not providence, was the source of human ethics.\(^ {43}\) Palmer’s adherence to induction provided certainty to his perceptions about moral actions and was based on what had come to pass, not in what God had commanded. The ancient Hebrew prophets denounced evil in their society, but Palmer’s particular understanding justified, rather than challenged, his culture.

At the same time, we can see how such a position made sense within Palmer’s presuppositions. If God had made humanity in God’s image, then God had implanted in humans the ability to know and do God’s will, even if they had never read the Bible. The ethical act, then, was weighed by God’s revelation, not by Kantian self-disinterestedness.


\(^{42}\) Palmer, ‘Christianity Vindicated from the Charge of Fanaticism’, 211–12.

God’s external revelation thus awakened in humanity certain predispositions that God had placed there. Such a view runs into difficulties, however. If everyone developed the same understanding when confronted with the same data, how could there be any disagreement about morality among human beings? Thus, we may sense the clash between Palmer’s Calvinism and his Realism. Palmer argued that God has clearly revealed his ethical standard to all humanity in nature; it is clearly discernible via the inductive method. The Calvinist would argue that humanity, however, could not perceive it rightly. How, then, could it serve as a standard for ethical action? If he were to be consistent, Palmer had two logical options: admit that human beings were incapable of acting truly ethically unless regenerated by the Holy Spirit, or that induction cannot produce a meaningful source of ethics merely by observation of the created order. Palmer appears never to have made the choice. Instead, he retreated into circular logic, which allowed him to justify some heinous things. For instance, because whites had exterminated the Native Americans, Palmer argued, it must have been God’s will that they be exterminated. Because it was God’s will they be exterminated, white Americans had the right to exterminate them. Likewise, because whites enslaved the descendants of Africans, it was God’s will that they be enslaved. Since it was God’s will that they be enslaved, it was right for white Americans to enslave them.

**B.) Induction as the Key to Truth: ‘Baconianism and the Bible’**

In his article entitled ‘Baconianism and the Bible’, Palmer explained his affinity for Realism’s scientific view of reality. He concluded that it was within the competency of

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44 The Westminster Confession of Faith, 10.1.
scientific inquiry to create ‘great systems of education, remodel political
constitutions...reform in jurisprudence, and effect organic changes in the social
condition of mankind.’\(^{47}\) This demonstrates Palmer’s view of science’s role in the
furtherance of social development. Accurate hypotheses could be formed about social
development that differed little from scientific laws. Here again, we see Palmer’s
essentially optimistic view of the future and find similarities with the thought of his
friend Joseph LeConte, one of the progenitors of the modern discipline of sociology.\(^{48}\)

At the same time, Palmer highlighted the limitations of science imposed by
materialistic philosophers:

A brood of sciolists is nurtured, who are perpetually mistaking the first
generalisations of science of its ultimate conclusions...hypotheses framed only for
the purpose of investigation are assumed as fixed facts; and these are arrayed in
deadly conflict with the teachings of Revelation. These smatterers, who have no
scope of knowledge to discover the real unity of truth amidst seeming diversities,
have raised the senseless clamour which on every side vexes our ears, that
scripture is a foe to science.\(^{49}\)

Palmer believed that empirical observations had to be tempered by revealed truth. He
also hinted at one of the foundations of Realism, namely, that one must not approach
nature with a hypothesis formed. It is far too easy to make the evidence fit one’s
predilection. Though Palmer saw the dangers of unchecked induction, he failed to heed
his own cautions. By the principle of induction, one was to conduct research by
observation and then form general conclusions. These conclusions must be tested by
the principles of negation, exploring possible contravening evidence, and must therefore
always be open to revision and correction should new data come to light.

Palmer asserted that there was one answer to the alleged warfare between
science and Christianity, and that was to acknowledge ‘that the only philosophy which

\(^{47}\) Ibid., 228.

\(^{48}\) Theodore Dwight Bozeman, ‘Joseph LeConte: Organic Science and a “Sociology for the South”’, \textit{The

\(^{49}\) Palmer, ‘Baconianism and the Bible’, 228.
Palmer did not deny that science had achieved much before Bacon, but argued, ‘Many of their alleged discoveries were fortunate conjectures.’ He then cited some of the more outlandish scientific claims of ancient philosophers as evidence that they could never prove their hypotheses because they lacked the tool of the inductive method. Palmer embraced the nineteenth-century optimism about science and human progress. He stressed that it was not only amenable to Christianity but the product of a specifically Protestant way of viewing the world. He wrote, ‘If any fact is established beyond dispute, it is that the world had no system of philosophy or science, nor was the path of discovery rightly opened in either, until the [English] Bible was brought forth from its concealment and shed its benign influence upon the human intellect.’ In Palmer’s desire to maintain cordiality between science and Christianity, he advanced the fantastic claim that the English Bible and Protestantism presaged the age of science. Palmer thus overlooked the foundational work done on the Continent to further scientific knowledge during and after the Renaissance by Catholics Copernicus and Galileo, and non-English speaking Kepler and Brahe, among others.

Palmer built his argument upon the Realist rejection of Platonic forms. He stated, ‘It may come under the broad charter of poetic license, but not of scientific explanation, to say that things are respectively beautiful or great or cold or hot, according as they partake of the abstract ideas of beauty or greatness, of cold or heat.’ It is difficult to comprehend how Palmer could merely dismiss the findings of the early natural philosophers as ‘poetic license.’ He believed that the great flaw of the early natural

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50 Ibid., 231.
51 Ibid., 233.
52 Palmer, ‘The Sensualistic Philosophy of the Nineteenth Century Considered (A Review)’, 489.
philosophers was their adoption of the \textit{a priori} method, by which they hoped to go beyond the observation of cause and effect to discover abstract general principles. This Palmer blamed on the `dull round of the syllogism.’ Palmer argued that, because the syllogism assumes in the premise what it seeks to prove, it by definition could add nothing to the corpus of human discovery.\footnote{Ibid., 236.}

Palmer next took up metaphysics, contending the Greek philosophers’ chief mistake was their emphasis on ontology. Because Platonic ideals were believed to be part of the original furniture of the mind, therefore ‘the only possible method of inquiry was the \textit{deductive}; precisely that adopted in physics to so little advantage.’\footnote{Ibid., 238.} In short, since latent ideas, and not intuitions, were native to the mind, they only had to be awakened and applied to the natural world. On the contrary, intuitions were ways of deriving ideas from existing things themselves. As Palmer saw it, the Idealist’s source of knowledge was circular, because it was found in immaterial ideas themselves, not in the real existence of things. Idealists theorised about existence, while Realists observed natural phenomena and sought to make sense of their observations. Therefore, Palmer blamed Platonism and deductive reasoning for millennia of scientific stasis:

> For two thousand years, the great problems of physical and mental science went unresolved. Men stood rooted, like statues, to the earth `their nerves all chained up in alabaster,’ or else, bound up in the fetters of a stony logic and balancing in the endless seesaw of the syllogism. But in the 17th century arose the great intellectual Reformer [Bacon], who, snatching the wand from the hands of the Stagyrite, `With his rod reversed and backward mutters of dissevering power,’ freed science forever from the enchantments of the wizard.\footnote{Ibid., 241.}

It is beyond debate that the awakenings of modern science occurred in the Renaissance, long before Bacon. Likewise, Johannes Kepler and the Cambridge Platonists alike married Platonic philosophy to scientific inquiry.\footnote{Joachim Otto Fleckenstein, `Kepler and Neoplatonism,’ \textit{Vistas in Astronomy} 18 (1975): 427.} Meyrick H. Carré notes that Galileo
could never have reached the conclusions he did merely by observation. He had to assume to be true what could never be observed: the deductive logic Palmer derides led Galileo to discover the law of inertia. Moreover, Galileo had to assume that natural processes ‘must be related in calculable or mathematical ways.’ Carré observes that the great advances in physics could never have taken place by induction. Plato saw geometry as a meeting point between the world of forms and the natural world; this would be employed by Galileo, Kepler, and many others, to discover and predict what they could not observe.

Nevertheless, Palmer credited Protestant Christianity and Bacon for the awakening of philosophy and science in the Western world. He argued that it was ‘authenticated fact...that the Bible, throughout all history has been the precursor of genuine philosophy.’ He contended that Baconian induction ‘should be the philosophy of Protestantism.’ He argued that both the theologian and the inductive philosopher ‘proceed on similar principles in the construction of their respective systems. The materials of science lie scattered in the utmost disorder through the broad fields of Nature...The business of the philosopher is to collect these...and put them together on an intelligible page.’

Palmer asserted that Scripture is the foundation of ‘genuine’ philosophy, yet neglected to supply supporting argumentation for his contention. This appears to be a circular argument: Realism is the sole genuine philosophy because it was alone congenial to Protestantism. Palmer wrote that theology, like inductive philosophy, consisted of gathering, observing, and collating materials because

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60 Ibid., 243.
61 Ibid., 243–44.
Revelation is not made in a logical and systematic form, but in the most fragmentary and undigested manner...The same patience, and diligence, and caution are required in ranging up and down the Record, as in surveying Nature: the theologian collates his passages as the philosopher collects his facts...The a priori method which we have seen so signally failed to open the mysteries of nature to the ancient Greeks, has wrought equally disastrous results when applied to the interpretation of scripture.\(^62\)

Palmer insisted that theology must reject the doctrine of innate ideas. Rather, all truth must come via revelation, perceived by observation through the sciences. Humanity’s role was to interpret the observable data, and draw conclusions. Protestantism had recovered the truth of Scripture by observation, freeing it from the allegorical interpretive method of the Alexandrian school and their medieval successors. Palmer overlooked the fact the very categories in which theologians thought, and the language they inherited from the church fathers and orthodox creeds, were indebted to Greek philosophy.\(^63\)

Palmer anticipated the objections some might have to such a positive connection between philosophy and doctrine but insisted that faith lay at the bottom of both. ‘The Bible everywhere inculcates faith, while it rebukes credulity.’\(^64\) He likened faith in the facts of Christianity to faith in the facts obtained by inductive induction, ‘Faith in what is unknown, yet fully attested, is the necessary antecedent of all scientific research and philosophical analysis.’\(^65\) Palmer also asserted that the Christian’s faith in the unseen was akin to the Realist’s faith in unproven ‘fundamental laws of belief,’ which are ‘simply a way of talking about whatever the mind does when it thinks.’\(^66\) The Realist philosopher placed his faith in the fact that the universe is as he perceived it to be, just as the orthodox theologian placed his faith in the reliability of the Bible. In both instances, what the philosopher and the theologian believed comported with

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\(^{62}\) Ibid., 241.
\(^{63}\) One thinks here particularly of the classic orthodox definition of the Trinity, that the three persons God were one in substance, whilst three in person.
\(^{64}\) Palmer, ‘Baconianism and the Bible’, 241.
\(^{65}\) Ibid, 245.
observation and logic. Therefore, neither needed to speculate about what could not be proven.

Palmer tied these divergent strands into the basic rubrics of a public theology. He posited the Biblical idea of law and justice. He argued that law governs humanity’s ‘moral relations’: the individual’s obligations towards others, towards society, and towards God. Palmer linked God as lawgiver with the philosophical foundations of government. As we contended previously, Palmer likewise argued that a prominent part of philosophy concerns itself with the nature of government, society and law.

According to Bozeman, the Presbyterian Realist did not distinguish between natural, social, and psychological phenomena. Rather, he extended scientific analysis to man and society. Therefore, ‘there was no incongruity in the application of the term “fact,” with the precise empirical implications it had acquired in the natural sciences.’ It is this cord that bound all of Palmer’s thought together: Biblical hermeneutics, political economy, scientific observation, cultural anthropology, and sociology were tightly interwoven. In Palmer’s mind, his opinions could thus acquire the weighty designation of facts, because they were based on empirical observations. These infallible observations then served to discern God’s providential will from the circumstances of human existence.

We notice three distinct traits in Palmer’s article: his faith in the inductive method to discern and improve upon society itself, his optimistic view of both scientific and social progress, and his commitment to the place of the Christian Scripture and theology in the progress of knowledge. These form the basic rubrics of the philosophy that undergirds Palmer’s public theology.

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68 Ibid., 249.
69 Theodore Dwight Bozeman, Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Antebellum American Religious Thought, 138.
C.) Palmer’s Applied Induction: ‘The Love of Truth, the Inspiration of the Scholar’

In ‘The Love of Truth’, Palmer then made a point he did not see in earlier or current philosophers, ‘It is to show, by a large induction of facts, that man may not trifle with truth without experiencing a fearful retribution.’\(^70\) Once again, Palmer’s theology of divine providence entered his inductive calculations. He believed that a just God would not allow indefinite rebellion against his truth, either by individuals or cultures. Palmer cited the Greek sophists and early Christian heretics as those who perished without leaving a lasting legacy of having bettered the world because God had judged their work and found it wanting. He cited ‘Mohammedanism’ and Judaism as two ideologies that suppressed the truth and thus failed to extend the boundaries of knowledge.\(^71\)

Palmer’s arguments here are careless in the extreme. It is doubtful that Palmer was unaware of Greek, Islamic, or Jewish contributions to the advancement of human knowledge, but he derided them here. This highlights a problem with Realist induction: it was far too easy to omit data that might lead one to question one’s positions. Palmer suggested that all false ideologies were doomed to fail. Societies that embrace error would fall, but societies built upon the truths of Protestant Christianity, in Palmer’s estimation, would flourish. If they did not, it must be because of some previously undetected moral flaw, not because the social structures were themselves faulty, particularly in the case of slavery. God’s providence rewarded righteousness, and punished wickedness, but it did not call into question the societal status quo. It is precisely at this point where Palmer thought that the Southern slave society held the moral high ground over Northern utopianism.

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\(^70\) Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘The Love of Truth, The Inspiration of the Scholar’ (Due West, SC, August 1854), 19.
\(^71\) Ibid, 22.
III.) Realism in Palmer’s Public Theology

Realists not only observed the human as an individual in relationship to the created order but also to wider society, leading them to theorise on the nature of government. Holifield notes that ‘The British tradition of moral philosophy also furnished the Southern moralists with the dominant theme of their social ethic: the category of “relation.”’ The theme of relational obligations loomed large for Palmer. Society was a mass of structured authority relationships between superiors, inferiors, and equals. For Palmer, the law served as an impersonal arbiter of the relational responsibilities between individuals. The government was the embodiment and enforcer of the law.

Realists thought much about what made for a pleasant society. Dugald Stewart wrote,

The only infallible rules of political wisdom are founded ultimately on a knowledge of the prevailing springs of human action, and he who loses himself in the details of the social mechanism, while he overlooks those moral powers which give motion to the whole, though he may accumulate a mass of information highly useful in the pursuits of private life, must remain in total ignorance of those primary causes on which depend the prosperity and the safety of nations.

Mark Noll contends that American Realism ‘was an intellectual vade mecum for liberal republicanism,’ propounded by preachers more than politicians. Palmer’s realism pervaded his thinking about civic life and the role of America in God’s providential plan.

Richard Hughes relates Palmer’s Realist convictions to his civic theology. He highlights the tension between historical Calvinistic commitments and Realism, noting a profound shift in Southern thinking: ‘by the 1830’s, Nature’s God was departing Dixie, [and] the Southern clergy nonetheless defended their biblical Jehovah with a new form

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75 Noll, America's God, 217–18.
of rationalism: the Baconian philosophy of the common sense realists.’ Hughes thus highlights a new synthesis: the marriage of Enlightenment philosophical ideals to orthodox Old School Calvinism. He views Palmer as the best example of the embodiment of the new Southern consensus. Hughes makes an important point, namely that the God of Calvinism appears a very different figure than the God of Realism, but fails to note that Palmer held the two views in tension. In his preaching, Palmer clearly articulated the notion of God the way his Puritan forebears had done. His public writings, however, bear out Hughes’s assertion.

Realism fitted the current need of the antebellum Southern Presbyterian thinkers well, giving them a scientific, as well as Biblical, rationale for the Southern slave society. We must note, however, that while Palmer’s public theology was the integration of multiple disciplines, sociology often appears most predominant, even as weighed against his commitment to Reformed theology. At the same time, Palmer’s regular Sunday preaching and his devotional writings were largely free of philosophy and social comment. The integration of disciplines characterised Palmer’s social thought, but he drew a bright perimeter around his ministerial efforts, and there devoted himself solely to matters of private piety.

A.) Realism and Government: ‘The Majesty of Law’

In ‘The Majesty of Law,’ an article published in 1888, Palmer related his Realist philosophy to his understanding of the ground and foundation of government. He contended that there could be no law apart from a lawgiver. He asserted that such should be obvious, but that humans had shown a propensity to speak of the law as a

77 Ibid., 451.
living entity, to 'speak of it as though itself were the king, instead of being the mere edict of a king.' He argued that the law, in its broadest sense is 'physical and instinctive' as well as 'intellectual and moral.' In this, he echoed Realist epistemology: the mind had latent intuitions, which the idea of law called to life. He wrote, 'Here, then, in the very frame of his being, we find man organised for obedience to authority under a jurisdiction from which there is no escape.' Palmer endeavoured to establish the ground of the comprehension of the law within the aforementioned 'ways of thinking'. He wrote further, 'But there are laws as well in the intellectual and moral sphere: laws of mind by which we trace the birth of every thought and the secret spring of every emotion. There are laws of memory, laws of conscience, laws of the will, laws of society.'

Here, his intent is to establish the ground of human government upon Realist principles. He wrote, 'We thus mount through human legislation to the stepping-stones of the eternal throne...We have ascended from one legal height to another, until the last induction yielded the supreme law from which all the rest were seen to flow.' In brief, Palmer asserted that the supreme law could be discovered, inductively, by ascending from the lowest to highest legal echelons: municipal law led to national law and that, from these, humanity could discover the existence of divine law. From that, he contended, we may establish 'a Being uncaused and underived.' Not only could God communicate himself to humanity, but human beings could also reason past the wall of antinomy and discern the existence and character of God by induction. Palmer thus used the Baconian method to derive the general truth of a divine lawgiver from the

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80 Ibid., 29.
81 Ibid., 30.
82 Ibid., 31.
83 Ibid., 30.
84 Ibid.
existence of mundane laws. This appears to be a re-appropriation of the Thomistic apologetic for God’s existence that the existence of law is predicated upon the existence of a lawgiver.

There is yet another way Palmer began to build his understanding of government and public theology on Realist principles: by likening moral and civil law to the laws of nature. He wrote,

To whatever extent the conditions may vary in which [humans] are placed, to the same extent may this law be modified in the details of its application; but it must ever remain the same in its principle and root, making the same exactions and imposing the same terms upon all beneath its sway. What is there in the widest extension of physical law comparable with this absolute universality of the moral?  

Palmer did note some distinction between physical and moral law. He contended that the moral law was immutable. Conversely, God had created physical law, and could have run the universe on different physical laws if he so chose. Still, at root, Palmer was arguing as a Realist, subjecting the affairs of humanity and the world of ideas to the same scientific scrutiny as the physical universe.

From these foundations, Palmer began to sketch out a positive theory of the role of government. The rule of Law made life in society possible by checking passions and by securing human rights. Though Palmer was writing from a theistic point of view, he does not advance a specifically Biblical understanding of the law. Palmer’s definition of law is ‘in the last analysis, the authoritative expression of a personal will.’ What he presented here is not out of accord with his theological commitments per se, but neither was it founded upon Calvinistic particulars. Here, Palmer began to build a philosophical foundation for his view of government, over and against what he saw as the abstract utopianism of the French radicals and American abolitionists.

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85 Ibid., 34.
86 Ibid., 37.
87 Ibid., 28.
Palmer believed only in social progress that was friendly to the workings of Divine Providence, and that took into account the historical realities of a culture. 88 Realism was intertwined with the rise of the social sciences, and the principle of induction promised the same sort of certainty and discovery for politics as observation had for physical sciences. Political science, like sociology, was a new way of applying scientific principles to a heretofore non-scientific discipline. It could be invoked either to support or to challenge the existing social order.89 In Palmer's case, it favoured the former. We see this in Palmer's arguments in support of slavery from the observation of nature, as well as history, and sociology. Daniel Boorstin argued that the underlying impulse was 'to draw the 'ought' out of the 'is'.’90 This is true throughout Palmer's 'secular' writing and perhaps helps to explain why Realism so often appears more prominently in his public thought than does any extant Calvinist social theory.

B.) Realism and Race

In Palmer’s thinking, Realism provided a rationale for both racism and African chattel slavery. Several authors note how it undergirded the Southern social ethic, describing the slave society not just as a historical ‘is,’ but also a moral ‘ought.’91 Mitchell Snay explains that the New Moral Philosophy's emphasis on relational obligations 'made it highly useful to Southern clergymen concerned with the relationship between master and servant.'92

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89 Ibid., 715.
91 Cf. chapter 7.
In the American context, chattel slavery was predicated upon belief in the inferiority of the black race, the sole race Americans enslaved. Mark Noll highlights how Common Sense intuitions and inductive principles served the pro-slavery arguments of Old School Presbyterian thinkers, noting how arguments subtly shift from Biblical to inductive reasoning. Palmer argued for white racial superiority based upon the Realist principles of intuition and induction. He wrote,

> When we cast our eyes over the great family of nations upon the Globe, we discover specific traits by which they are all distinguished. Philosophers have patiently inquired into the reasons of the different forms and colours by which the races of men are discriminated: but the different features of the mind and character are worthy of as minute attention...It is now a question of profound interest, what causes have produced this obvious diversity?

We note that Palmer cited, not just cultural differences, but also ‘features of the mind and character.’ Observation and induction served to confirm ‘self-evident’ truths of Western cultural, and white racial, superiority. This bears on Palmer's public theology. For Palmer, God had given the white race, particularly the white Americans, a solemn duty both to care for the ‘childlike’ races and to bring them under the blessings of ordered liberty, which, for other races, meant no liberty at all. He wrote,

> This Western Hemisphere, I cannot doubt, has been especially reserved that in these latter ages of the world, it might serve as the platform upon which to solve the mightiest Problems. For generations untold it was in the keeping of the wild Red man: but in due season he has yielded it up to a people whom Providence has transplanted, in the most remarkable manner, from other climes... we may surely regard with honest pride the noble mission to which we are called. In the eye of all nations, and upon a platform as elevated as our own Alleghanies (sic), we are called in Providence to work out results to which other nations and other lands are utterly inadequate.

To Palmer, it was self-evident that the white European had been commissioned by God to wrest the North American continent from the control of the ‘wild Red man.’ He

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93 Noll, *America's God*, 417 Noll discusses the New Moral Philosophy, and its supposedly scientific justifications for racism and slavery at some length.
94 Ibid., 421 quoting James Henley Thornwell, ‘A Southern Address to Christendom’.
96 Ibid., 26–27.
furnishes no Scripture to support this understanding. For Palmer, such a view was simply intuitive: historical fact became a moral imperative. One can clearly see how Realism, with its view of innate moral sense, might be useful to anyone simply to ratify one’s preconceived notions. European settlers had taken the North American continent from tribal peoples, and thus such was obviously right in the eyes of God.

Realism was useful to the pro-slavery argument as well. Palmer argued that those of African descent were an inferior people, both by culture and genetics. Palmer apparently did not consider possible alternate explanations for what he perceives as the degraded culture of the black slave. It was not a large leap to make from uneducated to uneducable if it served the purposes of maintaining the status quo. At the same time, we must note that Palmer did want to evangelise slaves, and protested abuses within the slave system. Perhaps most notably, he opposed polygenesis: the theory that those of African descent were a sub-human species. For Palmer, blacks, like whites, were descendants of Adam, created in God’s image, and capable of redemption through faith in Jesus Christ. Loving the black race meant keeping them in the state of childlike servitude, where they could be disciplined, evangelised, and catechised. This, he believed, was the white master’s charitable, burdensome, duty. It was given to the white race, particularly English-speaking Protestants, to lead the civilised world. This was the self-evident conclusion of the inductive study of civilisations. He wrote, ‘It might profit some of our dilettanti philosophers gravely to consider what it is that has bound Biblical Christianity and the inductive philosophy and Anglo-Saxonism together for the past two hundred years –and whether it is this conjunction of the Bible and Science that has put this race, like ancient Judah, in the leadership of modern nations.’ Here, Palmer

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99 Palmer, ‘Baconianism and the Bible’, 242. We note that Palmer used the terms ‘Anglo-Saxon’ or ‘Saxon’ in the broader sense of indicating the white, English-speaking nations.
intertwined his understanding of Biblical Christianity, the New Moral Philosophy, and race into an amalgam of Western, white superiority and world leadership. Palmer conveniently altered or ignored historical fact if it did not suit his argument. He disdained the French for their Catholic heritage, their Enlightenment Rationalism, and the French Revolution, and its subsequent tyranny. Thus, he overlooked France’s role in science and philosophy, as a major world power, its settlement of the New World, and its fervent support of American independence. Again, he has omitted countervailing evidence from his supposedly inductive study. For Palmer, to credit France with advancing civilisation would be crediting false philosophy and religion for moving God’s providential purposes forward. Ironically, Palmer deduces from the inevitable triumph of the white Protestant empire back to what he sees as its antecedents in European Protestant cultures. It is not incidental that this quote is from his article ‘Baconianism and the Bible,’ where he, as we have previously seen, lauds the New Moral Philosophy as the epitome of the philosophical endeavour. The white race, particularly as it found its home in America, had been given a role by God, and confirmed by observation and induction, to rule the world.

**C.) Palmer, LeConte, and Sociology**

Because Realism is entwined with the rise of sociology, which formed the basis of Palmer’s public theology, we here examine its place in Palmer’s thought. Norman S. Fiering observed that Realism stood at the nexus of the social sciences, and sought to integrate all human knowledge, and ethical, and theological concerns, under its umbrella, in a way that had not been done before.\(^\text{100}\)

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\(^{100}\) Fiering, ‘President Samuel Johnson and the Circle of Knowledge’, 236.
It will be beneficial to make a brief excursus into the thought of Joseph LeConte [1823-1901], the father of American sociology.\textsuperscript{101} LeConte was a member of Palmer’s intellectual circle in Columbia, South Carolina, which he credited with giving birth to the new discipline.\textsuperscript{102} LeConte contended that induction could be used to study society as surely as one studies a living organism. \textit{The Southern Presbyterian Review}, which Palmer helped found and co-edit, published LeConte’s work.\textsuperscript{103}

LeConte made a case for a sociology that was both scientific and spiritual.\textsuperscript{104} He presented social science as ‘a department higher, more complex, and far more important than all others; but, on account of its extreme complexity, hardly yet assuming the form of a Science, though it must eventually do so.’\textsuperscript{105} For LeConte, society was a living organism, and, like all life forms, developed according to discernible, fixed rules. Society, by fits and starts, advanced from lower to higher forms of life. He asserted that religion had progressed from fetishism through polytheism until it emerged as monotheism.\textsuperscript{106} He believed monotheism advanced from Judaism to Christianity, and Christianity from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism. He saw similar patterns in art and statecraft.

LeConte was emphatic about the scientific standing of sociology:

\begin{quote}
We have thus shown that the fundamental idea and \textit{doctrines} of Sociology are identical with those of Biology and Geology. In the next place, let us attempt to show that the \textit{scientific methods} to be used in Sociology...are identical with those which are in constant and successful use in Organic Science and Geology.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

LeConte predicated his sociological thought upon a belief in inevitable social progress, according to fixed laws. It thus shared in the spirit of nineteenth-century evolutionary

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{A helpful discussion of LeConte’s relationship with the Columbia Seminary circle can be found in Farmer, \textit{The Metaphysical Confederacy}, 105–10.}
\footnote{Bozeman, \textit{Joseph LeConte: Organic Science and a “Sociology for the South”}, 572.}
\footnote{LeConte is contending against empiricism and materialism, which argue for physical, but no spiritual or emotional, components of the social organism.}
\footnote{LeConte, ‘The Relation of Organic Science to Sociology’, 41.}
\footnote{Ibid., 50; LeConte borrowed this thought from Comte. Cf. Steve Wilkens and Alan G. Padgett, \textit{Christianity and Western Thought, Volume 2: Faith and Reason in the 19th Century} (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 186.}
\footnote{LeConte, ‘The Relation of Organic Science to Sociology’, 53.}
\end{footnotes}
thought. Palmer shared these assumptions.\textsuperscript{108} From our vantage point, these principles appear to overlook the wide variety of human experience, and also beg the question as to by what metrics was nineteenth-century Southern society judged more ‘advanced’ than that of other cultures? Palmer placed his faith in social metrics, and an unbounded view of human social progress that even the devastation of the Civil War could not chasten.

For LeConte, sociology did not present a way to bring about utopia; its adaptation to that use did not come until a generation after he wrote. Indeed, he was quite happy with the status quo, arguing that slavery improved by the steady march of progress. He insisted:

> The mere blind fanatical opposers of the institution of slavery...are clearly under the dominion and guidance of the absolute abstract dogmas mentioned above as characteristic of the critical or transition period in social philosophy. The use of rational scientific methods must eventually overthrow all such absolute dogmas, by showing the \textit{relative} nature of all human institutions.\textsuperscript{109}

In brief, his argument was that the sort of ‘absolutist’ philosophy that characterised abolitionism would give way before a more scientific sociology. His hope was, as the science of sociology advanced, ‘the institution of slavery, as it exists in the Southern United States, may be placed on a scientific basis which is absolutely invulnerable.’\textsuperscript{110} The constant talk of progress was part of the warp and woof of early sociology, which LeConte calls ‘the science of human society, human progress, and human improvement.’\textsuperscript{111} It appears to be a chronic feature of Southern Realist sociology to leave the concept of progress undefined. The similarities with Palmer’s thought are too striking to miss.

\textsuperscript{108} Cf. chapter 4.
\textsuperscript{110} Ibid., 59.
\textsuperscript{111} Ibid., 66.
Palmer explained this tension between tradition and progress in a tribute he wrote at the passing of a prominent New Orleans medical professor, calling him, ‘A proper representative of the present age. The first of these (career distinctions) was the union of progress with conservatism in his private and professional career alike.’ Palmer asserted,

In the equilibrium between the two only can the past be retained, and the future be explored. In the complete break between the two the past dies of exhaustion, and the future is still-born. The true progressive is no anarchist –not even a revolutionist. He watches the unfoldings of history, expecting to find the future in the wrapping of the past. Upon the present, as the isthmus between the two continents, he stretches his hand equally over both.\footnote{Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘The Representative Life and Character of Dr. T. G. Richardson’, in \textit{In Memory of Professor T. G. Richardson, M. D.} (New Orleans: The Faculty of the Medical Department of Tulane University of Louisiana, 1893), 56.}

This comment illuminates the tension in Palmer’s thought; he saw the ideal person as one who owned the past and the future. He wanted to see progress but was leery about promises that social engineering would bring about a better future. There are remarkable similarities between LeConte and Palmer. Their thoughts originated in the common source of Realism and developed within the same intellectual circles in Columbia. Understanding Palmer’s sociological thought, as it arose from his epistemology, provides us with a framework for understanding his public theology.

The relationship between sociology and public theology was also evident in Palmer’s ‘Thanksgiving Sermon’ of November 1860, when the United States was in the throes of the secession crisis. Palmer said,

A nation often has a character as well defined and intense as that of the individual. This depends, of course, upon a variety of causes operating through a long period of time. It is due largely to the original traits which distinguish the stock from which it springs, and to the providential training which has formed its education. But, however derived, this individuality of character alone makes any people truly historic, competent to work out its specific mission, and to become a factor in the world’s progress. The particular trust assigned to such a people becomes the pledge of the divine protection; and their fidelity to it determines the fate by which it is finally overtaken.\footnote{Benjamin Morgan Palmer, \textit{The South: Her Peril, and Her Duty. A Discourse} (New Orleans: Printed at the office of the True witness and sentinel, 1860), 6.}

112 113
The underlying sociological assumptions are evident: an assessment of the particular character of nations, and the sense that every nation had a particular mission, and was ‘a factor in the world’s progress.’ Still, like LeConte, Palmer had serious reservations about foisting change on society. He went on to say,

Baffled as our wisdom may now be, in finding a solution of this intricate social problem, it would nevertheless be the height of arrogance to pronounce what changes may or may not occur in the distant future...All that we claim for them (generations yet to come) and for ourselves is liberty to work out this problem guided by nature and God, without obtrusive interference from abroad.\textsuperscript{114}

We note that Palmer here called slavery an ‘intricate social problem’, the rare place where Palmer showed any reserve about the slave system. Just admitting that slavery was a problem is significant: how could a God-given social system be a problem, in any sense? Still, Palmer was adamant that, if slavery were a problem, Southerners must solve it for themselves. With secession still in the future, Palmer was already thinking of the South as its own nation and the North as ‘abroad.’ We also see Palmer’s use of the Realism to assess the character of nations in his pamphlet, ‘The Influence of Religious Belief upon National Character.’ Palmer manifested the nineteenth-century sociologist’s practice of drawing general conclusions from particular details, via induction:

In Europe, instead of the numerous superstitions which we find in Asia, are presented the two antagonist systems of Popery and of Protestantism...Wherever Protestantism prevails, we find the people thrifty, industrious and enterprising, the nation prosperous and independent, the social and domestic Institutions, which form the root of society, guarded by the most efficient sanctions, and all the wheels of society moving onward in harmonious progression. Wherever Popery prevails, we find the people ignorant and thriftless: no proper views of liberty and independence obtain, for where men have committed their eternal destiny to the keeping of a Priest, it is comparatively easy to entrust their temporal fortunes to the care of a tyrant.\textsuperscript{115}

Palmer then asserted that God’s providence might have assigned the most verdant and sunny lands to Roman Catholics, and the most barren ones to Protestants, to prove the

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 7.
superiority of Protestant cultural values. Here again, Palmer touted the cultural advantages of Protestantism over Catholicism which, to his mind, were provable by the metrics of cultural advancement. His reasoning is suspect: why would those who utilise a priest necessarily bow before a tyrant? Moreover, it was Greeks and Romans, not Christians, who invented the institutions that furthered liberty and the rule of law that Palmer touted. The modern thinkers that furthered those ideals were often not orthodox Protestants. As we will see later, Palmer would undercut this very argument by asserting that the American founding was atheistic and its leading lights far too tinged with Enlightenment radicalism. Here, Palmer was quick to add, ‘I will not deny the agency of political influences in these results, for it would savour of empiricism to trace all forms of disease to a single cause.’\textsuperscript{116} Palmer evidently viewed Empiricism as far too simplistic in its explanation of events. It is apparent, however, that the very thing Palmer disliked in Empiricism may also be charged against his practice of the principle of induction.

Palmer then offered a deeper analysis of French attributes, suggesting that these might be posited against his thesis. He said that, unlike other Catholic peoples, the French were ‘a people of great taste and refinement; they have made distinguished progress in the exact and experimental sciences: their literature is polished, various and extensive.’ Despite this, ‘it is written upon every page of their history that they lack depth of character.’\textsuperscript{117} Thus, they fell whim to the worship of the ‘miserable courtesan,’ the goddess Reason.\textsuperscript{118} ‘The French are the only people among whom the awful scenes of the French Revolution could have been enacted; simply because among no people was there such previous preparation’, he asserted. Palmer clearly laboured to employ the

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 24 Palmer also slights Italian, and other Catholic, peoples great contributions to cultural development.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 25.
inductive method by considering possible alternative explanations, or contrary
evidence, and disproving those possibilities, however flawed Palmer’s data collection
may have been. Palmer concluded his case by reasserting the case he has ‘proved’:

Taking my position at various points in the history of the past, I have
endeavoured to illustrate as single truth: not denying the influence of political
causes, I have proved by examples that national character is greatly modified by
religious views.\textsuperscript{119}

We recall that public theology seeks to understand how one’s own people serves to
further the purposes of God, and a sense that one’s nation is thus on the side of the right,
perhaps being the best nation ever to exist in history. This rhetoric strikes modern ears
as excessively jingoistic but was part of the tenor of the times. He wrote:

England, Scotland and America have formed a triple and a holy alliance to bear
the banner of the cross to the bounds of the earth. Happy in a three-fold union, of
blood, of language and of religion, they seem the selected instruments of
evangelizing the globe; and the sacred preeminence is thus assigned to the
English language of revealing Christ and his gospel to the race of man: it is at
once, the language of commerce, -the language of civil freedom and popular
rights, and the language of a universal religion, for the entire globe.\textsuperscript{120}

In Palmer’s estimation, God had predestined the Anglo-sphere, particularly Americans,
to bring the blessings of Christianity and civilisation to the whole world. This reflects
just how strong Palmer’s allegiance was to American civil religion, however much he
might elsewhere protest his separation of the spiritual and temporal realms.\textsuperscript{121} Here,
too, we see Palmer’s optimism about the future: providence guaranteed that America’s
influence would spread the gospel and ‘commerce…civil freedom and popular rights’
across the globe. Palmer has equated the spread of American influence, capitalism, and
democracy with the progress of the gospel. Eneida Jacobsen, citing Martin E. Marty,
notes that public theology is ‘reflecting on the religious behaviour of a people in light of

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘The Claims of the English Language’, \textit{Southern Presbyterian Review} 6, no. 3
\textsuperscript{121} Robert Bellah analyses such an opinion thusly, ‘In the beginning, and to some extent ever since,
Americans have interpreted their history as having religious meaning… Time and again there have arisen
prophets to recall this people to its original task, its errand in the wilderness.’ In \textit{The Broken Covenant: American
Biblical, historical, and philosophical positions.’ The above quote is an example of Palmer exhibiting both a sociological understanding and displaying his public theology.

D.) Calvinism as a Check on Realism: ‘The Ground of Certitude in Religious Belief’

Palmer wrote ‘The Ground of Certitude in Religious Belief,’ in 1898, near the end of his life. Although it does not address the matter of the Realism and public theology directly, it is nonetheless important in demonstrating that, although Palmer was an enthusiastic Realist, he harboured some reservations. Palmer’s stated goal was to demonstrate ‘the fact that Christianity is the only system which, depending wholly upon moral evidence, undertakes to conduct its advocates to unqualified certainty of its truth.’ His concern was not with the external evidence for the truth of Christianity, but rather its internal consistency. He admitted that such an argument is ‘drawn from the genius of the system itself and demand(s) a measure of sympathy with the truths communicated.’ He thus began with Realist reasoning, differentiating between reliable sense perception (externals that we observe) and internal ‘feelings,’ or intuitions. He contended that

Moral or probable reasoning, as it is variously termed, does not in its philosophic sense stand opposed to certainty…but only to demonstration. Its peculiarity is that it deals not with necessary truth…but with contingent truth…It is plain that this is the species of evidence upon which we depend in the common affairs of life, upon which history is written, and by which the natural sciences are established…It is the only method under which character could be built up, or a moral system be conducted…Just as the axioms in Mathematics are the wheels upon which the demonstration proceeds –just as there are primary beliefs from which all discursive reasoning takes its departure, and to which it recurs for verification –so there are principles in the moral constitution to which Divine truth is congenial. There must be a nexus between the object and the subject, a ring-bolt by which the without may be fastened to the within. If a revelation be given, what can it avail without the points in man himself to which it can be attached? 

124 Ibid., 96.
Like the earlier Realists, Palmer differentiated between strict logical evidence, such as those that undergird the laws of nature, and the interior propositions of the mind, which cannot be demonstrated in the same way. There must be something built into the human constitution that resonates with divine truth received from the outside: Realist intuitions. God supplied the substance of the propositions, and humans obtained it by observation. The mind, however, had the tools by which to comprehend them.

He went on to write, ‘Here then, is Christianity, by its very nature, moving upon a plane of evidence which is not necessarily exclusive of all doubt.’ The sceptical idealists had gone searching for certainty and found none. The Realists, contrariwise, insisted we must live as if certain things are true, even if we cannot strictly ‘prove’ that they are. Palmer, the Christian Realist, was thus willing to take on faith what he could not prove. Here, Palmer contended, was where faith might be demonstrated. It was an unseen act, based upon immaterial assumptions. It was not anti-rational, but neither could it be proved by strict logic. Internal consistency commended the truths of the Christian religion. Elsewhere, in Palmer’s assessment of Thornwell as a philosopher and theologian, he praised Thornwell because his studies in philosophy were not lost upon him as a theologian. If he sought to ascertain the bounds of reason in the one, he was not likely to transcend them in the other. Penetrated with the conviction that God can be known only so far as He has been pleased to reveal Himself, he bowed with perfect docility before the dogmatic authority of the Scriptures. The writer has heard him say a dozen times, ‘I have been cogitating upon such and such a subject, and can see no flaw in my reasoning, but I am graveled with one verse in the Bible;’ and then he would add, with inexpressible simplicity, ‘You know, P., that if there is but one passage of Scripture against us, our speculations must go to the winds.’ In this were signalised at once the modesty of the philosopher and the humility of the Christian. He brought all his conclusions to this touch-stone; and wherever he found a ‘thus saith the Lord,’ he ceased to reason and began to worship.

Our chief concern is that these writings demonstrate that Palmer’s philosophy was, in his mind, in submission to his understanding of the Scriptures. Though Palmer

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125 Ibid., 88.
126 Palmer, The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, 545.
was a philosophical thinker, he sought to chasten his philosophy by his allegiance to the Bible. This is a key to discerning the makeup of Palmer’s public theology. Palmer’s Old School Calvinism sometimes served as a check upon his Realist commitments. Still, while Palmer may have believed that he kept his Realism within Biblical bounds, the fact that he did not interact with Christian Scripture or theology in his public writings is telling. In Palmer’s estimation of his own thought, he utilised the Bible and Reformed theology as boundaries to Realist induction. They provided the form for, but not the substance of, Palmer’s public theology:

There is always danger that our conviction will rest upon the suitableness of the proposition to our natural apprehension, rather than upon the authority of a revelation. The certainty which seemed sufficient in the lower sphere fails entirely in the sphere of supernatural truth. It fails, because it rests upon a faith that is human and not divine—which is built upon the authority of reason, and not upon the competency of testimony. For be it remembered, Divine faith wrought in the soul by the Holy Spirit accepts the plainest truths precisely as the most difficult, upon a ‘thus saith the Lord.’

Palmer here claimed that, for the Christian thinker, induction was necessary but not sufficient. There are truths that cannot be discerned by induction. The Westminster Confession of Faith stated that God had spoken authoritatively in his Word. What is more, such truth could not be comprehended by the mind, without the internal illumination of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Christian Trinity, a classically Calvinistic understanding of the necessity of divine enlightenment to ascertain spiritual truth. We must note, however, that the bulk of Palmer's writings belie this claim.

Here, moreover, we hit upon an important distinction in Palmer’s thought: induction was indispensable for understanding ‘the lower sphere,’ life in the created order, either in the natural and physical, or social, sciences. At the same time, it was insufficient for discerning the character and will of God. Noting this will help us in

128 The Westminster Confession of Faith, 1.1.
129 Ibid., 10.1.
future chapters as we attempt to make sense out of Palmer's apparently conflicting impulses between Common Sense and Biblical principles. This becomes especially apparent when Palmer analyses or makes prescriptions for the social order.

**Conclusion**

As we have before considered, there are many scholarly opinions on the motivations of Southern Presbyterian thinkers. These opinions run the gamut from Shelton H. Smith's and James Silver's somewhat extreme assertion that Palmer was merely a craven propagandist for racism and the Confederate cause, to the more benign assessments of Palmer's biographers Johnson and Duncan. Bertram Wyatt-Brown's analysis falls somewhere in between those two poles. He contends that Southern values were pre-Christian and Anglo-Saxon ‘primal’ values: honour, the opinion of others as a gauge of self-worth, defence of male integrity, and reliance upon oath taking in place of family obligations.\(^\text{130}\) He sees Palmer as a fire-breathing advocate of ‘the ancient ethic’, whose Christianity had not permeated his cultural assumptions. To maintain this position, he must make much out of Palmer's comments about honour, which strike us as generally incidental, rather than as a central feature of his thought.\(^\text{131}\) There is more explicit evidence that Scottish Realism mostly shaped Palmer’s thought. Moreover, Palmer saw danger in the ancient honour code of the South. He wrote, ‘By the laws of God and man, no one has the right to take the life of another: but two men agree to go on the “field of honour,” as it is sarcastically called, each striving to do that very thing.’\(^\text{132}\) The code duello was the hallmark of the ancient honour cult; here, Palmer is unsparing in his critique of it. Likewise, Wyatt-Brown says that the oath stood in the stead of family obligations.


\(^\text{132}\) Palmer, *Formation of Character*. 

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obligations for the Southerner, but Palmer wrote an entire volume on family obligations and viewed those relations as the foundation of all human government. This, we shall see in a subsequent chapter, he derived from philosophy, as well as Scripture.

Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese note that Realism and Calvinism formed a resilient amalgam that undergirded the Southern slave society. In so doing, they contend, they developed an ‘original and distinctly modern view...of religion in the analysis and defence of the social order.’ It is our contention that Palmer was a chief architect of this original view—that induction and revelation together had forged American society into a providentially sanctioned society, one destined to lead the world to a new golden age. These principles pervade all of Palmer’s thinking about government, the church’s role in society, race and slavery, and even extend into his understanding of Biblical interpretation. We will expound the implications of this in more detail in subsequent chapters.

It has been our goal to establish Palmer within the Realist philosophical tradition, and to explain how Realism predominates in Palmer’s view of the Christian and his relationship to the civil government. We have also examined Palmer’s public theology and sought to demonstrate how Realism’s use of the inductive principle undergirded Palmer’s belief that he could read the purposes of God from the occurrences of history. In short, Palmer believed that the scientific study of society was possible, that societies and the individuals that comprise them could be scientifically classified according to genetics, abilities, and accomplishments, and that descendants of the English-speaking

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133 Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese note, ‘Southern theologians paid considerable attention to the relation of science to religion. Their commitment to the religious foundations of social relations led them to embrace enthusiastically that conservative Baconianism which was being propagated with special force by the Old School Presbyterians...the logic of southern developments led...to an insistence that science and religion must apply to the same things and, hence eventually led to a hardening literalism in the interpretation of religious discourse, even as it infringed upon matters scientific...In the end, they came to rely heavily on religion to sanctify their preferred views, but in so doing they forged an original and distinctly modern view of the proper place of religion in the analysis and defence of the social order.’ In ‘The Divine Sanction of Social Order: Religious Foundations of the Southern Slaveholders’ World View’, 215–16.
settlers of the United States were uniquely poised to bring the world to its next stage of development. Though Palmer touted the importance of theology, it does not enter into his writings on Realism and Public Theology. His Christian faith, however, did cause him to be reflective and qualify some features of his Baconianism, specifically in matters he refers to as ‘upper storey’ subjects like Christian revelation and spirituality. Even though Bacon and the Scottish Common Sense philosophers were careful to exempt metaphysics from empirical verification and the inductive method, Palmer appears to confuse the two. He conflated the physical and metaphysical realms, attempting to quantify what is spiritual, and assuming controversial ‘truths’ as the mere deliverance of consciousness. From this basis in philosophical understanding, we will proceed to examine how Palmer interprets Scripture and its relationship to the providential movement of God in history.
Chapter 4:

Hermeneutics, History, and Eschatology in the Public Theology of B. M. Palmer

‘History is but the record of theories and principles, the scope of which can be fully understood only in the results they produce.’

B. M. Palmer

In this chapter, we will explore the central place of Biblical hermeneutics, history, and eschatology in the public theology of B. M. Palmer. We will demonstrate how these three areas of thought undergird Palmer’s understanding of providence. As we demonstrated in the previous chapter, Palmer advocated social progress, and viewed the American South as the most pristine realisation of a Christian commonwealth as had ever existed in human history. Moreover, because the American South enjoyed these great advantages, she was entrusted with a great responsibility, to fulfil what Palmer called ‘her historic mission.’

We will exhibit that Palmer viewed the American South as the epitome of both the American and Biblical ideal of society, that he viewed the American federal system as having derived from Scripture, and that the various iterations of the American nation had a providential mission for bringing God’s millennial plan to fruition.

For our present purpose, we define hermeneutics as the discipline of interpreting a text: here, the Christian Scriptures. In Palmer’s thinking, hermeneutics and history combined in the Calvinistic understanding of the doctrine of providence. The

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Westminster Larger Catechism, one of the doctrinal symbols of Palmer’s Old School Presbyterian Church, defines the doctrine of providence as, ‘(God’s) most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering, them, and all their actions, to his own glory.’ We will show how Palmer adopted a precise view of God’s intervening in human affairs: victory was a vindication of righteousness, and defeat either God’s chastening or judgment, albeit with interesting exceptions. Palmer believed that the God of the Christian Scripture intervened in human affairs in an immediate way. Moreover, in Palmer’s writings, he demonstrated that, by observation, the Christian scholar could interpret what God’s responses were.

We define the Christian doctrine of eschatology as the understanding that history is advancing towards a pre-determined end. Many Christians believe history will culminate in the bodily return of Jesus Christ, but there is little agreement among Christians as to how these events will unfold. Palmer held to a post-millennial eschatology. The millennium refers to the thousand-year reign of Christ prophesied in Revelation 20. The post-millennialist believes that Christ will not reign bodily on the earth but rather from Heaven. By the preaching of the gospel, the world gradually will turn to faith in Christ, and society will be Christianised. Fred J. Hood contends that the accepted exegesis of Palmer’s day dated the beginning of the millennium ‘no later than the year 2000 and possibly as early as the 1840s.’ Palmer’s rhetoric bears this out. He writes that this ‘was so widely accepted that most Reformed ministers believed it necessary only to state that the most judicious commentators have concluded, that the predicted period is at length nearly arrived.’ Palmer thus held an optimistic view of the future. One finds scant evidence in historical scholarship on the importance of this

4 The Westminster Larger Catechism q. 18.
5 Fred J. Hood, Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837 (Tuscaloosa, AL: The University of Alabama Press, 1980), 69 Hood states that the calculation was based on the ‘1,200 days’ of Rev. 11:3 and ‘a time and times, and half a time’ of Rev. 12:13, to posit the reign of anti-Christ (the Pope) as 1,260 years. The question was to when this countdown actually began.
doctrine in the public theology of Southern Presbyterianism, and nothing regarding its impact on Palmer in particular. Thus, we will endeavour to show that postmillennialism played a formative role in Palmer’s public theology.

I. Palmer’s ‘Reformed, Literal Hermeneutic’

While not original to Calvinism, Calvin’s theological heirs followed the grammatical-historical method of interpreting the Scripture. It existed in the early church, and the Renaissance Humanists renewed it by emphasising the study of original sources. James Brashler summarises Calvin’s interpretive method as being ‘based on careful text-critical and linguistic analysis that was possible due to the rapidly improving grammatical and lexicographical knowledge of Greek and Hebrew.’ The Biblical interpreter’s task, then, was not to uncover secret meanings in the text, but rather to read it as the product of its age, taking into account things such as historical setting, human authorship, and the clear meaning of the text.

At the same time, Calvin, and those who followed him in the Reformed interpretive tradition insisted on the divine authorship of Scripture. God had not dictated to the human authors what to write but had inspired their words in such a way that preserved their individual personalities and concerns. We do not mean to imply

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6 Among the principles of this hermeneutic are, according to Calvin, the original intent of the author (Commentary on Romans and I Thessalonians, I. 4), the historical context of the writing (Institutes 4.16 & 23), the original, grammatical meaning (Institutes 4.17.22), context (3.17.14) and an understanding of the use of figures of speech (Institutes 4.17.23)
that Palmer, writing two hundred fifty years after Calvin, was unaffected by the intervening history or his cultural context. Mark Noll argues that the American experience distinctly shaped the Reformed, literal hermeneutic in the sense we mean it here.\footnote{Noll, \textit{America's God}, 377.} When Calvinistic ideals merged with the Realist vein of thought and were applied to the American cultural situation, they fuelled the social vision that undergirded Palmer’s Southern, American public theology. Noll locates the mid-nineteenth century abolition controversy squarely in the midst of a hermeneutical battle. On the one hand, he contends that this hermeneutic led people to activism, the assumption ‘[t]hat a simple solution existed for problems in theology, morals, and society.’\footnote{Ibid.,} On the other hand, a simplistic reading of Scripture led many Southern Christians to uphold chattel slavery as a system commended and regulated by Scripture.\footnote{Ibid., 385.}

As sectional tensions became acute, the activist and the literalist impulses began to diverge. The activist impulse attached itself to the great social causes of the nineteenth century, like abolition. Its religious leadership agreed that Scripture sanctioned slavery and was, therefore, wrong. Thus they must be subjected to the higher law of rationality, thus leaving Biblical literalism behind.\footnote{Samuel S. Hill, \textit{The South and the North in American Religion} (Macon, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 85.} As Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese observe, “Too often, when pressed hard in biblical exegesis, not only the radical abolitionists but the moderate antislavery men boldly asserted that if the Bible could in fact be shown to condone slavery, it would deserve to be condemned as an immoral book.”\footnote{Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, ‘The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society,’ \textit{The Georgia Historical Quarterly} 70, no. 1 (April 1, 1986): 9.} The activist North was departing Scripture while the literalist South justified the slave society.
II. Hermeneutics and History

Samuel S. Hill, Jr., contends that Southern religion was individualistic and pietistic. Its great concern was reconciling the soul to God and equipping it to live a Godward life.\textsuperscript{15} Southern religion placed piety against social concern; the two could not be held in tandem. Southern Presbyterianism, in particular, was not concerned with the great social ills of the day. Hill asserts an irony here, however. The genius of Southern Christianity was to occupy itself solely with private concerns to preserve the status quo in society. By re-making individuals through conversion, Southern Protestantism set out to make them both morally pure and content with their lots in life. He contends that this posture served the power structure of the slave society very well.\textsuperscript{16}

Palmer was concerned with Christian piety and the life to come, but it does not, therefore, follow that he was unconcerned with social ills. To the contrary, he had an almost unbounded faith in human progress to ameliorate social problems, and at times appeared to conflate the interests of the church and social improvement. The bulk of Palmer’s writing and speaking outside of the pulpit was devoted, not to matters of otherworldly piety, but to current issues and the advance of human society. He was not unconcerned with the betterment of humanity’s lot in this world, nor was he simply a guardian of the status quo, although he did have very different ideas of what progress ought to look like than his Northern counterparts.

By 1872, even though the South was still under Reconstruction, Palmer appeared reconciled to life in the reunited United States and called for progress to be made across races and regional divides. Though he held firmly to the separation of the races, he asserted those who had been slaves and were now citizens deserved all the rights of citizenship, ‘Accepting squarely, as the terms of national pacification, the Negro’s

\textsuperscript{15} Hill, \textit{The South and the North in American Religion}, 7.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 74–75.
emancipation and his political status along with these franchises should go the
privileges of education and culture.’\textsuperscript{17} He also contended for the black culture’s right of
self-determination, but also that privileged whites should not forsake it. They deserved
‘all the kindness and helpful cooperation to which the old relations between the races,
and their present dependence on each other, would naturally predispose.’\textsuperscript{18} He admitted
that such was not easy, but that the problems presented by the national upheaval would
find their solution from ‘practical Anglo-Saxon sense, and under the direction of a wise
Providence which still binds the destinies of the two together.’\textsuperscript{19}

However, even beyond this, Palmer issued prophetic warnings against what he
perceived to be the evil of the age: an unrestricted and unregulated capitalism, driven by
greed.\textsuperscript{20} ‘The Present Crisis’ in Palmer’s sights was Social Darwinism, not anything
related to the Civil War.\textsuperscript{21} Palmer was not against all social change. He knew that change
must come and that some change was beneficial. He wrote, ‘It is the climax of
statesmanship to strike the golden mean between the Radicalism which overturns only
for the sake of change, and the fatal Conservatism which, in its blind attachment to
inheritance and prescription, resists the progress it should aim to guide.’\textsuperscript{22} He cited the
American Revolution as an example. In Palmer’s view, American independence sought
to retain the best features of its British past: notably a common-law tradition and the
notion of human rights. Concurrently, he noted the American founders were willing to
cast off the constraints of hereditary monarchy and replace them with a constitutional
republic.\textsuperscript{23} Palmer believed the exigencies of the present crisis were best met by a return

\textsuperscript{17} Benjamin Morgan Palmer, \textit{The Present Crisis and Its Issues. Address by Rev. B. M. Palmer, D. D. at
Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Va. 27th June, 1872.} (Baltimore, MD: John Murphy & Co., 1872),
20.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid., 20–21.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 21.
\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 23.
\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 25.
\textsuperscript{22} Ibid., 11.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid., 12.
to the heroic values of the American founding, even as he admitted that such would have to be adapted to current realities:

In passing successfully through any crisis, a people must possess elasticity enough to adapt themselves to new conditions ...Nothing seals the fate of a nation sooner than the stubborn adherence to obsolete usages and forms which the progress of society is determinately throwing off.24

Thus, Palmer was not merely the staunch enemy of progress and guardian of white prerogative and privilege, as Hill asserts.

There was a divide, however, between Palmer and Northern ‘radicalism.’ Perhaps Palmer’s place in the divide is best illustrated by his commentary on the division in the Presbyterian Church (USA) that took place in 1837 between the ‘Old School’ and ‘New School’ factions. The Old School, with whom Palmer affiliated, held strictly to The Westminster Confession of Faith. Its ministers were obliged to confess every doctrine in Westminster as being faithful to the teaching of Scripture.25 The New School, on the other hand, was far more tolerant of doctrinal diversity, and emphasised the church’s obligation as an agent of social reform; it thus became a powerful proponent of abolition. As Hill notes, the Southern Old School appeared more concerned with upholding doctrinal purity and personal piety than it was with societal reform.26 It is a misunderstanding to assert that therefore Palmer did not believe in societal reform, he simply believed that it could not be violently or suddenly enacted. Moreover, though he noted many social ills that needed to be corrected, slavery was not one of them. The abolitionist, Palmer contended, wanted an immediate end to of the wrong of slavery, but, in a fallen world, not all wrongs could be righted:

It is time to reproduce the obsolete idea that Providence must govern man, and not that man should control Providence. In the imperfect state of human society, it pleases God to allow evils which check others that are greater...This spirit of

24 Ibid., 11.
25 Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘The Proposed Plan of Union between the General Assembly in the Confederate States of America and the United Synod of the South,’ Southern Presbyterian Review 16, no. 3 (April 1864): 282–283. The United Synod of the South was the remnant of the New School Presbyterian Church that broke away from its Northern counterpart after the secession of the South.
26 Cf. chapter 6.
atheism, which knows no God who tolerates evil...has selected us for its victims, and slavery for its issue...With its tri-colour waving in the breeze, it waits to inaugurate its reign of terror.27

This is further evidence of Palmer’s view of providence: in a fallen world, God allows lesser evils to aly greater evils. In Palmer’s reckoning, slavery was a ‘lesser’ evil that staved off egalitarian anarchy and bloodletting. The abolitionists were ‘those fierce zealots who undertake to drive the chariot of the sun utterly disregarding the delicate mechanism of Providence; which moves on wheels within wheels which the great designer alone can control.’28 Apparently, however, Palmer never noticed the inconsistency of an all-powerful providence that encompasses even the evil acts of men, but that could somehow be co-opted and thwarted by radical atheistic abolitionists.

E. Brooks Holifield contends that, though the Southern literalists believed they were allowing ‘the Biblical text to speak to them in its original purity...in fact they were participants in a portentous transition in the interpretation and application of the Bible.’29 In brief, Holifield argues that the Southern theologians viewed Scripture through the lens of their philosophical presuppositions, and were largely blind to the fact they were doing this. This led them to stake claims on the ground of Biblical truth that appeared dubious to other Christians who held to the same confession with equal strictness. For example, Alexander McLeod, pastor of the First Reformed Presbyterian Church of New York, wrote in 1802, ‘The practice of buying, holding, or selling our unoffending fellow creatures as slaves is immoral’. He opposed slavery on the grounds of The Westminster Larger Catechism’s interpretation of the eighth commandment, forbidding man-stealing.30 He quickly added that he did not condemn all conceivable

28 Ibid.
forms of slavery, but rather race-based chattel slavery in perpetuity. Abroad, the Irish ‘Covenants,’ close kin to the North American Reformed Presbyterians, likewise condemned American Slavery.\(^{31}\) This demonstrates that commitment to Old School Presbyterianism did not necessarily make one pro-slavery, nor did calling for the abolition of slavery indicate that one had necessarily abandoned those commitments, contrary to what Doralyn Hickey asserts.\(^{32}\)

Most histories of this subject and period remain relatively silent on the question of the method by which the Southern Presbyterians interpreted Scripture, beyond citing the verses that they used to bolster chattel slavery. We must not overlook its significance for Palmer. He adhered to the Reformed, literal hermeneutic, influenced by his nineteenth century American and Southern framework. One might argue that this was his chief work, given that the bulk of his literary labours were six decades’ worth of twice-weekly sermons. That Palmer believed in a literal interpretation of the Bible, as described above, is more assumed than explicit in his writings. For instance, in a detailed piece that he admitted was speculative beyond the teaching of God’s Word, Palmer issued this warning:

> Of course, the appeal must be made exclusively to the testimony of Scripture: and in gathering up this testimony, we feel the need of very great caution, since the condition of the angelic world is not made the subject of direct revelation in the Bible, but is incidentally unfolded.\(^{33}\)

Here, Palmer stressed that the only certain ground for building an argument was the express teaching of Scripture. A scholar may extrapolate beyond Scripture but do so

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\(^{31}\) Daniel Ritchie, ‘Radical Orthodoxy: Irish Covenanters and American Slavery, circa 1830-1865,’ *Church History* 82, no. 4 (December 2013): 824–829.

\(^{32}\) Doralyn J. Hickey, *Benjamin Morgan Palmer: Churchman of the Old South* (University Microfilms, 1990), 117–18, 164. Another prominent Old School abolitionist theologian was R.J. Breckenridge of Kentucky, whose grandson, B. B. Warfield (1851-1921), stood heroically against racism and segregation in the 1880’s, but became better known as a crusader for Calvinist Orthodoxy at Princeton Seminary in the early twentieth century.

humbly, admitting that what he is arguing has gone beyond what Scripture plainly revealed.

There is, however, more at work. Palmer, like others of his era, drew direct applications from the Scripture to the American experience. Eran Shalev describes the practitioners of this hermeneutic as those who ‘often treated “the American Israel” in terms that were not metaphorical but rather demonstrative of their conviction of a God still operative in history.’ Palmer’s work provides ample evidence of the re-appropriation of Biblical language directly to contemporary realities. For instance, after New Orleans fell in 1863, Palmer likened those citizens who took the oath of allegiance to the Union to the apostates of 1 John 2:19, saying of them, ‘these are simply traitors to the South –they went out from us because they were not of us.’ Later, he wrote, ‘Thus craftily were our unhappy fellow-citizens decoyed into the oath from which, at the beginning, they recoiled with the indignant exclamation of Hazael [from 2 Kings 8:13], “What! Is thy servant a dog, that he should do this great thing.”’

We must note that Palmer was not writing to Christians undergoing persecution for their faith. Palmer frequently equated the fortunes of the South with those of the chosen nation of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament kingdom of God. Elsewhere, he said ‘Eleven tribes sought to go forth in peace from the house of political bondage, but the heart of our modern Pharaoh is hardened that he will not let Israel go.’ Moreover, because of its fundamentally religious nature, the Southern cause merited martyrdom:

Our country and our God! The two blend evermore in the Christian patriot’s thought, and shall it be said there are no martyrdoms for the one, when the gibbet and the flame are welcomed for the other? True heroism may be displayed in endurance not less than in actions; and our fellow-citizens in Louisiana enjoyed a most distinguished opportunity of rendering a service to the Confederacy quite as valuable as that of the army in the field. Can any good

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36 Ibid., 10.
reason be assigned why they should not run the hazard of confiscation, of imprisonment and of death, equally with those who encountered the risk of capture, of wounds, and of death on the field of slaughter!\textsuperscript{38}

Palmer appropriation of Biblical terminology to describe present realities was common in nineteenth-century American discourse, as Noll and Shalev both contend.\textsuperscript{39} Palmer deserves notice because he was a prime example of how such a theological view of public life could coexist comfortably with a view that held that the church and the state were ‘perfectly distinct’ entities, ‘planets moving in different orbits.’\textsuperscript{40} Palmer, likewise, was an advocate of the separation of the sphere of the church from the civil realm. We must note that doctrine is related to the disestablishment of the church, but not identical to it. We will explore this in further detail in a later chapter. Here, we simply note the paradox in Palmer’s thought: a religious view of national life, while holding to a church utterly separate from it.

Shalev goes beyond Noll and contends that, in such an appropriating of Biblical terminology, nineteenth-century theologians ‘positioned politics as the new religion of the republic, a medium that sanctified the nation and articulated Americans’ perception of chosenness.’\textsuperscript{41} In short, the confusion of Biblical and civic categories in American religious thought in the nineteenth century led Christianity to become a diluted civil religion.\textsuperscript{42} Though some of this confusion is apparent in Palmer’s work, there was a tension between hope for present social improvement and pietistic otherworldliness.

\textsuperscript{38} Ibid., 27–28; he also calls a fallen Confederate General ‘a martyr’, though he ‘made no profession of religion in life.’ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, Address Delivered at the Funeral of General Maxcy Gregg, in the Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC, December 20, 1862 (Columbia, SC: Southern Guardian Steam-Power Press, 1863), 7, 10.

\textsuperscript{39} Cf. for instance the speeches and letters of Abraham Lincoln.

\textsuperscript{40} James Henley Thornwell, ‘Address to All the Churches of Christ Throughout the Earth,’ in The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, Banner of Truth, vol. 4 (Edinburgh and Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 449.

\textsuperscript{41} Shalev, American Zion: The Old Testament as a Political Text from the Revolution to the Civil War, 85. Cf. Noll, ‘The United States as a Biblical Nation’, 44.

Likewise, he viewed the church as God’s kingdom, but often transferred this thinking to the nation at large, forming a uniquely Southern, American ‘public theology.’ Palmer might have protested that his social speculations did not go beyond the bounds of Scriptural teaching, yet he applied Scripture in an unmediated way to American society, affirming a unique place for America in God’s plan. He saw definite parallels between the history of Israel and the providential mission of the United States. It is for this reason that we cannot regard his Biblical allusions as mere figures of speech. As Noll writes, ‘Although many ministers undoubtedly used such metaphors as self-conscious literary devices, the frequency of their appearance suggests that at least some had blurred the line between simile and reality.’ Moreover, Palmer’s Realist presuppositions lent an air of certitude to his speculations.

III. History as the Unfolding of God’s Providence

Palmer’s hermeneutic linked the Biblical text very closely with first with the fortunes of America, and then the Confederacy. This idea is not unique to Palmer. Shalev documents several others who promoted similar views about America as a whole, notably Lyman Beecher. The Reformed doctrine of providence posits a God that is sovereign over all the affairs of history and has predetermined all the actions of humanity. This does not mean that human beings make no real, accountable choices, but rather that God mysteriously ordered these choices to his glory. It is one thing to hold to the idea that God has a purpose for which he has ordered the events of all history, and another to look at specific events of history and posit God’s intention in every discrete event. This sort of posturing characterised much of Palmer’s writing. James Silver notes

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45 The Westminster Confession of Faith, 5.2.
that ‘Southern churchmen developed an infallible formula. Every Confederate victory proved that God had shielded his chosen people and every defeat became the merited punishment of the same people for their sins.’\textsuperscript{46} Ironically, however, Palmer did not view the defeat of the South as a judgment on Southern slaveholding, but rather as a judgement on the South’s imperfect realisation of the godly slave society. Moreover, Palmer could posit that, though the righteous cause may not prevail in the present, God would vindicate it, not just in eternity, but also in history. John Patrick Daly notes that nineteenth century Southern Presbyterians were not fatalists, but rather sought meaning in adversity. He notes that Calvin himself had asked, ‘What avails it, in short, to know a God with whom we have nothing to do?...ignorance of providence is the greatest of all miseries and the knowledge of it the highest happiness.’\textsuperscript{47}

Palmer’s view on providence made a distinction between personal and larger historical events. In \textit{The Broken Home: Lessons in Sorrow}, he chronicled the deaths of his mother, five children, and his wife. While he drew spiritual lessons from these sorrows, he nowhere intimated that he viewed his extraordinary sorrows as a visitation of divine wrath for his sins. Historical events, however, were different. He wrote, ‘The separation of North and South was as surely decreed of God, and has as certainly been accomplished by the outworking of great moral causes, as was the separation of the Colonies from their English mother.’\textsuperscript{48} Elsewhere, Palmer argued that Providence would right whatever social wrongs attend to slavery and its abolition:

\begin{quote}
My own conviction is, that [the relationship between races] is far too delicate and difficult a problem to be solved by empirical legislation –either by the State, on its political side, or by the Church, on its ecclesiastical. It must be patiently wrought out in the shape which an infinitely wise Providence shall direct—and it needs
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{46} Silver, \textit{Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda}, 31.
the element of time, with its silent but supreme assimilating and conciliatory influence.49

He then drew the inference from the separation of languages in Genesis and cited four thousand years of history as teaching the providential lesson that God would have the races not intermingle.

A.) God’s Intervention in History: ‘The Rainbow Round the Throne’

On 27 February 1863, Confederate President Jefferson Davis appointed a fast day, and Palmer gave an address at Milledgeville, Georgia. By this point, Federal troops had occupied New Orleans for nine months, and Palmer had been forced to flee. In this sermon, we find some of Palmer’s clearest statements of his convictions about the workings of providence. For instance,

not a single nation which once showed kindness to the people and church of God has been suffered wholly to perish from the earth; whilst every Power that lifted itself to persecute Israel has gone down to mournful wreck beneath the waves, leaving scarcely a trace of its existence behind.50

Palmer cited Persia, and, surprisingly, Egypt, as two examples of empires that showed kindness to the chosen people of God and persisted to the present day. This is an example of the judgement of the ‘tribunal of history,’ that we examined earlier. The ancient prophet may have stood ‘by the side of the historian with an inspired interpretation of passing events,’ and yet modern man ‘cannot fail to see that all history is but an exposition of Providence, as Providence is the interpretation of history.’51 Other Christian thinkers have affirmed this in the general sense, but Palmer’s understanding is different. Unlike chiliasts, Palmer did not draw upon explicit prophecies about America to make his case. Rather, he employed induction to read God’s purposes out of history.

51 Ibid., 30.
His conclusion was that God had worked a certain way in the past, and his hearers could therefore be certain that he would act that way now and in the future.

Palmer posed the question, 'Can we determine whether the sufferings of our beloved land fall upon it in the way of penal judgment or of paternal discipline?', and concluded that he could.\(^5\) He first asserted that 'I recognise in the schism which has rent asunder the American people only a new application of the law by which God has evermore governed the world; that of breaking in two a nation which has grown too strong for its virtue.'\(^5\) Here again, Palmer devised a principle from his observation of history. Moreover, we note Palmer's employment of religious terminology – the breakup of the Union was a 'schism.' He further argued that 'the organic law under which human governments were constituted by God, not consolidation but separation...is recognised as the regulative...principle.'\(^5\) As we noted from Noll above, the regulative principle is an explicitly Reformed term for how to apply the Bible directly to life.\(^5\)

Palmer believed that God issued judgments in time as well as eternity, based upon the virtuous or wicked acts of nations. This view is as old as the Hebrew prophets. Even so, Palmer went beyond the mere request for God to judge, and informed God what the verdict ought to be: 'We make our appeal to Him who rules beneath the rainbow, on the ground, that, touching this controversy between us and our foes, we are blameless.' Palmer did not mean by that statement that the Confederates were without sin, 'But, touching those who have drawn out the sword and are pursuing us with slaughter and with fire, our protest is in the language of the Apostle, “We have wronged no man, we have defrauded no man.”'\(^5\) His only prayer was for '[a] just peace, drawing after it the blessings of life, liberty and happiness, is the boon for which we daily pray before Him

\(^{52}\) Ibid.
\(^{53}\) Ibid.
\(^{54}\) Ibid., 31.
\(^{56}\) Palmer, The Rainbow Round the Throne: Or Judgment Tempered with Mercy, 33–34.
whose merciful prerogative it is to succour the oppressed and to bring the tyrant low.'

Whether it ever occurred to Palmer that those the South held in bondage could easily adopt his argument, we do not know, though elsewhere he would protest, 'I will never, no never, live a slave; and the alternative now presented by our enemies is secession or slavery. Let it be liberty or death!' Providence assigned the descendants of Africans to slavery, but Palmer found it unthinkable that providence might assign it to him.

Palmer then made the signal observation that nobody ought to interpret the Southern reversals as divine displeasure. He admitted, ‘Here, then, is a class of facts which, taken by themselves, would seem to infer that we are deserted by God...lured on by false hopes to be snared in a more fatal ruin.' Thus, he called upon his countrymen to remember the ways that God has shown mercy to the Confederacy. God had freed it from partisan infighting, gifted it with great leaders, confused the camps of its enemies, and given it glorious victories in battle, which were ‘Providential interpositions.'

Because Palmer was convinced of the righteousness of the Southern cause, as well as the righteousness of God's judgments in history, he said,

I cherish the conviction, with all the tenacity of religious belief, that God is about to vindicate the supremacy of his own power in the establishment of our independence. And it seems to me most fitting, that at the precise juncture when he introduces a balance of power upon this Western Continent, he should renew the salutary lesson taught by all history, that 'the Most high ruleth in the kingdom of men, and giveth it to whomsoever he will.'

He drew all these thoughts together in his fourth point, ‘The North cannot succeed in its enterprise against the South, except through the perpetration of a double crime without a parallel in the annals of the world.' This crime would be the extermination of both the

57 Ibid., 35.
58 'Retrospect of the Year 1860,' The Christian Observer 60 (January 1861): 87 This is the conclusion of Palmer’s November, 1860 ‘Thanksgiving Sermon’ also entitled ‘Slavery a Divine Trust,’ but the quotation occurs in an excised paragraph recorded by a reporter and included here.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid., 37.
black and white races. He concluded that the North would have to exterminate the Southern white race because it would never surrender. Moreover, if the white race perished, the black race would be unable to fend for itself. Palmer puts himself in the number of the martyrs, 'I prefer not to live if my country be not free.'

He also asked his hearer to consider what will happen to the slave population if the white race perished:

If the experience of the past teaches anything with certainty, it is the fact that...an inferior race cannot be intermingled with a superior, without annihilation. What have these poor sheep done, that these butchers should drive them to the slaughter...? I confess to you that if this be the fate of the African, I am at a loss to understand the meaning of that Providence which brought him to our shores, and made him thus a member of the household of faith; and I feel that He who rules the earth...will forefend this doom of the slave, by the preservation of the master, who, under divine appointment, stands his guardian and his friend.

In Palmer’s view, providence had entrusted the slave to the care of the South. He asked whether God might spare the South to finish the task of evangelising the slave, 'It is not reserved to this day, so near the promised millennium, to burden the record of human history with a two-fold crime...'

Palmer concluded his sermon by asserting that the cause of the South is ‘pre-eminently the cause of God himself.’ He contended that the Northern radicals had taken it upon themselves ‘to rectify the glaring defects it has discovered in the whole economy of Providence.’ Here we see Palmer highlight his particular view of providence. Northern infidels were out to overturn God’s will revealed through history and ancient institutions. Southern Christians were those defending the divinely-ordained status quo. If God wanted change, then God would bring it about. The South had undertaken to ‘strike for the rights of God and vindicate the honesty of his reign.’ It is interesting that

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62 Ibid.
63 Ibid., 38.
64 Ibid., 36.
65 Ibid., 38–39.
66 Ibid., 39.
67 Ibid., 39.
Palmer could assert that providence dictated the slaves be brought to Southern shores to be evangelised, but somehow exempt the same providence from having brought war to the South.

**B. God’s Judgements in History: ‘The Tribunal of History’**

In 1872, Palmer gave an address before the Southern Historical Society in New Orleans. The date is significant because New Orleans fell to federal troops in 1862, and the North defeated the South in April 1865. Reconstruction, the time of protracted military occupation and martial law, lasted until 1877. As the South’s economic capital and chief seaport, New Orleans’s economy and civic life were shattered by the Civil War. Palmer alluded to this; he opened his address with a recounting of Pericles’ funeral oration:

> It was after the disastrous campaign of the summer of 431 B.C., when all Attica had been ravaged by the Spartan legions, and the entire population was compressed within the walls of Athens, that Pericles, the consummate statesman…ascended the Bema to speak the honours of the Athenian dead.68

He recounted Pericles’ recitation of the glories of Athens over and against the ‘monotonous drill of Sparta or some other ideal standard impressed upon society with a heavy-handed uniformity.’ Moreover, Palmer recorded, Pericles concluded that those who remained after the defeat ‘must willingly toil, drawing the lesson that the conflict is not for equal motives between us and our enemies who possess nothing of the like excellence.’69

Palmer drew the lesson, with obvious parallels to his audience’s present experience, that war was often the ‘logical result’ of longstanding and large scale conflicting opinions. The conflict in Greece, he asserted, was between Lacedaemon’s ‘continental and oligarchic’ government and Athenian democracy.70 He did not leave his hearers in doubt as to the purpose of his historical allusion, stating, ‘We of the South

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69 Ibid., 246.
70 Ibid., 247.
have been stirred by the power of the same sentiment.’ He clearly resented the ravages of the Union forces, which confiscated ‘three-fifths of its property’ (slaves) ‘by a single stroke of the pen,’ and ‘a band of harpies fattening upon the public revenue more obscene than those described by Virgil.’\textsuperscript{71} In Palmer’s view, the Northern tyranny had subjugated the pure Southern democracy.

Palmer had a sense that the North deeply wronged the South during the Civil War and Reconstruction. Against this dark backdrop, Palmer asserted that his understanding of providence meant that before ‘the solemn tribunal of history... justice and truth are sure to meet a proximate vindication.’\textsuperscript{72} We note that what Palmer posited here was not the final judgment of God at the end of human history, but the ‘proximate’ verdict of history itself. He wrote, ‘The scepticism of this inquiry, we propose now to meet, by asserting the reality of a judicial process going forward perpetually in the court of time, and reversing the hasty judgments rendered amidst the passions of the passing hour.’\textsuperscript{73} In short, the judgments of future generations, unclouded by passion and prejudice, would be more accurate in their assessments of present motives and action.

Palmer presented three arguments in support of his thesis. First, ‘There is in the human soul a principle of justice, a relic of that image of God in which man was first created.’\textsuperscript{74} Because of this innate sense, Palmer contended, given enough time and distance from present passions, humanity would pass accurate verdicts upon the injustices of the past. He anticipated someone might ask where such a court would be held, and answers ‘The public conscience is the judge...The intelligence and virtue, the truth and candour of the race, constitute the panel before which the cause is heard. And a sublime Providence raises up the advocates who speak.’\textsuperscript{75} Palmer was confident that

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 248.
\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 249.
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid, 252, underline Palmer’s.
providence would bring vindication in the final assize. God would see to it that the righteous cause of the oppressed is heard and adjudicated in the annals of history. One might here raise a question as to how Palmer reconciled his view of humanity’s innate ‘intelligence...virtue...truth and candour’ with his Calvinist conviction that every human faculty is depraved.\textsuperscript{76} One senses an awareness of this tension in Palmer’s brief comment early in his argument that, ‘Our nature is majestic even in its wreck.’\textsuperscript{77} Palmer had faith both in humanity and the providence of God:

> A holy Providence gives the token of its own judicial process by and by in that lower tribunal it has created in the human soul; and eternal justice throws down its great shadow upon the earth in these solemn historic retractions, the last judicial findings in its court of appeal.\textsuperscript{78}

How this relates to the formation of Palmer’s public theology becomes more apparent in his second point:

> History is but the working out of principles and theories, the scope of which can only be known in their practical results; and God has so conditioned this probationary life that, whether for good or evil, these results are permitted to accrue with little of intervention or restraint. By consequence, history is throughout the progress of a trial. Human actions are perpetually passing under critical review in the light of the fruits they produce.\textsuperscript{79}

He raised the question, familiar in the Psalms, of why it appears that the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer, a problem that ‘make[s] providence a paradox.’\textsuperscript{80} His answer was that humans tend to view only a tiny sliver of time, while the arc of God’s justice bends long: ‘Not until the issue is traced in the connexions that are beyond time, is the solution given to the vast, complex problem of human life.’\textsuperscript{81}

> Palmer insisted that human life, and all of history, is ‘probationary.’ He then contended for ‘the disciplinary character of life,’ which gives us the key to the interpretation of history...The divine method...is to give man his opportunity. His true character will work itself out...Nothing is wanted but the

\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 250.
\textsuperscript{78} Ibid., 253.
\textsuperscript{79} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 254.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid.
element of time; and the world will pronounce its irreversible judgment....As with
the individual, so it is with every corporate society.\textsuperscript{82}

Palmer argued that time will tell: ‘An indignant world rises up in judicial resentment of
the fraud so long practised upon its credulity, and takes reprisal for the wrong in the
complete reversal of its previous judgment.’\textsuperscript{83}

Palmer found the evidence to support his assertion in the annals of history, citing
the downfall of the Roman Republic, the Spanish Empire, and the French Republic. He
concluded that the patrician-plebeian divide was the cause of the Roman downfall.
Curiously, he linked the fall of the Spanish Empire to, among other things, their
expulsion of the Islamic Moors, ‘who had become the children of her soil, enriching it
with the learning, industry and art of the East.’\textsuperscript{84} However, it is revolutionary France
that here, and many places elsewhere, loomed large in his sights. ‘The fatal song of the
sirens...breathed no more seducing accents than those of “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,”
which roused the passions of the wild enthusiast dancing around the tricolour of the
French revolution.’\textsuperscript{85} He concluded that ‘the burning Paris of today...tells the bitter fruit
borne by that Radicalism which sweeps like the whirlwind through America and
through England –the direst foe of constitutional freedom wherever it is found and
which will yet sack the very world, and lay the earth in ashes at his feet.’\textsuperscript{86} Palmer was
writing around the time of the Paris Commune, and believed its baleful effects, a century
after the French Revolution, to be the sort of historical judgment for which he here
contends. Larry E. Tise notes that the Southern slave apologists believed in the socially-
stratified, orderly, republican conservatism of Burke over and against what they saw as
the egalitarian, heterodox levelling of Jefferson and the French Revolution.\textsuperscript{87}

\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 255.
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 259.
\textsuperscript{87} Larry E. Tise, Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840 (Athens, GA and
God had stratified society to serve the purposes of good order. Master and slave, husband, wife and children, pastor and people, all had assigned roles as authorities or subordinates in various relationships, for the mutual benefit and peace of all involved. When those roles violently evaporated, God’s judgment of the culture followed. For Palmer, the lines drawn in history were clear: God would work his providential judgments in such a way that they would be evident to all, not merely in the final judgment at the end of time, but also in the course of historical events.

Palmer’s last point is intriguing, giving his sociological bent. He warned against reducing history ‘to a positive science,’ and referenced Thomas Buckle, who ‘pushes the reign of inexorable law into the sphere of the variable and contingent.’ He cited with approval Froude’s critique: since history, unlike natural phenomena, never repeated itself, it could not be the subject of inductive study. This appears to mark a shift from Palmer’s earlier thinking. It may just be that fifteen years and massive social upheaval served to chasten and change his faith in the inductive method and many other things. This is contrary to Doralyn Hickey’s assertion that Palmer ‘retained fundamentally the same viewpoints, with little alteration, until the end of his life.’ He had experienced the unpredictable vicissitudes of history and concluded that inductively-derived principles were insufficient for understanding or predicting human behaviour. Providence, however, held the answer:

We are in a condition to see how history is manufactured for a purpose; how an impudent partisanship manipulates the facts; how the truth we personally know is suppressed; how gross fictions are stereotyped by endless repetition; how the brand of injurious epithets is freely used to stamp falsehood with the seal of truth; and how misrepresentation and calumny are stuffed into books which circulate around the globe and preoccupy the minds of men...Is it strange if some

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should morbidly infer that all history is but a romance at best, if it be not also a libel and a slander.\textsuperscript{90}

Even so, the bleak present did not dampen Palmer’s faith of God’s judgments in history. He was convinced that the evil of despotism brought about the downfall of Nineveh, Persepolis, Babylon and Egypt, for ‘of all things on earth nothing is weaker than force; and in its calm judicial tone, (history) pronounces the most withering sarcasm upon the ambitions and achievements of the sword.’\textsuperscript{91} Based on his inductive study of history, Palmer asserted, ‘this long succession of gigantic empires simply held the world until the light of freedom could break from the west – until, out of the bosom of a better civilisation, philosophy and science should rescue it from the dominion of a superstitious and fantastic imagination.’\textsuperscript{92}

Interestingly, Palmer gave another version of the address nearly three decades later, to a gathering of Confederate veterans. His argument and language were largely the same, but he prefaced his remarks more congenially. He did note, however, that it is sometimes asked why we should stir the ashes of that ancient feud...To this question, comrades, we return the answer with a voice loud as seven thunders: Because it is history, because it is our history and the history of our dead heroes who shall not go without fame,’ he went on to admit, ‘it is the story of a strife that marks an epoch on the annals of the American people.\textsuperscript{93}

After almost four decades since the South’s defeat, Palmer granted that America was one people, although it had transitioned from a confederation to a ‘consolidation, and the American nation emerged out of the American republic.’\textsuperscript{94} As in the earlier oration, he began by giving his historical explanation for how such a cataclysm as the American Civil War could erupt, but then he interrupted his vindication of the South with a conciliatory remark:

\textsuperscript{90} Palmer, ‘The Tribunal of History,’ 260.
\textsuperscript{91} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{92} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{93} Palmer, ‘Orator of the Occasion,’ 248.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid, 249.
It is not my design, however, to discuss these issues. On the contrary, I have traced the remote origin of the Confederate war for a purpose which is entirely conciliatory, and to explain some things which may appear contradictory. It enables both parties in this struggle to give full credit to each other for patriotic motives, though under a mistaken view of what that patriotism may have required...It explains how, through a noble forbearance on both sides—always excepting the infamies of the reconstruction period—the wound has been healed in the complete reconciliation of a divided people.95

In the years between the Southern defeat and Reconstruction, Palmer had reconciled for himself and his hearers how one could be both a Southern partisan who looked to the past without shame and a forward-thinking citizen of the reunified nation, standing on the cusp of a new century. The dreaded Yankees, headed by their ‘tyrannical Pharaoh’ Lincoln had become, after the hated Reconstruction, a partner in forbearance and reconciliation.

Timothy F. Reilly analyses this transition in Palmer’s thought.96 He sees growth in Palmer’s thought from the ‘big villain of the play’ to the conciliatory elder statesman, who could embrace the phenomenal progress of the turn of the twentieth century. Though Reilly notes that Palmer was ‘one of the chief architects of the Lost Cause tradition, whose pervasive theme in Southern literature, historical recollection, and political life helped to sustain morale and strengthen regional identities,’ he notes that such did not mean Palmer could not also embrace a hopeful future.97 He concludes, ‘By the close of the nineteenth century, Palmer had thus become an avowed nationalist and world interventionist.’98 Paradoxically, this did not mean Palmer forgave the federal government for Reconstruction, nor did he accept ‘the Northern victory as everlasting or morally acceptable.’99 Interestingly, Palmer did not discern the verdict of God in the defeat of the South, and the abolition of the slave system. Bertram Wyatt-Brown has

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95 Ibid.
97 Ibid, 289.
98 Ibid, 298.
99 Ibid.
noted, ‘Contradictory though it may seem, success was always attributed to nobleheartedness duly rewarded by divinity. On the other hand, defeat meant no disgrace, no godly judgment, for instance upon Southern devotion to the slave institution.’

However bleak the outlook Palmer had adopted after the Southern slave society crumbled around him, by the end of his life he had returned to his earlier view of America as a redeemer nation, one that would lead Christian civilisation into the next century.

C.) History and Public Theology

It is not a difficult task to link Palmer’s view of history to his public theology. History, in Palmer’s mind, has a great and providential purpose: it is to render the judgments of God in history. Many of these judgments are directly linked to the particular forms of government that were in play – God has judged the despotisms of the Ancient Near East at the tribunal of history. The South’s present shattered fortunes, her slandered reputation before the nations, and the overweening despotism of the North would be utterly reversed as God worked his providential judgments in history. Then, as he argued in other places, the South’s love of freedom, its decentralised polity and its sacred trust of chattel slavery, would be seen to be a superior form of society as had yet existed. As he wrote in another place, ‘[t]he bar of impartial History...has never failed, upon sufficient evidence, to reverse the judgment of previous ages, and to render complete, though it may be tardy, justice to communities as well as to individuals.’

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102 Palmer, ‘Import of Hebrew History,’ 582.
IV. Eschatology and the Thousand Year Triumph of the Christian West

‘[A] MAGNIFICENT AUDIENCE GATHERING AT THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH TO HEAR THE PATRIARCHAL MAN OF GOD TRACE DIVINE PURPOSE THROUGH DIFFERENT CIVILIZATIONS AND EPOCHS UNTIL THE NEW ERA’S DAWN BRINGS NEARER TO PEACE AND GOOD WILL ON EARTH.’

On 1 January 1901, Benjamin Morgan Palmer preached his last significant sermon to the congregation he had pastored for nearly half a century. He took for his texts Psalm 103:19, ‘The Lord hath prepared his throne in the heavens; and his kingdom ruleth over all,’ and Hebrews 12:28-29, ‘Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: For our God is a consuming fire.’ He stated that he desires to illustrate the truth of the proposition:

the history of this world is an organic whole, and all of its parts are connected together by a holy and divine purpose running through, from the first to the last, carrying along with it the continuous development of the human race, and terminating, as its definite conclusion, in the establishment of a kingdom, which is to endure throughout the ages of a coming eternity.

He proposed to proceed in the sermon by endeavouring to ‘illustrate this morning by select portions of human history which shall irradiate the same.’ It is noteworthy that this sermon was given on a Tuesday, and was not part of Palmer’s regular Sabbath preaching. He recapitulated much of the same ground we have covered earlier in the chapter. Though some of his positions softened over time, he retained the essential view of human history and providence that characterized his thought earlier in the nineteenth century. The sermon was a Christian vindication of Western cultural might as an expression of God’s providential will:

103 New Orleans Picayune, 2 January 1901, p.1.
104 Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘The Address of Rev. B. M. Palmer, D. D., LL. D. Delivered on the First Day of the New Year and Century in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, LA., at the Request of Citizens, and Members of the Church, of Which He Has Been Pastor Since December 30, 1856’ (The Brotherhood of the First Presbyterian Church, 1901), 2.
105 Ibid.
What do we see to-day? The Indian practically extinct; the vast forests through which he pursued his game levelled to the earth, and the fertile bosom of the soil receiving culture and yielding its fruit a thousand-fold to the industry of man. Instead of the war-whoop of the Indian, we hear the chimes of Sabbath bells, and songs of praise issuing from myriads of Christian homes to the glory of that God ‘who hath prepared his throne in the heavens, and whose kingdom ruleth over all.’

Palmer continued by linking God’s judgment of the Canaanites at the hands of the Old Testament Hebrews to the harrying of the Native Americans off their ancestral soil, ‘in order to find room for his chosen people.’ The Native Americans were judged because they had

for countless centuries, neglected the soil, had no worship to offer the true God, with scarcely any serious occupation but murderous inter-tribal wars, the time came at length when, as I view it, in the just judgment of a righteous and holy God…the Indian has been swept from the earth, and a great Christian nation, over 75,000,000 strong, rises up on this [continent]…to give to him the honour which is his due.

Palmer noted that the European colonists’ motives may have been ‘simple avarice and voracity,’ and yet God had used the wicked actions of settlers to exact his vengeance upon the ‘heathen’. Palmer said nothing about converting Native Americans to Christianity, civilising them, or coexisting alongside them. In Palmer’s estimation, it was God’s will that they perish. Historical ‘is’ had become a moral ‘ought’: a clear example of our understanding of Palmer’s view of providence. Thus, Palmer’s understanding of providence, progress and the coming millennium appeared more concerned with cultural conquest than nations won to Christ. The vision Palmer cast in this sermon was essentially one of secular progress, and not of religious conversions.

Palmer’s take on the Oriental world is similar. It appears his antipathy is not so much religious as it is racial and cultural:

I ask you to look at the stupendous power of these nations of Europe…all of them Christian powers…Is it so that after nearly a century of feeble missionary effort from these Christian powers on either side of the Atlantic, that Christianity (sic),

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106 Ibid., 10.
107 Ibid., 10–11.
108 Ibid., 11.
not of her own motion, or through the action of the church, but as the engine of power used by the State, is brought face to face with the darkest and most cruel heathenism of the world....the largest heathen empire on the globe [presumably he means China and Buddhism here] and before a heathen religion, which, in my judgment, is the most utterly godless of them all, their worship consisting of little more than reverence for their ancestors and a blind endeavour to avert the terror of the demons which they fear.¹⁰⁹

Stephen Haynes views the ‘Century Sermon’ through a mostly racial lens. It is a tempting path to take, given the aforementioned statements. Conversely, Wayne C. Eubank, in an article examining the ‘content...proofs, organization, style, delivery, and audience reaction’ of and to the sermon, overlooks the racial element entirely. He grants that, according to Palmer ‘men have three historical roles, just as the three sons had divinely prescribed destinies...In short, man’s history was an outline of servitude, enlargement and religious service.’¹¹⁰ Nowhere does Eubank note that this division was the result of racial descent. Eubank’s overall assessment of the speech is that, 'His grasp of history in terms of current affairs was also striking –such was his sagacity.'¹¹¹ He also notes that the aged minister spoke without the use of notes, and was nearly blind.

There is, however, something that Haynes and Eubank fail to note: the centrality of the idea of societal progress towards the millennium. Palmer viewed individuals, races, cultures, and religions as having divinely-ordained roles to play in God’s providential plan. That plan would reach its earthly culmination in the trans-national millennial reign of Christ, not from Jerusalem, but from his heavenly throne. He writes of such a time:

But through the perspective of prophecy, as given to us in God’s own revealed word, it is not difficult to tell what the end of all these conflicts, and of all human history, will be...there is yet to be a period of rest for the agitated and unhappy earth; a thousand years during which righteousness and peace shall dwell upon

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 12.
¹¹¹ Ibid., 35.
the earth...and the ‘kingdom which is righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost’ shall for a thousand years bless this inhabited world.\textsuperscript{112}

Palmer believed the millennium would begin at some point in the near future, as Christ reigned from heaven, and the earth came into submission to him by the proclamation of the gospel. He wrote in his sermon, ‘Christ’s Universal Dominion’, that, ‘The chain of proof runs through the Scripture of the Old and New Testament...until at last the dawn of the Millennium breaks upon the sight, when ‘the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.’ ( Isa 11:9).’\textsuperscript{113} He looked forward to a future time when God will be glorified by exalting his son over the rulers of the nations. Yet the overwhelming bulk of Palmer’s future-oriented writing projected a millennium that looked very much like the present: the white sons of Japheth ruling over the sons of Ham, and the march of progress accumulating increasing wealth and influence to the European, and especially American, affluent classes.

There is a striking division between Palmer’s public writing and occasional orations on the one hand, and his regular sermons and devotional works, on the other. In Palmer’s extant sermons and religious articles, we find little if any reference to the general improvement of society as a whole that characterized postmillennial thinking. In fact, when Palmer preached on future-oriented texts, inevitably they were about the believer’s hope of heaven, or the return of Christ in triumph, without a mention, save the one noted previously, of the intervening millennial state. Instead, one will find tragic notes sounded. His third and fourth points in a sermon entitled ‘Looking at the Unseen,’ preached on 3 June 1877, were ‘The sense of things eternal gives endurance to bear the pains of present discipline’ and ‘the text) places life before us distinctively as the sphere of

\textsuperscript{112} Palmer, ‘The Address of Rev. B. M. Palmer, D. D., LL. D. Delivered on the First Day of the New Year and Century in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, LA, at the Request of Citizens, and Members of the Church, of Which He Has Been Pastor Since December 30, 1856,’ 16.

The hope Palmer held out for the present life is not in the progress of humanity, or even in the progress of the gospel in remaking society, but rather in the final return of Christ: ‘When the dispensation of the Gospel shall be brought to its close...Then shall be closed forever the battle between holiness and sin. The separation will be complete of the righteous from the wicked.’

It might be tempting, then, to draw the conclusion that postmillennialism occupied an insignificant role in Palmer’s thought, and thus in his public theology. Yet it is in Palmer’s writing on political and social topics that we find not a gospel postmillennialism, but rather a secularised millennialism of the progress of science and statecraft:

And now, what is the truth to-day? That a haughty and aggressive civilisation, such as ours, a civilisation that has learned through science nature’s most secret powers, brings forth hitherto unknown agencies, no more to be the toy of the chemist in the laboratory or the philosopher in his study and in his library, but to be harnessed to all the practical duties of common life –the very wonders of God’s power harnessed to man’s car, and made each day to minister to and serve us in our wants, and make our lives happier and brighter. Why look at these lights, which encircle this room...and you see the interpretation of my thought. That mighty civilisation has grown strong in its new discoveries...Here then, is an aggressive civilisation; our European and American civilisation.

Simply reading that, we might think that Palmer was passing judgment on Western civilisation for its dominance of the globe at the turn of the twentieth century. He says, however,

this vast continent of ours, shaken to its very foundation by a civil war, now reposes more solidly upon its base as the strong and mighty nation into which it has converted; and have our own people, manifesting their strength with armaments of war, at this moment in alliance with the powers of Europe, are astonishing the wisdom of the European nations with the acuteness and force of their diplomatic skill.

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115 Ibid., 403.
117 Ibid.
As we see from Palmer's understanding of the doctrine of providence, the plan of God for human history gives history a purpose and a goal. Nonetheless, this goal was not world evangelisation, but rather the triumph of Western Christianised society. As noted above, Timothy Reilly describes this as ‘nationalism,’ but fails to place Palmer’s nationalism in the overall context of his view of providence and his postmillennial eschatology. Indeed, the way Palmer was able to reconcile himself to a United States he saw as very different from the one into which he was born, was his unswerving faith in providence. In God’s plan, the mighty, new American empire had eclipsed the South as the nation that would fulfil God’s divine destiny. Reilly is right to note a sea change in Palmer’s thinking. The loose confederation of Hebrew tribes functioning as semi-independent entities was central to his arguments for Southern Secession. He had found in the government of ancient Israel an archetype for the Southern argument for ‘states’ rights.’

By the end of his life, however, he had embraced the idea of a cohesive American nation that exercised worldwide influence. For Palmer, while the march of progress appeared to be largely secular, the results would be profoundly religious: a God who glorified himself in the earth not so much through evangelisation but by the military, financial, and cultural might of the West.

B. M. Palmer nowhere explicitly laid out his beliefs about the postmillennial return of Christ, but they do implicitly run through many of his writings. Postmillennialists believed certain events had to transpire before Christ would return. Generally, these included the rise and overthrow of Antichrist (often seen to be the Pope), the proclamation of the gospel to all the nations, Christianity’s triumph over all false religions, the general ‘re-engrafting’ of the Jews into the Christian church, and then a partial apostasy, during which time Christ will return and establish his eternal kingdom.

118 ‘States’ rights’ was the assertion by the Southern states that membership in the United States was voluntary, and that every individual state had the right to determine such policies as chattel slavery for itself.
kingdom over the New Heavens and the New Earth.\textsuperscript{119} R. J. Bauckham credits post-
millennialism with the great upsurge of missionary activity in the nineteenth century. 
He notes further, however, that in the nineteenth century, ‘postmillennial expectation 
increasingly approximated to the secular doctrine of progress and merged into liberal 
theology’s identification of the kingdom of God with moral and social improvement.’\textsuperscript{120} James H. Moorhead notes further that ‘the majority of ante-bellum Southern clergymen 
appear to have been postmillennialists who expected a progressive evangelical conquest 
of the world rather than an early Second Coming.’ He notes that, in the North, 
postmillennialism was married to free-labour capitalism, but, ‘Especially among 
Presbyterians, many ministers envisioned the gradual expansion throughout the world 
of a Christian civilization that included slavery.’\textsuperscript{121} Palmer’s theological views, as we 
have seen, were strictly Old School Calvinist, but there is a distinct division between his 
thology and preaching on the one hand, and his view of progress essentially measured 
by the advance of mighty civilisation.

Fred J. Hood is more sceptical, contending, ‘Postmillennialism was a doctrine 
estespoused by men who were confident that they in large part had control over their 
society and could direct it towards ends desired by themselves’ and he contends that the 
‘absolute dominance of postmillennialism…indicates more strongly than other data the 
extent to which religion was the possession of the elite.’\textsuperscript{122} Hood asserts that 
postmillennialism emphasized the ‘this-worldly’ nature of Reformed theology, a 
religious perspective ‘closer to deism than they realized.’\textsuperscript{123} On the one hand, there are 
some senses in which this can be seen to be true. As we have noted, on the other hand,

\textsuperscript{120} R. J. Bauckham, ‘Millennium,’ ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, \textit{New Dictionary 
\textsuperscript{121} James H. Moorhead, ‘Millennialism,’ ed. Samuel S. Hill, Jr., \textit{Encyclopedia of Religion in the South} (Macon, 
\textsuperscript{122} Hood, \textit{Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837}, 70.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 46, 71.
the vast majority of Palmer's pulpit ministry did not concern the topics of secular progress. Palmer was not a proponent of the social gospel, much less of deism; in his pulpit he avoided societal issues altogether, and focused exclusively on spiritual matters.

Hood also points out that earlier American postmillennialism, such as that of Jonathan Edwards, had downplayed the place of cataclysm, a tribulation period before the inauguration of the millennium, but that the revolutions that rocked Europe from 1775-1825 reintroduced that idea into the American consciousness. Palmer experienced a cultural cataclysm and still he nowhere asserted that the destruction and subjugation of the South were an apocalypse that somehow presaged the millennial glory. To the contrary, the Southern experience served to chasten Palmer's futurism, but only for a time. Doralyn Hickey asserts that Palmer's Old School theology kept him hidebound, calling him ‘almost a theological recluse,’ whose ‘over-confidence imprisoned him and his followers within a statement of faith unable to communicate adequately with the rising generation.’\(^\text{124}\) As we have seen, however, this appears not to have been the case. Palmer was a man in touch with his times; though his theological convictions did not budge, his public theology sometimes resisted, but then ultimately acquiesced, and finally embraced, the world as it changed around him.

**Conclusion**

Palmer's public thought entwined the strands of history, providence, and hermeneutics. From that amalgam emerged a very hopeful view of human progress; Palmer was not a guardian of the status quo. Though he is vague on what exactly entails societal progress, the republican ideals of the American founding play a key role, as well as the improvements wrought by the advances of applied science in the nineteenth century.

\(^{124}\) Hickey, *Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, 118.
While his theology of providence undergirded his view of history, and his eschatology provided history with an end goal, the goal itself appeared to be the triumph of a white-led mighty Western empire, not the eventual evangelisation of the world. The path to progress was not an unbroken string of triumphs, but God would use even human wickedness to advance his ultimate purposes. In Palmer’s view, those purposes could be ascertained simply by looking at history itself, a testimony to his faith in the inductive method. Moreover, though God’s providential hand could not be forced, it could be discerned and gently guided. At the forefront of Palmer’s thinking, always, was the central role of America in its various historical manifestations, would play in God’s ultimate plan for the world.
Chapter 5:

Government and Society in the Public Theology of B. M. Palmer

In this chapter, we examine Palmer’s understanding of the origins, necessity and role of civil society in his public theology. We examine the centrality of the doctrine of providence in his political thought and examine his political theory in comparison with leading thinkers. We contend that Palmer envisioned the role of government as the imposition of providential order on a chaotic world to bring about social progress.

Palmer held firmly to the separation of church and state, whilst advocating a Christian republic; he believed both the United States and Confederate Constitutions to be deficient because they were not explicitly Christian. He believed that power did not have its genesis in centralised authority, but rather began in the intimacy of the patriarchal family, and was voluntarily delegated upwards.

Palmer’s thoughts about human government fall under four categories. First, the patriarchal family was ‘the original society from which the state emerges, and the church, and every other association known among men.’\(^1\) Society was an interconnected web of relationships between those God invested with benevolent authority, and those under authority; this principle undergirded both interpersonal relationships and government. Second, although church and state were distinct entities, the ideal state was one that acknowledged the Lordship of Christ and was in general conformity to the Word of God. Third, God built a ‘principle of separation’ into history that served to keep the state from encroaching into other spheres of human endeavour, and this was a justification for Southern secession. Fourth, if God’s providence had taken the United

States from a decentralised collection of sovereign states and transformed her into a centralised empire, then such a development was welcome because it furthered the purposes of the kingdom of God.

I. Palmer in the Context of Contemporaneous Political Thought

B.M. Palmer nowhere explicitly linked his thought on the nature of civil society to Calvinism. The most obvious corollaries to Palmer's political thought were rather the founding ideals of the American Republic, and political thinkers Edmund Burke[1729-1797], Beverley Tucker[1784-1851], and John C. Calhoun[1782-1850]. Doralyn Hickey asserts that Palmer's political thought was not reflective of any degree of originality, but rather was heavily dependent upon James Henley Thornwell. Palmer's thought, however, continued to evolve during the forty years after Thornwell's death. Moreover, the friends disagreed over the nullification controversy of the 1830's, the desirability of the abolition of slavery, and, for a time, the issue of secession itself. Palmer seems to have given more thought to the philosophical underpinnings of government than did Thornwell. Whereas Palmer gave great thought to the essence of civil society, Thornwell appears to have confined himself more to American Constitutionalism, secession, and practical matters.


3 Hickey, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 18–19.


5 A review of a comprehensive bibliography of Thornwell demonstrates his limited and occasional concerns: he addressed duelling, public schooling, moral reform societies, secession, and wrote a petition to the Confederate Congress to amend its constitution to make it explicitly Christian. Beyond this, Thornwell does not appear to have thought through political philosophy with the same amount of depth that Palmer did.
A.) Edmund Burke and Nathaniel Beverley Tucker

Palmer’s political thought shows great affinity with that of Edmund Burke. Burke likewise influenced John C. Calhoun, one of Palmer’s political heroes.\(^6\) Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese note that Burke was attractive to Southerners because he advocated a leisurely class entrusted with the affairs of state, professed love for the American South, and valued the chivalric ideal and classical antiquity.\(^7\) Palmer also admired Burke’s support for the grievances of the American colonists against the crown, and his deep-seated antagonism to the ideals of revolutionary France.

Burke argued for the occasional necessity of a restrained revolution that preserved historic social ideals and entrusted the government to altruistic leaders. He wrote of the Glorious Revolutionaries, ‘their whole care was to secure the religion, laws, and liberties that had been long possessed’.\(^8\) On the other hand, Burke abhorred the French Revolution because it overthrew the entirety of the ancient order in the name of abstractions with no grounding in human nature or historical experience.\(^9\) Palmer, likewise, often referred to the French Revolution as the archetype of social disorder, and saw the same atheistic spirit at work in abolitionism.\(^10\) Burke stressed the necessity of continuity with the virtues of the past, ‘People will not look forward to posterity, who never look backward to their ancestors.’\(^11\) At the same time, he did not deny the necessity of orderly progress: ‘A state without the means of some change is without the means of its conservation. Without such means it might even risque (sic) the loss of that part of the constitution which it wished the most religiously [to] preserve.’ He cites the

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\(^9\) Ibid., 89–90, 156.
\(^10\) Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘Address before the Crescent Rifles, on Sabbath Morning, May 26, 1861,’ *The New Orleans Sunday Delta*, June 2, 1861, 1.
twin principles of ‘conservation and correction,’ as the saving graces of those times when, ‘England found itself without a king.’ Those twin ideals permeated Palmer’s thought. While Palmer was an advocate of social progress, he feared radical change that overthrew the revered structures of the past in pursuit of an abstract idea, the abolition of slavery.

Burke believed a constitutionally limited monarchy was the most desirable government; perhaps surprisingly, Palmer agreed. Palmer argued that the only reason America formed a republic was that she had no settled nobility. Those who saw republican government as inherently virtuous were wrongly prejudiced against monarchy. Burke favoured government by a cultivated leisure gentry, which is how Palmer envisioned the American South. Both wrote of the perils of popular democracy. Both viewed social stratification as a settled fact, and best for all involved. Like Burke, Palmer viewed providence as the fundamental reality behind social development, and, while it could be cooperated with, it was disastrous to attempt to alter it. Palmer viewed the conflict between North and South through the same lens that Burke viewed the Glorious Revolution in Britain over and against Revolutionary France.

Palmer adapted Burke’s ideas to changing historical realities and developed them further by his understanding of Scripture. Michael O’ Brien points out that Edmund Burke had a great advocate in the nineteenth century South, Nathaniel Beverley Tucker. Tucker and Palmer shared Calvinism’s pessimistic assessment of human nature. Tucker wrote, ‘In all the earth one thing rebels against (a human being), and defies him. IT IS HIS

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12 Ibid., 106.
13 Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10, 1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer’ (Columbia, SC: Charles P. Pelham, State Printer, 1864), 9; cf. also Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘Church and State,’ Southern Presbyterian Review 3, no. 2 (October 1849): 211.
15 Palmer, ‘A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina’, 11; Burke, 124.
16 Ibid., 120; cf. also Francis Canavan, Edmund Burke: Prescription and Providence (Carolina Academic Press and the Claremont Institute for the Study of Statesmanship and Political Philosophy, 1987).
Like Palmer, and John C. Calhoun, Tucker believed the social contract was without historical foundation; humanity had been tribal from the first. Society was not a voluntary arrangement, it had always existed. Tucker posited that government was not the imposition of theoretical ideals on a recalcitrant populace but was instead the creature of circumstances. O’Brien writes, ‘government shaped itself around the society that made it and so contained all of society's oddities.’ This understanding put Tucker at odds with earlier Southern political thinkers, notably Jefferson. As we will explore, Palmer shares the view that the American experiment was more a product of practical realities than it was the establishment of a republic upon untested political ideology.

Moreover, Palmer and Tucker agreed that the slave society was a just social arrangement. This advocacy may seem self-evident, yet, in the latter eighteenth, and early nineteenth, centuries, there was considerable Southern sentiment in favour of abolition. Palmer, however, saw in the reciprocal duties of master and slave the reformation of the rebellious human will tamed by the yoke of involuntary subjection to another. He missed the irony that the secessionist movement was itself the refusal of the master class to bow their necks before their governmental overlord. Most notably, O’Brien contends that Tucker’s ‘radicalism intended a revolution that might conserve; he could not imagine virtue in the new.’ The same could be said of Palmer. These shared

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18 Ibid., 36.
20 O’Brien notes, it “created a safe worker-ant population, made color a bond of sympathy between rich and poor...and schooled the wealthy in noblesse oblige and responsibility...there is no freedom for him, in whom there is not an abiding disposition to bring appetite and passion under the dominion of fixed laws.” in Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860, 2:872; cf. Tucker, A Series of Lectures on the Science of Government, 455.
21 Charles S. Sydnor documents that the Virginia legislature debated slavery in 1832, and that approximately 106 anti-slavery societies, with over 5,000 members, existed in the slave states. This was over three times the number in free states. In The Development of Southern Sectionalism: 1819 - 1848, paperback, vol. 5, A History of the South (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1968), 95 Also, Palmer’s own denomination had passed an anti-slavery resolution in 1818.
23 Ibid.
ideals help us situate Palmer in the political thought of his day. Like Tucker, Palmer repudiated many of the Enlightenment ideals of American founding fathers, and embraced what he perceived to be a more consistent Christian and Realist political understanding.

B.) South Carolina: Cooper, Calhoun, and Nullification

To the end of his life, Benjamin Morgan Palmer was known to exclaim ‘I am a South Carolinian, you know.’ That identification was akin to a national identity. Thomas Cooper instructed his students, ‘If a citizen of this State be asked, “Are you an American?” His reply ought to be, “Sir, I am a South Carolinian.”’ Cooper, an English Enlightenment radical whom Burke had censured in Parliament, immediately preceded Thornwell as president of the South Carolina College. Palmer had a mixed assessment of Cooper: ‘His varied erudition, his trenchant style, his enthusiasm in whatever he espoused, [and] the boldness and courage with which he maintained opinions at variance with the popular sentiment...[masked] the shallowness of his philosophy, and even of his learning.’ Even so, Cooper exercised a large influence in South Carolina’s thought about its identity as a voluntary member of the American Union, which became clear in the dispute over nullification in the 1830’s. South Carolina was Palmer’s country, and it had every right, in his view, to exercise its right to withdraw from the voluntary union for any reasons it deemed sufficient.

The nullification issue is beyond our present study, except to note it as a precursor to the secessions of 1861. Cooper and Calhoun were architects of the

25 O’Brien notes, “Many South Carolinians ended up refusing the idea of American Nationality. They were insistent that the United States were (not was) a federation or a confederation...but not a nation.” in Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860, 2:826–27.
26 Palmer, The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, 60.
nullification doctrine: a state retained the right to nullify any federal statute it found to be unconstitutional. Though this idea had had some currency in several disputes between states and the federal government, it had come nowhere closer to the use of federal force than in South Carolina in 1832.

Former vice-president John C. Calhoun was the public leader of the nullification movement in South Carolina. Palmer came to manhood in South Carolina during Calhoun's heydey and had great affinities with his thought. Calhoun denied social contract theory, contending that it was 'an incontestable fact that man is so constituted as to be a social being. His inclinations and wants, physical and moral, irresistibly impel him to associate with his kind; and he has, accordingly, never been found...in any state other than the social...this state itself cannot exist without government.'\(^{28}\) Palmer reiterated this same argument in his work, *The Family in its Civil and Churchly Aspects*.\(^{29}\) Likewise, both feared not only tyrannical government but also the possibility that the majority would tyrannise the minority in a pure democracy.\(^{30}\) Though Calhoun proposed potential solutions for this, he argued, like Palmer, that only certain civilisations were capable of self-government, and that only certain occupants of countries were suited to citizenship. He also expressed admiration for the counterbalancing influences of the commoners, the nobility, and the monarchy in European nations.\(^{31}\) Palmer clearly stands in the Burkean strand of Southern thought, as personified by Tucker and Calhoun. Palmer did not simply echo Calhoun's ideas, but moulded them by his understanding of Scripture, providence, and philosophy, and thus, they became a formative piece of his overall public theology.

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\(^{29}\) Palmer, *The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects*.


\(^{31}\) Ibid., 42–43, 61.
C.) Palmer in the Context of Southern Presbyterian Political Thought: Dabney and Thornwell

Many consider James Henley Thornwell and Robert Lewis Dabney the leading intellectual luminaries of Southern Presbyterianism, while Palmer receives scant attention in most historical analyses. Palmer’s uniqueness, however, was that he gave great thought, not merely to the American political experiment, but also to the philosophical underpinnings of society itself, and developed a complex political philosophy. Palmer thought more broadly than Thornwell and Dabney about these issues. American constitutionalism and secession were closely interwoven in the thoughts of the three men. Though there was some variation between them regarding the timing and rationale for secession, there were broad areas of agreement. Before the War, Dabney had been far more reticent about secession than either Palmer or Thornwell. When South Carolina acted alone, Dabney wrote to his mother, ‘As for South Carolina, the little impudent vixen has gone beyond all patience. She is as great a pest as the Abolitionists.’ This was a far cry from Palmer and Thornwell, who, by the time of South Carolina’s secession, viewed its cause as wholly just. Eventually, however, the thinking of these three prominent Southern Presbyterian public thinkers coalesced.

After the war, Palmer reconciled himself to American hegemonic power in a way that Dabney never did, and Thornwell had died. According to Sean Michael Lucas, Dabney never adapted to the changing post-war world, but rather saw himself as a stanchion of the old order. Palmer, however, sought ways both to hold on to the Old

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35 Lucas, Robert Lewis Dabney, 106.

36 Ibid., 106 & 130.
South, even as he championed the rapidly modernising world. Hence, while the two men may not have disagreed, the issues they chose were different. Dabney took on matters like Darwinian evolution, feminism, secularised public education, ‘robber barons’ and corporations, radical individualism, and the ‘Lost Cause’, while Palmer was optimistic about the social advancement, rapid Westward expansion, and the growing imperial might of the reunified United States.

II. Providence, Order, and Progress

Benjamin Morgan Palmer lived in a chaotic age. Born in 1818, Palmer died in the dawning days of the twentieth century. In his last public oration, he marvelled at the wonders of electricity in his own sanctuary. During his lifetime, the United States transitioned from a tiny, struggling nation into a world empire with a population approaching eighty million. Palmer was in his forties when the American Civil War broke out. It would claim approximately 620,000 American lives, and radically alter life in the American South. In 1854, Palmer moved from the quiet homogeneity of Columbia, South Carolina, to raucous, diverse New Orleans, the South’s sole metropolis. Because of his role in the secession of Louisiana, Palmer was forced to flee when the city fell to the Union on 1 May 1862. He spent the remaining three years of the war travelling about the South, speaking to troops and legislators. In 1865, he returned to a city under Reconstruction, martial law, and pitched battles in the streets.

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37 Cf. for instance Benjamin Morgan Palmer, “The Address of Rev. B. M. Palmer, D. D., LL. D. Delivered on the First Day of the New Year and Century in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, LA., at the Request of Citizens, and Members of the Church, of Which He Has Been Pastor Since December 30, 1856” (The Brotherhood of the First Presbyterian Church, 1901).

38 James K. Hogue, *Uncivil War*, Kindle e-book (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 2011), sec. 154, ‘While every ex-Confederate state experienced a surge of violence associated with racialized struggles for internal political power after the Civil War, Louisiana became a unique epicenter of violent politics. This occurred, not because Louisiana was typical of the Old South, but precisely because it was so singularly distinct in its population, its geography, and the role it played in the conduct of the Civil War. In most of the states of the former Confederacy, freed slaves formed a minority of the population. Louisiana was one of only three states where black slaves outnumbered free whites in the census of 1860.’
What is more, Palmer’s life was marked by deep tragedy. Five children and his wife predeceased him. The early loss of his best friend, Thornwell, greatly affected him. Palmer’s amount of reflectiveness about his grief renders it significant. Palmer’s personal afflictions translated into a more global view of the human condition:

Hence men of every faith, and men of no faith, stumble over the scandals of the divine government. Good and evil are jumbled together in a strange mixture. The virtuous and the vile move together upon the same plane, beneath the same protection, and apparently in the enjoyment of equal blessings...And men, in their partial induction, leap rashly to the Epicurean conception of a Deity in stately repose, wholly unmindful of the affairs of earth. The mistake lies in forgetting the true character of life as a discipline.

For Palmer, order and discipline were ways of imposing regularity on a tragic and uncertain existence. Palmer believed that human life was a trial. It may have been providentially held in the hand of a loving Heavenly Father, but its events often seemed horrifically arbitrary. One can see why a strong sense of relational obligations, predictability, and order appealed to Palmer. The irony, however, is that Palmer supported Southern secession, which would overturn his entire world, introducing the disorder he feared. It is noteworthy, however, that while Palmer wrote reflectively on his own suffering, and on the suffering brought upon Southern society by the War, he left no commentary on the turbulence of life in post-bellum New Orleans.

Palmer did have much to say about the threat of chaos in general, however. As we have already highlighted, Palmer’s great fear was of the dissolution of Christian civilisation by the ever-present spectre of the French Revolution. Even though that

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40 Palmer, The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell, 523.
43 There is a passing reference to ‘The troubles in our city,’ in a letter to Mrs. Anna G. Hayden of Louisville, Kentucky, on 21 September 1874, during the ‘Battle of Liberty Place,’ when 3,500 members of the White League deposed the sitting governor, captured former Confederate General Longstreet, and held the state government for 3 days.
44 One may see similarities between Palmer’s views and those of Edmund Burke in England, as well as Guillaume Groen van Prinsterer (1801-1876) and Abraham Kuyper (1837-1920) and the Dutch Anti-Revolutionary Party in the Netherlands, though there is no indication in Palmer that he appropriated the
revolution lay in the receding past, the revolutions of 1848 in Europe, as well as the threats of socialism and violence, renewed his concern. Palmer viewed the American South as the bulwark against the sort of radical social change he saw happening in the North, and in Europe.

Palmer prized the ideals of liberty he saw behind the American Revolution and which he believed were preserved in the Confederacy. The French Revolution and subsequent nineteenth century European upheavals, on the other hand, horrified him. Like Burke, he believed that the ideals and institutions of orderly government were preserved by the American revolutionaries, but overturned by the French. In his estimation, the values of each revolution could not be more different.

Palmer believed the United States had passed through three distinct phases: the American Republic, the Confederacy, and the imperial American Nation. Each of these incarnations had a specific providential call, though the Civil War North was an aberration in God’s providential plan. It was thus logical for him to distinguish between wars he believed were fought to protect original values and those designed, in his view, to overthrow the status quo. To Palmer, the American Revolution was a Burkean conservation of earlier values, even as it represented progress in human government:

Governments at last are not made, but grow. The philosopher may sketch, in the seclusion of his closet, the Utopia which charms his fancy; but the statesman must accept that form of government which the antecedent conditions of society may impose...our fathers evinced their practical wisdom in striking the golden mean between the radicalism which overturns only for the sake of remodelling, and that fatal conservatism which, in its blind attachment to inheritance and prescription, resists the progress it should aim to guide.


45 Drew Gilpin Faust notes, “The biblical language of providential selection that had inspired the seventeenth-century Puritans and the patriots of 1776 now defined Confederate purposes. Whereas the North had perverted these ideas, the South had seceded in order to preserve what would otherwise be lost. Secession represented continuity, not discontinuity; the Confederacy was the consummation, not the dissolution, of the American dream.” in The Creation of Confederate Nationalism: Ideology and Identity in the Civil War South (Baton Rouge, LA and London: LSU Press, 1989), 27.

46 Palmer, A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10, 1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer, 9–10.
Palmer sounded his familiar theme of progress, but what he envisioned was not a radical break with the past. It was, rather, orderly progress, freed from both 'radicalism' and 'fatal conservatism' that resisted all social change. In Palmer’s mind, the difference was clear. Utopians imposed their will violently by breaking the existing traditions, while ‘statesmen’ accounted for social development, guiding it forward without sacrificing the good in its past. Humanity’s responsibility was to cooperate with where God was taking history, and not to fight against it. Here, Palmer echoed Burke, Hegel, Tucker, and Calhoun both in his pragmatic take on American republicanism, and in his cautious futurism. Moreover, in Burkean fashion, Palmer believed it a profound mistake to bend reality to an ideology. Society may advance, but it could only do so taking history, culture, and the current mood of the populace into account; force could never accomplish it.\(^47\)

After the War, Palmer would reflect further on the nature of the American founding as a blow for orderly providential progress against utopian chaos:

The whole political fabric was not changed from ‘turret to foundation stone;’ but only so far as the pressure of events imperiously demanded. The existing organized governments were simply combined in new relations. The whole internal machinery of State rule by domestic legislatures was preserved intact, and the entire body of the English law was carried over for the protection of personal and civil rights. The country was safely navigated through the perils of an immense revolution by the conservatism which retained all that was essential to order and liberty, and by the judicious boldness which lopped off the external forms in which these had been enshrined, when their continuance would have impeded the fresh development which the occasion and the age demanded.\(^48\)

Palmer again championed an orderly progress that could embrace new realities but did not abandon the structures of the past. Technology and westward expansion would define the post-war period, in ways that would strain the old order. Palmer saw both of those things as nearly unqualified goods. For Palmer, such expansion was God’s

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\(^47\) Palmer was inconsistent here because, as we show in other places, Palmer lauded the removal of the ‘wild Red man’ by force.

will, regardless of what it might mean for the native population. God had ordained the American nation to prosper and expand.⁴⁹

Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese note that Southerners were conflicted about progress. They ‘simultaneously embraced and repulsed aspects of the changes that had shaped their own society and worldview but increasingly threatened their destruction.’⁵⁰ This conflict is evident in Palmer. These assessments conflict with Samuel S. Hill, Jr.’s assertion that the sort of otherworldly spirituality and social stratification advocated from Southern Presbyterian pulpits is proof that they wanted to maintain the existing order at whatever cost.⁵¹

Hill rightly points out that Palmer and his contemporaries craved order. Their Realism meant they saw both social stratification and an acceptance of one’s relational obligations as key to maintaining order. What is lacking in Hill’s analysis, however, is the prominence of the public Christianity Palmer advanced in his many journal articles and occasional speeches. The overarching theme of Palmer’s public theology is social progress. For Palmer, however, an ideal future would retain the racial and social hierarchy of the past. He wrote, for instance, ‘It is, however, plainly assumed that servitude is a permanent relation, in all the conditions of human society.’⁵² Bertram Wyatt-Brown is more nuanced in his assessment than Hill. He notes that Southern thinkers believed that ‘moral progress…and other noble aspirations were possible,’ but only if their proponents realised the limitations of power, divided among institutions such as the family, the church, and the government. Any violation of that order was a recipe for tyranny.⁵³

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Wyatt-Brown asserts that orderly social progress was a product of Enlightenment thinking. In this, he overlooks the sea-change in American philosophy from Enlightenment Idealism to Realism. Palmer’s love of progress was, rather, the product of Realist intuitions and induction. Palmer feared Enlightenment ideals and critiques the American founders for being too influenced by it:

The public leaders of the time were largely tinctured with the free-thinking and infidel spirit which swept like a pestilence over Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and which brought forth at last its bitter fruit in the horrors of the French Revolution.54

On this point, we will see, Palmer was of two minds. He argued in some places that the American republican system, and the separation of powers, was borrowed wholesale from Israel under the judges. Even so, the founders were too enamoured of French radicalism. Here again, we see Palmer being overly simplistic. Thomas Jefferson had famously expressed admiration for the French Revolution, but other founders shared Palmer’s critique. Palmer elsewhere would express that he thought of the American Revolution the same way Burke thought of the Glorious Revolution, as a blow struck for both order and human liberty.

For Palmer, providence favoured social stability and order. The world was imperfect, and no governmental structure could bring about perfect order. The establishment of the best possible society was found in every member fulfilling his role and relational responsibilities without trying to upset the fundamental social order.

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A.) The Southern Patriarchal Household as Foundation for Government: The Family in its Civil and Churchly Aspects

Palmer believed that the patriarchal family was the pattern for civil government:

The Family is really the model state. It is not simply a device for the propagation and maintenance of the species; it is strongly compacted government. In it, the nature of law is punctually expounded by its actual enforcement. 55

First published in 1876, it is reasonable to surmise that The Family in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects was Palmer’s mature thinking on the subject. By this time, he had accommodated himself to the South’s re-entry into the American union. He laid out the foundation of all just government:

But in the whole development [of nations], it is simply the law of the household expanding itself through all the ramifications of the commonwealth and a true statesmanship must glean its great and essential principles from the subordination first established in the Family. The nearer a government is conformed to this ideal, in the distribution of power and in the combination of influences by which society shall be controlled, the more perfect it will be, both in its conception and administration. 56

Palmer reasoned that the patriarchal family was the building block of society because it resolved the paradox of personal freedom and submission by teaching ‘the subordination of concurrent wills.’ He called this ‘the foundation of all government and law.’ 57 It may be tempting to think that all of this is rather self-serving, as all the ‘concurrent wills’ of the rest of the household must bow to the patriarch in this ‘ideal’ society. Palmer, though, envisioned a higher order in the coming kingdom of God, where God will erase all such distinctions. Palmer speculated that the slave would be more highly honoured in Heaven than his faithful master. 58

It is important to note here that, like Hegel, Tucker, and Calhoun, Palmer viewed social connectedness as having sprung up with humanity itself: there was no state of

56 Ibid., 175.
57 Ibid., 18–19; Lucas, ‘Southern-Fried Kuyper?,’ 182. Lucas notes that Dabney, too, saw the household (versus the individual) as the basic unit of orderly society.
58 Palmer, The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects, 158.
nature and no point when humanity came together to form a social contract. There had always been a social hierarchy, governmental authority, and law. For Palmer, God had ordained social connection, and therefore, humans existed in a governmental structure from the beginning. Authority evolved up from the family ‘through the tribe into the nation,’ an argument we saw, in part, earlier, in ‘The Ancient Hebrew Polity.’

Like Dabney, Palmer viewed the family, and not the individual, as the essential building block of society, something that set them both at odds with the prevailing individualism of late nineteenth-century political thought.

B.) The Southern Patriarch and the Nature of Power and Authority

For Palmer, providence had given the Southern patriarch comprehensive authority in the household, ruling over his wife, children, and slaves. He described the patriarch’s role as ‘given under the form of despotism,’ in its various relational responsibilities as husband, parent, and master. His authority ‘imperiously exacted submission most prostrate, and obedience the most unquestioning.’ Palmer understood, however, that fallen men ‘cannot be entrusted with absolute power,’ and therefore God imposes ‘checks against abuse’, which were found in the master himself. To his wife and children, the master’s rule was tempered by ‘instinctive affection’, to his slaves, by ‘the restraint of interest, the most universal and controlling of all the motives which influence human conduct.’ Palmer wrote this book eleven years after abolition. The Southern defeat did not change his view of slavery.

Palmer believed that the first civic and religious virtue every human must learn was submissive obedience. To accomplish this, ‘they must be put at first under the

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59 Ibid., 10.
60 Ibid., 172.
61 Ibid., 172-3.
62 Ibid., 173.
pressure of a despotism. No milder form of authority will achieve the end in view.'

Palmer has in mind the idealised plantation family. In other places, he laments that Northern industrialisation had eclipsed the agrarian ideal. He related his thoughts as if they were settled facts, not opinions; he seems unaware that this ideal may be impossible to attain, and that the reality of plantation life was often far more violent.

Perhaps the most notable feature is the paradox in Palmer’s thought between the necessity of despotism to teach submission, and the craving for liberty and the right of self-determination that Palmer expressed in his advocacy for the Southern secession. The lessons of submission apparently were necessary for wives, children, and slaves alone. That would seem an apt explanation for how Palmer could exclaim that he would never die a slave while upholding that it was good for African descendants to be lifelong slaves. Michael O’Brien notes, ‘Nothing, in truth, was more common than for Southerners, without irony, to decry political “slavery.”’

Palmer’s thought on the nature of government and the nature of its power in his two chapters on masters and slaves. In Palmer’s thinking, slavery would not have been part of an un-fallen world because, ‘it could hardly find place in a society absolutely perfect, and among beings who were entirely sinless.’ Even so, Palmer favoured slavery in perpetuity:

We know that it is not the method of grace to take evil out of the world but to transform it; softening and sanctifying it into a blessing, by making it a part of a general disciplinary scheme, whereby men are fitted for higher destinies in another world...servitude, evolving itself from the curse of labour, is simply one of those adjustments of Divine Providence by which the poor find relief from the pressure of their necessities; whilst the rich, by their exemption from the drudgery of life, have leisure to push the world forward in refinement and civilization. What may have been originally an evil, is thus transmuted into an ultimate blessing.

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63 Ibid.
64 Genovese and Fox-Genovese conclude that such a view adheres to ‘an individualism of heads of families, and a simultaneous preference for the implicit corporatism of the family as the fundamental institution of society.’ in Fox-Genovese and Genovese, The Mind of the Master Class, 679.
67 Ibid., 124–25.
Palmer argues that slavery eliminated the ‘sharp antagonism’ between labor and capital because it preserved relational subordination, an idea earlier presented by Calhoun. Given Palmer’s fear of socialist upheaval, and his critique of Northern industrial relations, he posited the genteel Southern household as a bulwark against both socialism and rapacious capitalism. Here again, Palmer sounded the principles of relational obligation and order, and their necessity for human progress, as well as an expression of the disciplinary character of life in a fallen world.

Palmer noted how the family was ‘represented as an empire under law,’ and was furnished a ‘complete ethical code’. He based this argument on Paul’s family instructions in Ephesians and Colossians. Relational obligations were foremost: ‘The husband rules, the wife submits; the father commands, the child obeys; the master reigns, the servant ministers.’ In Palmer’s mind, the relational nature of these connections guards against abuses and motivates to the fulfilment of obligations. Thus, ‘law prevails throughout, asserting supremacy and enforcing subordination.’ These obligations and relationships are not merely natural, nor may they be left ungoverned; the rule of law is necessary.

Scholars who believe that a power dynamic can largely explain the South make much of views like those Palmer expresses in *The Family.* The reality in Palmer’s case, however, appears more complex. It is important to note that the Southern slave household had collapsed before he wrote *The Family* and yet he maintained the slaveholding household as the Biblical ideal. At the same time, and perhaps

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68 Ibid., 128.
69 Ibid.
70 Ibid.
paradoxically, Palmer was able to accommodate his understanding to a radically new social order.

**C.) The Development of the State**

Palmer had definite ideas about how civil society developed. The family moulded obedience, readying its members for service to the broader society. The tribe grew out of the family and were then ‘consolidated into nations…its diversified interests…controlled by an authority which is more remote and kingly.’\(^7^2\) This was merely ‘the law of the household expanding itself through all the ramifications of the commonwealth…The nearer a government is conformed to this ideal…the more perfect it will be, both in its conception and administration.’\(^7^3\) Palmer again noted that society inevitably stratified. It was a bulwark of order against chaos: ‘The gradation of rank in the Family should not be overlooked…No folly is more conspicuous than the agrarianism\(^7^4\) which seeks to level the distinctions in society, and to reduce all classes to a uniform grade.’\(^7^5\) Again Palmer raised the spectre of revolutionary France, and its destructive egalitarianism.

According to Palmer, society grew upwards from the family. The family inevitably entered into relationships with other families nearby. Business interests, friendship, and intermarriage formed bonds of kinship. Clans formed, developed into tribes, which combined to form nations. The state thus evolved upward from the family. It was not imposed on subjects from above, nor was it the product of a voluntary social compact. This sets Palmer at odds with Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and many early American

\(^{72}\) Palmer, *The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects*, 175.

\(^{73}\) Ibid.

\(^{74}\) Though Palmer does not explain what he means by the term ‘agrarian,’ given the context of his abhorrence of the French Revolution, he may have mind ‘The Great Fear’ agrarian revolts of 1789 in France, as well as any forcible scheme of land redistribution, such as took place in ancient Rome.

political theorists, though in agreement with Tucker, Calhoun, and G. W. F. Hegel.\textsuperscript{76} Palmer wrote, ‘The old theory of the social compact is historically untrue and intrinsically absurd...it is perfectly clear that no government could be framed strong enough to subdue and control a thousand imperious wills.’\textsuperscript{77} Palmer contrasted his anti-utopian view, which accepted circumstances as they are and bade men make the best of them, with the ideological impositions of utopians: ‘The philosopher may sketch, in the seclusion of his closet, the Utopia which charms his fancy; but the statesman must accept that form of government which the antecedent conditions of society may impose.’\textsuperscript{78}

**D.) Palmer and G. W. F. Hegel**

Though Palmer nowhere mentions his reliance upon Hegel, he undoubtedly was familiar with him, because of the emphasis given to moral philosophy in the curriculum of the University of Georgia.\textsuperscript{79} At its heart, Realism was a conscious rejection of Idealism. Thus, it is unlikely that Palmer would admit explicitly Hegelian assumptions about the origin and nature of government. However, like Hegel, Palmer saw the family as the fundamental unit of society, the seedbed of all government.\textsuperscript{80} Both men represented a social conservatism rooted in the family. The family gave a person both an individual and corporate identity. For Hegel, the choice to marry was an ethical act, because it was done by free consent, the voluntary submission of the will of the wife to the husband, in the context of mutual love. Like Hegel, Palmer emphasised that the wife’s submission was voluntary: ‘the relation is grounded simply upon their mutual choice, and does not pre-exist by any connection of blood or birth.’\textsuperscript{81} What may appear to be submission to a


\textsuperscript{77} Palmer, *The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects*, 11.

\textsuperscript{78} Palmer, *A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10, 1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer*, 9.

\textsuperscript{79} E. Merton Coulter, *College Life in the Old South as Seen at the University of Georgia* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1983), 15–16.

\textsuperscript{80} Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 110.

\textsuperscript{81} Palmer, *The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects*, 51.
tyrant was softened by the husband’s self-sacrificing love. Hegel, likewise, spelt out this idea explicitly. He wrote, ‘[Marriage’s] objective force lies in the free consent of the persons, especially in their consent to make themselves one person, to renounce their natural and individual personality to this unity of one with the other.’\(^{82}\) Hegel insisted that, although this may be considered ‘self-restriction,’ in reality it was liberation, ‘because in it they attain their substantive self-consciousness.’\(^{83}\) Palmer, likewise, wrote:

> The woman must, therefore, relinquish her independence, and must voluntarily assume the obligations for which she exchanges her own freedom...The negotiations are transacted with her, not only as independent and free, but as in all respects the peer of her future lord.\(^{84}\)

The woman was a ‘subordinate, and yet an equal,’ one who has ‘resign[ed] her independence,’ and yet was free, who has learned ‘how to surrender her will, and yet preserve her personality.’\(^{85}\) She did this, by ‘an act of unconstrained choice,’ but was led to it, ‘by the instinct of her nature.’ She was to be content with her providential lot, bound to her husband by the cords of love. The household was her sphere of authority, and in it she reigned as her husband’s vice-regent, whilst he was out engaging in commerce. Perhaps most strikingly, even in this surrender of her prerogatives, there was ‘no derogation from her original dignity.’\(^{86}\) These are all ideas that, whilst Palmer provides Biblical support, were found nearly verbatim in Hegel.\(^{87}\) Palmer’s correspondence with Hegelian ideas was more than coincidental.\(^{88}\) Palmer’s understanding of the development of the state out of the seedbed of the family, over and against the voluntary cooperation of individuals as in the social contract, appears to

\(^{82}\) Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 111.
\(^{83}\) Ibid.
\(^{84}\) Palmer, *The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects*, 52.
\(^{85}\) Ibid., 51–52.
\(^{86}\) Ibid., 53–65.
\(^{87}\) Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 111–15.
\(^{88}\) We note that Hegel has been interpreted in divergent ways. The issue here was not whether Palmer was reading Hegel correctly, but rather whether his ideas can be seen to correspond with Hegel’s actual statements. The similarities extend beyond the marital relationship, to the parental‐filial relationship, as well: Hegel and Palmer draw similar distinctions, and each notes the individual rights of children, not simply subject to parental tyranny.
have been an idea he obtained, however it may have been mediated to him, from Hegel.89

Therefore, the type of conservatism that Palmer adhered to was one heavily influenced by Burke and Hegel, one that sought social progress but was careful to take into account the historical realities of people and culture. Moreover, it was a tradition that valued individual liberty predicated upon order and the fulfilment of obligations.90

Thus, Palmer saw the Northern and Southern visions for America as at complete odds. In Palmer’s vision, corporate life was built upon concrete principles, yet these must account for life’s exigencies. Not all life’s wrongs could be righted immediately or by government fiat. The danger of utopianism was the destruction of liberty and the subjugation of all of life under the authority of a centralised government. The Northern utopian, like the French Revolutionary, self-righteously set out to mend all wrongs, and ended imposing tyranny:

It is the dream of the Radical to change our whole political fabric from turret to foundation stone; but true wisdom dictates that such modifications shall be gradually admitted as time and experience shall hereafter suggest.91

Here, too, we glimpse again Palmer’s cautious view of progress. Human beings could mould history, but, at the same time, they could not force God’s providential hand. Societies could be coaxed, but not coerced, to change. Governments arose according to historical and cultural circumstance, and could not be foisted on an unwilling populace. At the same time, societies did advance and improve. The American Republic was an advance from British monarchy, and the Confederacy was an improvement over original

89 Nor is this the only idea. Palmer’s idea of the relationship between church and state mirrors Hegel’s, as does his belief that republicanism is not inherently virtuous nor monarchy an inherent vice. Cf. Hegel, *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 168–78; Cf. also Bernard Yack, ‘The Rationality of Hegel’s Concept of Monarchy,’ *The American Political Science Review* 74, no. 3 (September 1980): 709–20.

90 Gustave E. Mueller argues that Hegel is misread when he is accused of totalitarianism. According to Mueller, the ‘state’ was not synonymous with government, in Hegel’s thought. It was, rather society as a whole, the aggregate of the discrete institutions necessary to a free and well-functioning nation. ‘Hegel on the Relation of Church and State,’ *Journal of Church and State* 5, no. 1 (May 1, 1963): 96.

91 Palmer, *A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10, 1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer*, 10.
American Constitutionalism, and a rescue from its descent into crass democracy and tyranny.

E.) A Christian Republic

Palmer's thought on government was not static. His view of providence allowed him to adapt to changing circumstances even as he championed unchanging social mores. Although God instituted governments, they could go astray. In Palmer's estimation, the American government had become a tyranny, and thus could be legitimately cast off.92 Southern secession was legal action because of how the United States Constitution was ratified, as well as what it said.93

Palmer sensed a tension in his thought between divine authority vested in governments, and illegitimate government overreach. This led him to consider several questions: In what sense was a government accountable to God? How may it be judged? Was it a mere abstraction, or an actual entity? Palmer's thought changed over time. In 1849-50, he had written, 'The State has no substantive existence; but is only a name given to define a relation in which a body of men stand to one another.'94 By 1861, Palmer's view had changed markedly with national circumstances:

Nations are in a weighty sense persons before God, with individual characters mysteriously impressed upon the parent stock, and fully developed through a providential training; that they work out their historic missions which are unequivocally assigned by a higher power...they are held account for their fidelity to their trusts: and that their solemn duty is to recognize in every stage of their career that Being by whose guidance and blessing they are conducted to their destinies.95

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The state was no longer a fiction, but a culpable entity with an individual will:

We reject the shallow nominalism which makes the State a dead abstraction. It is more than an aggregation of individuals. It is an incorporated society and possesses a unity of life resembling the individuality of a single being. It can deliberate and concur in common conclusions...analogous to the powers of thought and will in a single mind.\(^{96}\)

Palmer argued that a nation retained this identity, even as successive generations pass, and that God’s judgment may rightly fall upon a nation for its ancestors’ sins. Whereas, earlier Palmer had denied that a nation could be religious, by 1861, he said, 'We bewail...the fatal error of our Fathers in not making a clear national recognition of God at the outset of the nation’s career.'\(^{97}\) Elsewhere, he wrote,

Human government itself is not only an ordinance of God, but that it is a dim reflection of the Divine...Hence human government is not only divinely ordained, but its existence and preservation depend upon those religious convictions which are recognized in divine law.\(^{98}\)

The question of why Palmer's view changed is a matter of speculation. It would appear likely, however, that as the relationship between North and South began to fray, many in the South began to see the Northern states as a villainous monolith, bent on destroying the entire Southern way of life. Palmer’s own writings began to reflect this.\(^{99}\) Indeed, Palmer rarely, if ever, names any particular abolitionist enemies. The enemy had become Northern society itself, more than any one individual.\(^{100}\)

Palmer asserted that religion meets the state most clearly in the sacred nature of the oath, 'To trifle, therefore, with the sanctity of the oath, is to strike a fatal blow both at religion and at law.'\(^{101}\) Palmer had embraced the concept of a Christian republic, one that answered to God moreso than to its constituency. Here, he found the American

\(^{96}\) Palmer, *A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10, 1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer*, 3.


\(^{98}\) Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘The Oath of Allegiance to the United States,’ 1863, 16.


\(^{100}\) Ibid., 13.

\(^{101}\) Palmer, ‘The Oath of Allegiance to the United States,’ 17.
founders wanting. He marvelled that, though the New World was claimed for Christ by ‘their Christian Majesties, Ferdinand and Isabella,’ that ‘when this most religious people, after the lapse of a century and a half, undertook to establish an independent government, there was a total ignoring of the divine claims and of all allegiance to the divine supremacy.’ He explained that this was ‘not due to the irreligiousness of the masses, for they were pre-dominantly Christian.’ Rather, it was because ‘the public leaders of the time were largely tinctured with the free-thinking and infidel spirit which swept like a pestilence over Europe…and which brought forth at last its bitter fruit in the horrors of the French Revolution.’ Thus ‘the American nation…entered upon its career without a God.’ As Palmer saw it, the Confederate Constitution was an improvement:

Thanks be unto God, my brethren, for the grace given our own Confederacy, in receding from this perilous atheism! When my eye first rested upon the Constitution adopted by the Confederate Congress, and I read in the first lines of our organic and fundamental law a clear, solemn, official recognition of Almighty God, my heart swelled with unutterable emotions of gratitude and joy.

Later, however, Palmer would acknowledge that the Lordship of Christ, though it had been ‘partially retrieved’ in the new Constitution of ‘our own Confederacy’, still was not explicit enough. It is important to note that, despite Palmer’s belief that the state ought not to control the church, and that the church ought not speak to civic matters, he believed in a Christian republic. The deficiency of the United States Constitution was that it was not explicitly Christian; the strength of the Confederate Constitution was that it more closely approached this ideal.

Given Palmer’s view of providence, hermeneutics, and the imminent eschaton, it followed that soon republican government and Christian commitments would converge. Perhaps they already had, in the new Confederate States of America. Had it been

103 Ibid.
104 Palmer, ‘National Responsibility before God: A Discourse, Delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Appointed by the President of the Confederate States of America, June 13, 1861.’
105 Ibid.
realised, the Confederacy would have been a perfect example of Palmer’s understanding of historical progress. Whatever had led to Palmer’s change in views, they had clearly changed, and the latter view would prevail to the end of his life, as he came to terms with the Southern defeat and reunified American nation. If a nation were to fulfil God’s providential purposes, then its form of government must be grounded in God’s Word.

**F. Scripture the Foundation of Republican Government: ‘The Ancient Hebrew Polity’**


In that lecture, Gutheim introduced ideas that Palmer would later develop into ‘The Ancient Hebrew Polity’. Gutheim contended that the Israelites under Moses formed no hierarchy, but that all persons were equal before the Law. He found in this a ‘state of perfect civil and political equality, as a guarantee of personal liberty and independence, should be secured for all future time at the occupation of Palestine.’ He asserted that the Jewish state possessed a bi-cameral legislature: the princes of tribes constituted the upper house, and popular representatives the lower house. At a certain point, Joshua ‘convened an “assembly of the people,” to renew the covenant, or, as we would say, to ratify the constitution, while in fact he had only convoked the elders.’ Gutheim found this significant because Scripture equivocated the representatives of the people with the will of all the people. Gutheim located the genesis of the principles of American government in the ancient Hebrew polity.

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109 Ibid.

110 Interestingly, this view can also be found much earlier in Calhoun, cf. Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy*, 153–54.
Palmer believed that God intended the Hebrew state ‘to be a protest against the universal perversion of government,’ just as surely as the Hebrew worship was ‘against the universal corruption of religion.’ He argued that the antediluvian world knew no government except the patriarchal family, and that the flood, together with God’s provision of the death penalty for murder in Genesis 9:6, was ‘not the proclamation of private revenge, but the prohibition of it. It is the creation of the Magistrate armed with the sword of justice, which never smites but in the name of law.’ Palmer contended that, as society developed, despotism was the ubiquitous form of government. Over and against this, Israel was given a ‘revealed Political Constitution,’ in which ‘the central idea is that the Supreme Being is the Governor of nations.’ This was no mere historical point for Palmer; it is rather illustrative of the foundation of all good government. Even though Palmer regretted the Constitution’s non-religious character, the founders had stumbled upon the separation of powers and a bi-cameral legislature, and aligned American government with that of Ancient Israel.

It is interesting to consider why Palmer did not reflect on the relatively short life of the Hebrew ‘republic’, which soon gave way to the monarchy, particularly because he was not averse to constitutional monarchy. It may simply be because he could not read the American republic back onto a hereditary monarchy. This is further proof of Palmer reading Scripture through the lens of his own experiences, rather than judging his experience by Scripture.

Thus, Palmer was not simply advancing an historical thesis, he was making a normative application. He wrote that his intent was ‘to prove that the Hebrew Commonwealth enshrined the fundamental principles of political and civil liberty, which

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112 Ibid., 155.  
113 Ibid., 156.  
114 Palmer, ‘National Responsibility before God: A Discourse, Delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Appointed by the President of the Confederate States of America, June 13, 1861.’
modern nations have only reproduced, and under other forms have applied.'\textsuperscript{115} This is a clear instance of Palmer developing a moral ‘ought’ from a historical circumstance.

History, under the dominion of God’s providence, provided the archetype for just government. Palmer nowhere noted how the founding fathers, overtaken with the ‘infidel spirit’, nonetheless settled upon a ‘Biblical’ republicanism, though he did explain why, in his opinion, they chose republicanism in general:

The republican form of government was adopted by (the American Founders), not through original choice, but as a simple necessity. The controversy with England was not begun for republicanism, though it ended in it. With them monarchy was not so much repudiated, as liberty was sought: and if any branch of the royal family had resided here, and had sympathized with the passionate struggle of a young nation to be both great and free, the conservative spirit of our forefathers would have led to the establishment of monarchy upon these republican shores. But there was no titled class, having the prestige of nobility and rank, from which a monarch could be chosen; and the statesmen of this period dwelt too much in the light of past history not to know the impossibility of lifting a single family, from the uniform level of society, to permanent presidency over the rest.\textsuperscript{116}

Here, Palmer, writing in 1863, stated that republicanism was simply the default choice because there was no hereditary nobility in America. Elsewhere, he argued, ‘Assuming that Constitutional freedom can only be enjoyed under Republican forms, as propagandists of their own political faith, they have sometimes rudely challenged every other creed as heretical and monstrous.’\textsuperscript{117} Palmer displayed no particular fondness for republican government, \textit{per se}, at this point, but, by 1898, his understanding had clearly changed. The values America had inherited from Israel under the Judges included a written constitution that chartered human rights, an agrarian economy, a decentralized power structure \textit{contra} the surrounding despotisms, a federal union of these tribes primarily to withstand the onslaught of foreign enemies, the supreme rule of law over the monarch, and equality before the law for all citizens, a system of checks and

\textsuperscript{116} Palmer, \textit{A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10, 1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer}, 9.
\textsuperscript{117} Palmer, ‘National Responsibility before God: A Discourse, Delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Appointed by the President of the Confederate States of America, June 13, 1861,’ n. p.
balances, and a the right of appeal to the supreme magistrate.\textsuperscript{118} What is more, though Palmer admitted that he could draw no clear connection between the ‘bi-cameral’ Hebrew legislature and the American Congress, neither could it be ‘successfully denied.’\textsuperscript{119}

If republicanism were not inherently virtuous, according to Palmer, neither were ‘the elective franchise,’ or the existence of multiple political parties. Though Palmer notes that, ‘Under a free government where men are permitted to think, they must be expected to differ.’\textsuperscript{120} Therefore, ‘the simple existence of parties...is not an evil,’ and could indeed be ‘conducive to a higher good.’\textsuperscript{121} Yet, as party loyalty had eclipsed national patriotism in the United States, party interests became self-serving, determined to favour Northern industrialism over Southern agrarianism. Likewise, Palmer cited ‘the abuse of the ballot, the very symbol and instrument of the people’s power,’\textsuperscript{122} Palmer recalled the ‘purer days of the republic: when honest merit waited, like Cincinnatus at his plough, to be called forth for service, and before noisy candidates cried their wares at the hustings like fishwomen in the market...and when the votes of the people only expressed their virtuous and unbiased will.’\textsuperscript{123} The orderly republic had descended into crass mob rule: ‘But I will not –so help me God! –I will never submit to the despotism of the mob. It is not the occupant of the White House who is the tyrant of to-day; but the starving millions behind the throne.’\textsuperscript{124} This demonstrates the extreme antipathy Palmer felt towards the Union. Palmer’s Civil War era reflections on the neutral value of various forms of government gave way in his later years to the settled belief that republicanism was handed down in Holy Writ. The question is, if the aforementioned were not political

\textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 166.
\textsuperscript{120} Palmer, ‘National Responsibility before God: A Discourse, Delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Appointed by the President of the Confederate States of America, June 13, 1861,’ n. p.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} Ibid.
virtues, what were? Individual freedom ranked high in Palmer’s value system. He understood individual freedom to be the right of self-determination among the landed slaveholding gentry who would benignly govern those under their rule.

These opinions support the idea that the prominent Southern Presbyterian divines were theocratic in their understanding of government. They did not envision a return to the Hebrew kingship, but rather saw in the Old Testament a pattern already existing in American civil government, however imperfectly. The difficulty, then, is to reconcile this view with both the separation of the church from the state and with the doctrine of the spirituality of the church.

Perhaps most strikingly, Palmer asserted that, just as the American and Confederate constitutions were submitted to the people for ratification, so too was the divinely given Hebrew polity. It rested ‘upon the consent of the people’ who freely accepted Jehovah as their sovereign. Though the precise nature of God’s covenant with Israel is the topic of much theological debate, few modern scholars would assert that Israel elected God to be its sovereign. Such defies the very notion of Ancient Near Eastern monarchs, let alone a God who claimed to be king over his people.

Palmer aligned Hebrew political structures with American institutions to buttress his public theology. If America were the pinnacle of God’s providential plan, it followed that its political institutions must have Biblical warrant. Gutheim asserted that Ancient Israel was not a theocracy in the truest sense, but was more of a republic, and then a constitutional monarchy, under God, replete with representative government and a written constitution. Palmer echoed these sentiments: a nation that was destined to realize God’s divine purpose of bearing civilization and embracing progress must have

126 Cf. chapter 6.
divine sanction for its civil order. For Palmer's public theology to remain consistent, however, he had to make room for both the South's secession and its eventual reincorporation in God's divine plan for the United States.

III. Palmer, Southern Secession, and the Confederacy

A.) The Divine Principle of Separation / ‘A Vindication of Secession and the South’

B. M. Palmer gave much thought to the nature of the federal union of states, and on what grounds such a union may be broken. Palmer presented these arguments in a lengthy response to his fellow Old School Presbyterian, R. J. Breckinridge.\(^{129}\) Palmer's understanding of the United States government as a ‘Congress of Republics’, sovereign states that had voluntarily bound themselves together for limited purposes,\(^{130}\) In Palmer's view, since the federal government had broken faith by increasing its power over the states, and created an imbalance of by admitting more non-slaveholding states to the union, the South had no choice but to depart. Palmer saw this as a religious conflict between the righteous and infidels:

> It is fitting that religion herself should with gentle voice whisper her benediction upon your flag and your cause. Soldiers, history reads to us of wars which have been baptized as holy, but she enters upon her records none that is holier than this in which you have embarked. It is a war of defence against wicked and cruel aggression – a war of civilization against a ruthless barbarism...a war of religion against a blind and bloody fanaticism...for the land which the Lord has given us for a heritage.\(^{131}\)

Palmer knew full well that there were orthodox believers on the other side of this conflict. He had served alongside men like Charles Hodge and Archibald Alexander in the courts of the Old School church, yet this did not detract from his assessment of the


\(^{130}\) Ibid., 160.

overall cause. A true Christian may be deluded into thinking his cause was just, but that
did not make it so. The Yankee cause was one of Jacobinism, atheism, mob rule, and
aggression. Despite all this, Palmer professed an ardent love for the Union. Though he
wrote the following about Thornwell, it likewise reflects Palmer’s own professed
patriotism:

He was, in this, an eminent type of the great body of the Southern people; who
relinquished with unspeakable pain their traditional attachment to the Union,
from a stern conviction that they could no longer live under it with safety or with
honour.’\textsuperscript{132}

That sentiment quickly faded, as is evidenced by the sheer volume of material he wrote
and speeches he gave in favour of the Southern cause. Later, his friend Henry Martin
Smith would recall that the conquering Union forces regarded Palmer as ‘the big villain
of the play’ in the secession of Louisiana. After New Orleans fell to Federal troops in
1862, Palmer could not return because General Benjamin Butler, the occupation
governor, had fixed a bounty on his head.\textsuperscript{133}

B.) ‘The Thanksgiving Sermon’\textsuperscript{134}

On Thursday, 29 November 1860, Palmer preached a sermon at First Presbyterian
Church. Up until that time, while there was significant secessionist activity in New
Orleans, the bulk of sentiment was pro-union. Haskell Monroe points out that, in the
election of 1860, Southern votes split among three candidates. John C. Breckinridge was
the most ardent pro-slavery candidate while two other candidates, Stephen A. Douglas
and John Bell, were more conciliatory. Breckenridge carried Louisiana as a whole, but
fell more than five thousand votes short of a majority. In metropolitan New Orleans, the

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{132}] Palmer, \textit{The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell}, 467–68.
\item[\textsuperscript{133}] Robert Q. Mallard, ‘Personal Reminiscences of Rev. Benj. Morgan Palmer, D. D.,’ \textit{Union Seminary
Magazine} 14, no. 2 (1903): 111; Wayne Carter Eubank, ‘Benjamin Morgan Palmer, A Southern Divine’
(Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 1943), 130.
\item[\textsuperscript{134}] Although Thanksgiving did not become a national holiday until 1863, many states observed it on the
third Thursday in November, beginning in the early nineteenth century.
\end{itemize}
combined vote for Douglas and Bell was more than three times the Breckinridge total. At that point, the sentiment of the South’s largest city was pro-Union. This was likely because New Orleans’s economy was dependent upon Mississippi River transit. Whatever the factors may have been, within less than two months, sentiment radically shifted. Doubtless, the election of Abraham Lincoln, with less than forty per cent of the popular vote, played a major part.

In the midst of this situation, Palmer chose Psalm 94:20 for his Thanksgiving holiday text, ‘Shall the throne of iniquity have fellowship with thee, which frameth mischief by a law?,’ as well as Obadiah verse 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, that they that ate thy bread have laid a snare under thee; there is none understanding in him.’ Palmer began by noting,

I have never intermeddled with political questions...I have never obtruded, either publicly or privately, my opinions upon any of you; nor can a single man arise and say that, by word or sign, have I ever sought to warp his sentiments or control his judgment upon any political subject whatsoever...I have preferred to move among you as a preacher of righteousness belonging to a kingdom not of this world.

To Palmer, the issue at stake was ‘in its origin a question of morals and religion...debated in ecclesiastical councils before it entered legislative halls.’ He sensed the tension of his addressing public issues from the pulpit, in his role as a Presbyterian minister, and asked the forgiveness of his hearers if he had ‘misapprehended’ his duty. He sounded the familiar notes of providence, public theology, and progress:

A nation often has a character as well defined and intense as that of the individual...however derived, this individuality of character alone makes any

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136 Ibid., 106.
139 Ibid., 6.
140 Ibid.
people truly historic, competent to work out its specific mission, and to become a factor in the world’s progress.\textsuperscript{141}

The South’s providential mission, Palmer contended, was ‘to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of domestic slavery as now existing.’\textsuperscript{142} Palmer saw Southern secession as a necessary step in America fulfilling its providential destiny, and thus lending to the progress of the human race. Once again, he raised the spectre of revolutionary France, contending that the ‘undeniably atheistic’ abolition spirit was the product of ‘a thousand Jacobin clubs here.’\textsuperscript{143} He then called upon the Southern slaveholding states to depart, because ‘the union of our forefathers is already gone.’\textsuperscript{144} To those who would argue that Lincoln’s election was the product of the functioning of the American ideals Palmer desired to preserve, he retorted, ‘no despotism is more absolute than that of an unprincipled democracy, and no tyranny more galling than that exercised through constitutional formulas.’\textsuperscript{145} This highlights a tension in Palmer’s own view: if God had decreed the election of Lincoln, then, according to Palmer’s usual reasoning, this ought to have indicated that such was God’s providential good purpose. Clearly, Palmer made an exception in this case. The South had a God-given task, to separate from the Union and reclaim the mantle of the benevolent slaveholding republic, for, ‘If she has grace given to her to know her hour she will save herself, the country, and the world.’\textsuperscript{146}

Local newspapers printed the sermon and distributed it throughout the South. Monroe notes that a pro-Union pastor in Baton Rouge credited Palmer for sweeping the state towards secession, as did the editor of the \textit{New Orleans Daily Picayune} on 9 January 1861, when he wrote, ‘The Rev. Dr Palmer...has done more for the cause of secession in

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\item \textsuperscript{141} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Ibid., 10.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Ibid., 12.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Ibid.; John C. Calhoun had said ‘where the majority rules, the minority is the subject.’ cf. O’Brien, \textit{Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life and the American South, 1810-1860}, 2:832.
\item \textsuperscript{146} Palmer, ‘Thanksgiving Sermon,’ 16.
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this state than any other man.’ The fact that Palmer could not return to New Orleans after its capture testifies to the influence of the sermon. James Oscar Farmer calls Palmer’s Thanksgiving sermon, ‘The most famous, and probably the most extreme of (the Fast Day) sermons.’ It was widely distributed and commented upon across the South; Mississippi’s governor reputedly stated that it was worth more than a thousand troops.

The ‘Thanksgiving Sermon’ shows that Palmer understood the providential task of a country to be God’s involvement in the affairs of nations. These tasks could be ascertained by the population, and pursued with all vigour. The imposition and maintenance of divine order on a nation would bring about social progress, a concept that Palmer tends to leave undefined. Yet, if a nation became tyrannical, then God’s providence would humble it. As the goal of secession was realized, and the War commenced, Palmer gave much thought to the vindication of secession, particularly through arguing for the necessity of separation as God’s way of preventing men from accruing tyrannical power.

C. ‘The Rainbow Round the Throne’ and the Principle of Separation

Palmer gave the ‘Rainbow’ sermon on a Confederate day of ‘fasting, humiliation, and prayer,’ 27 March 1863. He wrote,

I recognize in the schism which has rent asunder the American people only a new application of the law by which God has evermore governed the world; that of breaking in two a nation which has grown too strong for its virtue, in order to its preservation and continuance.

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147 Monroe, ‘Bishop Palmer’s Thanksgiving Address,’ 118.
148 Farmer, The Metaphysical Confederacy, 263.
149 Fox-Genovese and Genovese, The Mind of the Master Class, 616–17.
He asserted that, in God’s view of government, ‘not consolidation but separation is recognized as the regulative and determining principle.’\textsuperscript{151} He cited God’s bounding of the nations in Genesis, and scattering the peoples by means of language at Babel, lest they grow too strong. Such has been the way of the world:

> These communities in their turn, check and restrain each other: and it has been by balancing nation against nation, and kingdom against kingdom, that God has held under a measure of restraint the super-abounding wickedness of the world.\textsuperscript{152}

Palmer did admit two mitigating factors: a people ought not to separate from its nation ‘without cause,’ and it should not pursue separate nationality if it did ‘not possess within itself the elements of national greatness and strength.’\textsuperscript{153} Precisely who determines what is a just cause, or the requisite national greatness, Palmer did not say. The South, Palmer contended, could vindicate itself on those points before ‘any tribunal human or divine.’\textsuperscript{154}

Palmer admitted that, in the past, he had been guilty of idolising the power of the nation, ‘in supposing one people could be virtuous enough to control such a territory.’\textsuperscript{155} The United States had simply grown too large, and presumably thus too proud, for God to use her in her current state. Palmer was penitent of his former ambition, though, as we shall see, he regained it shortly after the reunion of North and South into the American empire. As of 1863, however, God had chastened and humbled ’Babylon the Great’.\textsuperscript{156} Thus Palmer justified secession on Biblical grounds, and successfully, in his own thinking, transferred America’s divine mission to the Confederate States of America. Ultimately, in God’s providential purpose for America, the nation might stray

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 31.
\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{153} Palmer, \textit{The Rainbow Round the Throne: Or Judgment Tempered with Mercy}.
\textsuperscript{154} Ibid., 32.
\textsuperscript{155} Ibid., 33.
\textsuperscript{156} Ibid.
for a time, but it could not ultimately persist in the wrong. If God had ordained America to be an empire, then Palmer would accommodate himself to God’s providential will.

**D.) Confederate Nationhood**

As we have noted, Palmer saw the fledgling Confederacy as ready to take its place among the historic nations, and perhaps the only one that fully realized its providential mission which was chiefly to advance and preserve African chattel slavery. Drew Gilpin Faust believes that Christianity was ‘the most fundamental source of legitimation for the Confederacy.’\(^{157}\) The ideals of the Confederacy took on transcendent meaning: God was on the side of the South. In this assessment, she aligns with James Silver, Edward R. Crowther, and others against Bertram Wyatt-Brown, who argues that the church’s role has been afforded undue prominence.\(^{158}\) Faust notes further that the unexpected devastation of the war made religious justification all the more urgent.\(^{159}\) The Confederacy was God’s providential instrument. It was no surprise, therefore, that it would have to suffer in order to bring about God’s kingdom.

This explains, at least in part, the shift in Palmer’s view away from a secular republic to a Christianised one, and his insistence that God gave every great nation a providential task to fulfil. In Palmer’s mind, a sectional conflict had become a holy war, and thus required a holy nation to wage it.\(^{160}\) Yet, the Confederacy’s defeat would bring about a change in Palmer’s thought. The Confederacy may have died, but God’s purposes for America must continue unabated, and therefore Palmer had to accommodate his thinking to new realities.


\(^{159}\) Faust, *The Creation of Confederate Nationalism*, 27.

\(^{160}\) The preeminent grandeur of this war is...that it centres upon a religious idea.’ Palmer, *A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10, 1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer*, 22.
IV. Palmer’s Post-War View of Government and Society

In Palmer’s understanding of divine providence, one had to reconcile himself to what had unfolded in history, because such was God’s will, and therefore right. The rise of African chattel slavery, the Native American holocaust, the defeat of the Confederacy, and the rise of the American Empire, were not events that God merely permitted. On the contrary, these were immediate realizations of the will of God. Here such events found their moral legitimacy. Human beings were thus duty bound to cooperate with whatever the current reality happened to be, as we have examined previously. Thus Palmer’s opinions about God’s purposes for a nation in history changed with changing circumstances.

In 1861, Palmer had written that the larger question between North and South, was, ‘whether this is to be a Republic or an Empire...if there had not been an African on this continent, this political difference must sooner or later have worked out the result which has occurred.’\textsuperscript{161} God would not allow such a proud empire to stand, because, ‘If there be no other bonds holding these States together but those of central force and coercion, then, with all our boasting, we have solved no problem in politics, and made no contribution to history.’\textsuperscript{162} Palmer contended that America thus would have failed in her providential mission. After the South was defeated, however, Palmer reconciled himself to the fact that God must have had different purposes. Even so, Palmer surrendered no ground on the justifiability of slavery, the depredations of the Reconstruction regime, or the unforgiveable insults the Northern Presbyterians had made against their Southern co-religionists. Still, Palmer came to embrace the rapid advance in technology and cultural dominance of the Anglo-sphere at the end of the


\textsuperscript{162} Ibid.
nineteenth century. Timothy Reilly notes the tension in Palmer's thought between his role as 'one of the chief architects of the Lost Cause tradition...that helped to sustain morale and to strengthen regional identities.'\textsuperscript{163} By the dawn of the twentieth century, however, Palmer embraced Western imperialism as the United States claimed its rightful place among the dominant powers of the world. In fact, he said, the American nation, far from being weakened by its massive internal conflict, 'now reposes more solidly upon its base as the strong and mighty nation into which it has been converted.'\textsuperscript{164} As he said to a gathering of Confederate veterans in 1900, 'the American nation emerged out of the American republic.'\textsuperscript{165}

By 1900, Palmer's reflections differed markedly from his earlier understanding. In the 1860's, he saw providence as standing on the Southern side of the question, and in favour of a decentralised republic. By 1900, he believed that God had clearly decreed that the United States become a centralised imperial nation, his instrument to impose Christian civilisation on the world. Palmer believed he could do this without surrendering his cherished belief in the rectitude of the Southern cause. He admitted that being a patriotic American and yet an unrepentant Confederate appeared contradictory. Yet, his current view of the motives of both North and South, 'enables both parties in this struggle to give full credit to each other for patriotic motives.'\textsuperscript{166} The Civil War was based upon a conflict of visions. The North had viewed the United States as a centralised nation, whereas the South viewed it as a confederation of independent republics. This is how, 'the wound has been healed in the complete reconciliation of a divided people.'\textsuperscript{167} Likewise, the Southerner could be proud of the cause of 1861, even

\textsuperscript{163} Timothy F. Reilly, 'Benjamin M. Palmer: Secessionist Become Nationalist,' \textit{Louisiana History} 18, no. 3 (1977): 289.
\textsuperscript{164} Palmer, 'The Address of Rev. B. M. Palmer, D. D., LL. D. Delivered on the First Day of the New Year and Century in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, LA., at the Request of Citizens, and Members of the Church, of Which He Has Been Pastor Since December 30, 1856,' 15–16.
\textsuperscript{165} Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 'Orator of the Occasion,' \textit{Confederate Veteran} 8 (1900): 249.
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid.
as he had been re-engrafted into American life, accepting 'defeat without a blush of
shame mantling the cheek of a single Confederate of us all.'

Palmer devised a way of thinking that both vindicated his past bellicosity and yet
accommodated itself to both defeat and social progress. Gone was any talk of a holy war
waged against an infidel tyranny. By the turn of the twentieth century, Palmer saw God's
hand clearly at work in the nigh-extinction of Native Americans. He praised the
conversion of forests into farmland and factories that were 'yielding its fruit a thousand-
fold to the industry of man. Instead of the war-whoop of the Indian, we hear the chimes
of Sabbath bells and songs of praise issuing from myriads of Christian homes to the glory
of...God.' Likewise, the allied powers of Europe, 'holding China by the throat, and
dictating the terms by which that immense empire with its 400,000,000 of population
shall hereafter subsist, and in what relation it shall stand to the civilized world.'

The 'Christian powers' of the world, not through missionary effort, but 'as the engine of
power used by the State,' were brought into conflict with Islam, in which Christendom
would certainly be victorious. Though Palmer notes in passing the temptations of the
accrual of power, the tenor of the sermon is clearly towards the God-ordained triumph
of Western civilisation. It is doubtless surprising that a man who devoted his life to the
propagation of the Christian gospel should praise, not its advance, but rather the
triumphant military dominance of the West over supposedly inferior powers and
civilisations.

Palmer's public theology thus relied heavily on the events that occurred in
history that, in his mind, vindicated Western Civilisation and furthered the progress of
the Christian religion, more through military conquest than missionary effort. Palmer's
public theology accommodated itself even to what appeared to be history's great injustices, and gave moral justification to historical conquests that many in later generations view with far less enthusiasm. Richard Hughes noted that Palmer in his mind had amalgamated divergent strands of history from ancient Israel to the Founding Fathers, and made the cause of the South a key piece in God's accomplishment of his divine plan. Hughes's understanding is insightful, but limited by failing to reckon with Palmer's championing of progress and his incorporation of the defeat of the South and the subsequent development of Imperial America that Reilly notes.

Conclusion

We began this chapter with four considerations in Palmer’s theory of the state: the patriarchal family as the basic social unit, the Lordship of Christ over the ideal state, the principle of separation that justifies secession, and the embracing of America’s providential purpose by which Palmer accepted Southern defeat and located progress in the post bellum American empire. Against that structure, we saw that Palmer viewed God’s providence as desiring the imposition of order as the way to bring about progress out of chaos. Palmer found in the Old Testament not only the basic pattern of society but also the basis for the discrete features of the American republic, which is another example of his legitimising what exists out of the providential plan of God. For Palmer, progress in statecraft meant a fuller realization of these ideals. He saw them, albeit tainted with the ‘infidel spirit,’ in the United States Constitution, and saw the

172 Richard T. Hughes summarises, 'Not content simply to identify the South with the purposes of God in the abstract, Palmer rooted his argument in the concrete details of history. When he had finished, he had created a mythical South that was the fulfilment of five different sacred histories: ancient Israel, the ancient Jewish patriarchs, primitive Christianity, Puritan fathers, and founding fathers. This, for Palmer, was cosmos. Cosmos, however, trembled on the brink of chaos whose demonic agent was deistic infidelity. Here was civic theology that was even more than civic theology; it was cosmic drama with cosmic significance acted out on a cosmic stage.' in 'A Civic Theology for the South: The Case of Benjamin M. Palmer,' Journal of Church and State 25, no. 3 (October 2, 1983): 467.
Confederate Constitution as an even more perfect embodiment of them. Palmer knew, however, that a state could grow too haughty and, when it did, providence would arrange for it to be broken apart, and a faithful remnant separated from it. By this Palmer justified Southern secession.

A tension existed in Palmer’s thought, however, between the morality of the Southern cause and the reality of Southern defeat. As we have shown, historical fact was a powerful force in determining God’s will, another application of the ‘is-ought’ problem at the heart of Palmer’s understanding of providence. Palmer thereby found a way of maintaining the rectitude of the Southern cause even as he embraced the prospects of America as a world empire. For Palmer, when it came to matters of government, God’s providence had destined America to become the Christian empire, projecting might around the world in the service of the coming millennium. The question of how the church relates to the government was thus for Palmer a large one, and that matter we take up under the heading of the spirituality of the church.
Chapter 6:

B. M. Palmer and the Relation of the Church and Society

‘We...made the Confederacy our idol.’
–Henry B. Pratt

In this chapter, we examine B. M. Palmer’s understanding of the providential role of the church in society.1 After a brief examination of the spirituality of the church doctrine, we will examine how Palmer appropriated it in his ministry. We will examine whether he violated the doctrine regarding Southern secession and other political issues, and how James Henley Thornwell shaped Palmer’s view. We will contrast Palmer’s view of the spirituality of the church with that of Robert Lewis Dabney, and border-state pastors Samuel McPheeters, Thomas Peck, and Stuart Robinson.2 We will explore the diversity of scholarly opinion on the history of the doctrine and demonstrate how this issue relates to Palmer’s particular understanding of the doctrine of providence.

I.) Defining the Spirituality of the Church

A.) A Christian Church in a Christian State

Defining what Southern Presbyterians meant by the phrase, ‘the spirituality of the church’ is a complex issue. Many of them viewed it as their distinctive doctrine. They shared a belief with other non-established churches that the church ought to be free of

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2 A border state was a slaveholding state that did not leave the Union. In several cases, these states had rival governments and were subject to martial law. Robinson ministered in Kentucky and adhered strictly to a separation of the church from political advocacy or entanglements.
state entanglements.\textsuperscript{3} The doctrine of spirituality goes further than this. James Henley Thornwell defined it thus:

> The provinces of Church and State are perfectly distinct, and the one has no right to usurp the jurisdiction of the other. The State is a natural institute, founded in the constitution of man as moral and social, and designed to realise the idea of justice...The Church is a supernatural institute, founded in the facts of redemption, and is designed to realise the idea of grace...The power of the Church is exclusively spiritual; that of the State includes the exercise of force...They are as planets moving in different orbits, and unless each is confined to its track, the consequences may be as disastrous in the moral world as the collision of different spheres in the world of matter.\textsuperscript{4}

It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the Southern Presbyterians, therefore, believed in a secular state. Elsewhere, Thornwell wrote,

> The separation of Church and State is a very different thing from the separation of religion and the State. Here is where our fathers erred. In their anxiety to guard against the evils of a religious establishment, and to preserve the provinces of Church and State separate and distinct, they virtually expelled Jehovah from the government of the country and left the State an irresponsible corporation...They made it a moral person, and yet not accountable to the Source of all law. It is this anomaly which we desire to see removed; and the removal of it by no means implies a single element of what is involved in a national Church.\textsuperscript{5}

It is clear that Thornwell did not advocate a secular state. Rather, he argued at length that, while the state cannot bind the hearts of its citizens to Christianity, it ought to ally itself with the Christian religion.\textsuperscript{6} This is important as we seek to understand Palmer's view of the relationship of church and state, for he and Thornwell were in essential agreement. Moreover, it challenges the conceptions of historians who lack a category for understanding how the state could be Christian, and yet institutionally separate from the church.\textsuperscript{7}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[3] Edward R. Crowther contends, 'Presbyterians ...were the least likely to countenance any entanglement of the state in religious matters...Although evangelicals taught the (sic) God created government, they also believed that interference by secular government corrupted the Church. And intervention by the state in church affairs also violated God's organizational chart.' in \textit{Southern Evangelicals and the Coming of the Civil War}, vol. 73, Studies in American Religion (Lewiston, N.Y.: E. Mellen Press, 2000), 84.
\item[6] Ibid., 552–53.
\item[7] H. Shelton Smith, 'The Church and the Social Order in the Old South as Interpreted by James H. Thornwell', \textit{Church History} 7, no. 2 (June 1938): 117.
\end{footnotes}
states, the state is duty bound to protect ‘the church of our common Lord.’ Moreover, the church may exercise influence on the church in moral and spiritual, though not legislative, matters.

Thornwell’s view lent itself to squabbles about the fine parsing required to separate matters into their moral, spiritual, and legislative aspects. Within the Old School Southern Presbyterian tradition, there were disagreements over to what extent the church was to avoid civil entanglements. Moreover, the doctrine was placed under extreme stress by the increasing sectional strife of the middle nineteenth century, two divisions in Presbyterianism involving slavery and secession, and a patriotism that made theologians adjust, if not violate, their previous convictions.

Within the nineteenth century Southern Presbyterian Church, the range of opinion on the church’s relationship to political life was partially determined by geography. South Carolina, the hotbed of secession, was the first state to depart. Its natives Thornwell and Palmer were comfortable with a close symbiosis between church and state. Thus, it was in South Carolina that the cause of Christ and the Confederacy became fused in Presbyterian thinking. Border state pastors Samuel McPheeters, Stuart Robinson, and Thomas Peck, on the other hand, favoured a total separation of the two spheres: a purely spiritual church and a purely secular state. The most they desired from the state was to be left alone. This may be because of the complexity of ministering in a situation where they had to navigate profound differences on the matters of slavery.

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8 The original had assigned the state role ‘that unity and peace be preserved in the church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresy be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of god duly settled, administered, and observed.’ It also gave the state the power to summon synods, and magistrates to be present at them, as well as ‘to provide that whatsoever is transacted in them be according to the mind of God.’

9 John B. Adger, ‘Northern and Southern Views of the Province of the Church’, *Southern Presbyterian Review* 16, no. 4 (March 1866): 384–411. Adger attempts to vindicate the Southern church against Northern Presbyterian charges of political meddling by separating issues into these three components. It is a masterpiece of special pleading. Cf. also Doralyn J. Hickey, *Benjamin Morgan Palmer: Churchman of the Old South* (University Microfilms, 1990). 172 Hickey argues that Southern secession caused Palmer to forget the former concern [the total separation of the functions of church and state] and intermesh the authority of pulpit and legislative hall.’
and secession and avoid running afoul of the law in states with competing Union and Confederate governments.  

Like his state, Virginian Robert Lewis Dabney initially opposed secession. He agreed in principle with the border state pastors, yet believed a gospel minister individually could be an outspoken Southern partisan, much like Thornwell and Palmer. Nonetheless, Dabney clearly believed in a secular state:

A theocratic State [Old Testament Israel] is no rule for a state not theocratic. When a state can be shown, where there is but one denomination to choose, and that immediately organized by God Himself just then; where there is an assurance of a succession of inspired prophets to keep this denomination on the right track; where the king who is to be at the head of this State Church is supernaturally nominated by God, and guided in his action by an oracle, then we will admit the application of the case.  

Dabney appeared as a mean between the extremes of a purely pietistic church, and a politically activist one.

B.) Historical Roots and Antecedents of the Spirituality Doctrine

Southern Presbyterians looked to a variety of sources for the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Thomas Peck noted John Erskine of Dun's statement, 'There is a spiritual jurisdiction and power which God has given unto His Kirk...and there is a temporal jurisdiction and power given of God to kings and civil magistrates. Both the powers are given of God, and most agreeing to the fortifying one of the other, if they be rightly used.' He also cited Andrew Melville, 'There are two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland; there is King James, the head of the Commonwealth, and there is Christ Jesus, the King of the

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10 The case of Missouri pastor Samuel McPheeters shows just how precarious it was to pastor in a border state. McPheeters, unlike his fellow Southern Presbyterians, pledged loyalty to the Union and strictly avoided expressing any political opinions during the War. Nonetheless, he and his wife were expelled from Missouri by the martial governor for suspicion of disloyalty, and the PC(USA) removed him as pastor of the church for this reason, over the protests over his congregation.

Church, whose subject James the Sixth is, and of whose kingdom, he is not a king, nor a
lord, nor a head, but a member.’

They could also look to their doctrinal symbol. In 1787-89, American
Presbyterians revised the sections of The Westminster Confession regarding the
relationship of the church to the state. They excised the state’s role in protecting against
heresy in chapter 22.4, and completely re-wrote Chapter 23.3, ‘Of the Civil Magistrate.’
The original had called upon the state to preserve unity and peace within the church, to
protect right doctrine, and to summon synods when it deemed necessary. The American
Presbyterians removed all this language. They merely said that the state ought not to
favour one Christian denomination over another, but rather allow them all to operate
without interference from the civil power. The early American Presbyterians envisioned
the church as a voluntary society, and their view of the relation of the church to the state
was that of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, ‘Congress shall make
no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’
John Witherspoon, a bridge between ecclesiastical and political thought among the
American founders, wrote that Presbyterians ‘do not even wish to see any religious
constitution aided by the civil power, further than may be necessary for protection and
security, and at the same time, equal and common to all others.’

Though it is true that the Southern Presbyterians believed that the state ought
not to interfere with the church, the majority of their emphasis fell upon the church not
interfering with civil matters. Though some assert that this doctrine was novel, The
Westminster Confession says:

Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is
ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the
commonwealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by

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13 Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. Board of Publication, A Collection of the Acts, Deliverances, and
Testimonies of the Supreme Judicatory of the Presbyterian Church from Its Origin in America to the Present
Time (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1856), 785.
Likewise, Francis Turretin [1623-1687], Genevan Reformed scholastic theologian, addressed the matter in volume 3 of his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*. He stated the question thus, ‘Does any spiritual power distinct from the political belong to the church? We affirm.’ He distinguished his position from Roman Catholicism, which, he said, taught that the church was to dominate the state. Likewise, he distinguished his thought from that of the ‘Erastians,’ who denied, in his estimation, that the church had any independent power from the state regarding church discipline and membership. He was clear that the church’s power was not that of the sword, but related solely to maintaining its doctrine, rules, and terms of membership. It is ‘only ministerial and subaltern, and not supreme and autocratic.’ Turretin wrote in a different age and situation from that of Southern Presbyterianism. Our purpose is not to explore his understanding of how this doctrine was applied. We merely contend that Southern Presbyterians had to look no farther than their confession or the standard systematic theology of their day for support for the spirituality doctrine.

This argues against the assertions by Mark Noll and others that the doctrine was a convenient novelty. The Southern church may have been novel in how it applied the doctrine, but the idea itself was not new. David VanDrunen argues that Charles Hodge likewise held to a version of the spirituality of the church. Though Hodge allowed more latitude on what civil matters the church may address, his actions at the 1861 General

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14 31.4.
16 Mark A. Noll writes, ‘The concept of the ‘spirituality of the church” can be explained as a convenient doctrine allowing southern Christians to avoid taking action on slavery, was also in fact a sincerely held religious conviction related to this rejection of Whig and northern Calvinist activism.’ In *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 312; Charles Hodge calls it a ‘novel, yet sound, doctrine’. In *Discussions in Church Polity*, ed. William Durant (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1878), 116.
Assembly in opposition to the Gardiner Spring resolution, showed that he was committed to the spirituality doctrine. 18

It would be a mistake to assume that Southern theologians invented the spirituality doctrine to sidestep addressing slavery, for they often addressed it. 19 Palmer's argument was not that slavery was merely a political issue, and therefore outside the church's responsibility to address, but rather that white enslavement of the 'inferior' black population was God's will, and therefore ought to be commended by the church. 20 At the same time, Southern Presbyterian positions advocated the preservation of slave marriages, the humane treatment of slaves, and fought against laws forbidding teaching slaves to read and write. 21

We might rightly query Palmer, 'In what sense was a church that would petition the government to declare itself Christian not intermeddling in civil affairs?' 22 Thomas Peck raised a similar objection to his co-religionists in 1863, 'Will the acknowledgement of Christ in the Constitution make us a “Christian nation?”...No; there is no magic in the name of Christ emblazoned in our Constitution and on our banners to transform us into a Christian people.' 23 It is this particular point we raise concerning Palmer's understanding. What, precisely, did Palmer mean by his advocacy of the spirituality of the church, given his political involvement as a Christian pastor?

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18 Old School minister Gardiner Spring introduced a resolution that was passed by the 1861 Old School General Assembly, which stated that all ministers take an oath of loyalty to the Federal Union.
19 Smith, 'The Church and the Social Order in the Old South as Interpreted by James H. Thornwell', 119.
21 Smith, 'The Church and the Social Order in the Old South as Interpreted by James H. Thornwell', 121–22.
22 We must here note that the memorial petition was never adopted by the Southern Assembly. Thornwell, seeing the discord it caused, and noting how late it was in the proceedings, withdrew it from consideration. Cf. B. M. Palmer, The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 507 and John B. Adger, 'Dr. Thornwell's Memorial on the Recognition of Christianity in the Constitution', Southern Presbyterian Review 16, no. 1 (July 1863): 77–79.
23 Peck, 'Church and State', 136.
C.) Alternate Explanations of The Spirituality of the Church

The spirituality of the church is often left unaddressed or is poorly understood by many scholars of the nineteenth century South, with the exceptions of Ernest Trice Thompson and Jack Maddex. Thompson grants that the Southern manifestation of the spirituality doctrine had roots back at least to the Hanover Presbytery in Virginia in the 1700's. He contends, however, that the Southern Church became more thoroughgoing in its adherence to the spirituality doctrine after the Civil War, essentially to maintain the lost cause and the racial status quo ante. Thompson favours William E. Boggs's definition, ‘All secular and political topics should be excluded from the pulpit, along with the so-called topics of the day...[and] all the sciences, whether physical or metaphysical, ethical or political.’ He then goes on to catalogue how the church violated this precept throughout the nineteenth century, speaking out against women’s suffrage, the labour movement, socialism, and the alleged corruption of the Grant administration. He concludes that the Southern Presbyterian Church believed it was within its purview to address issues that bolstered the status quo, and declared any issue that challenged it outside the bounds of the church’s interest. Moreover, it appears never to have occurred to them that this might be regarded as political activity in and of itself.

The puzzle is how Southern Presbyterians could believe that their church ought not to address social concerns while they often did that very thing. Some, like Dabney, asserted that a minister entered into such debates only in his role as a private citizen. Palmer’s work did not even pass this test.

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24 Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, vol. 2, V. 2-3: Presbyterian Historical Society. Publication Series 13 (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1963), 407. Thompson writes,‘(The Southern Presbyterian Church) had little recognition or understanding of the social inequities that prevailed in its own section and throughout the nation in matters of class and race, and it denied that the church, as such, had any responsibility for the establishment of social justice beyond the simple preaching of the gospel of God’s redeeming love in Christ. The silence of its pulpit, the tendency of its press, contributed to the maintenance of the status quo in which its own members had so large a stake.’
26 Ibid, 2:413.
Jack Maddex explains the paradox of a spiritual church and a politically activist clergy differently. He critiques both those who assert that the doctrine was invented or re-appropriated to avoid church pronouncements on slavery and those that argue the spirituality doctrine was strictly adhered to up until the twentieth century, with a few lamentable deviations from principle. Maddex alternately proposes that the Southern manifestation of the spirituality of the church did not exist before the Civil War, but rather post-war Presbyterians read it back into their past. He illustrates just how political the Southern church was before and during the Civil War, including pronouncements of church courts. He asserts that the spirituality motif gained prominence almost accidentally during a debate at the 1859 Old School General Assembly. A motion was brought to settle free American blacks in Africa. Thornwell was opposed, and Palmer suggested he object because such was not the church’s role. Thus, Maddex contends, Thornwell made up the doctrine spontaneously, arguing that the church ought to have ‘nothing to do with the voluntary associations of men for various civil and social purposes that were outside of her pale.’ If the Bible were silent on any issue, the church must be also. Maddex contends, however, that Thornwell did not understand this as silencing the church on political questions; it was merely the exigency of the moment. He notes that Palmer’s understanding of Thornwell’s

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28 Maddex writes, ‘Antebellum Southern Presbyterians did not teach absolute separation of religion from politics, or even church from state. Most of them were proslavery social activists who worked through their church to defend slavery and reform its practice. Their Confederate militance did not violate any antebellum tradition of pietism. Only during Reconstruction, in drastically altered circumstances, did they take up the cause of a “non-secular” church—borrowing it from conservative Presbyterians in the border states.’ In Maddex, ‘From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State’, 438.
29 Ibid., 441.
30 Maddex writes, [Thornwell] apparently said the church should not endorse particular secular policies, but he added that it should condemn evil policies. He affirmed the church’s duty to speak on slavery, but not to decide which social system should exist in a given area.’ In ibid.
argument maintained that the church ‘should rebuke officials, condemn immoral policies, and teach people the duties of their social relations.’

Maddex contends that Thornwell and Palmer did not view even the Gardiner Spring Resolution as a problem in principle. The Southern divines cited the resolution as the watershed issue that split the Old School Church into Northern and Southern Assemblies because it required Presbyterian ministers to pledge loyalty to the Federal Government. In the eyes of Thornwell and Palmer, the Southern church did not depart because the church commended loyalty to one’s own government, but rather because it insisted on loyalty to the national government, making loyalty to a foreign regime a matter of faith. Maddex notes that the new Southern church’s ‘Address to All the Churches’, which Thornwell wrote, did not take issue with an assembly’s power to make such a resolution. Rather, Thornwell asserted, ‘Two nations, under any circumstances except those of perfect homogeneousness, cannot be united in one Church, without the rigid exclusion of all civil and secular questions from its halls.’ In short, the Southern Church affirmed that it was within the sphere of the church to address ‘civil and secular questions.’ Likewise, Palmer, in his opening sermon of the Southern General Assembly, declared that the Confederacy must dedicate itself to Christianity.

Maddex notes that the border state pastors were more consistent ‘spirituality’ advocates than their brethren in the Deep South. However, his conclusion that ‘It was the overthrow of the Confederacy and slavery which turned Southern Presbyterians to promoting a wholly “non-secular church,”’ is an overstatement. Quite clearly, a

31 Ibid., 441–42.
32 Thornwell, ‘Address to All Churches of Christ’, 448.
35 Ibid., 448.
contingent of influential Southern Presbyterians believed it long before Confederacy was defeated. Maddex asserts that the Civil War chastened Southern Presbyterians, mentioning that Palmer ‘vowed to put the past behind him and speak only as an humble servant of God,’ which Maddex draws from a newspaper account of Palmer’s first sermon upon his return.\(^{36}\) The actual account of Palmer’s auditor reads,

> As for the dead past, he, for one, was anxious to hide it away in the solemn tomb. Henceforth, no word should escape his lips but such as was meet for an humble servant in the temple of his God and King...he would emulate the example of Paul the Apostle, by preaching Christ and Him crucified.\(^{37}\)

We must note that whatever Palmer’s intention in those words, his actual practice remained unchanged. He retained his role as a prominent pastor active in public causes until the end of his life. Maddex usefully demonstrates the postbellum Southern church gradually embraced the border state form of spirituality, climaxing at the 1870 General Assembly, which ‘based its refusal of fraternal relations with the USA (Northern) church on the latter’s political utterances and its alleged slanders on the CSA church’s political record.’\(^{38}\) Palmer led the charge.

Maddex’s thesis goes awry when he asserts, ‘Southern Presbyterian apologists reinterpreted the church’s history, adjusting the past record to their new doctrine and adapting Thornwell quotations to illustrate it.’\(^{39}\) The assertion claims too much. Whatever the spirituality of the church doctrine may have meant in the practice of the antebellum Southern church, Presbyterians claimed to believe it far earlier than 1859, contrary to Maddex’s assertion. Palmer, if not others, had thought it through thoroughly as early as 1849-50. Whether Southern Presbyterians as a whole came to be more consistent advocates of the doctrine after the War is beyond our purview, but Palmer’s thinking and practice were unchanged. It is not difficult to see why this doctrine has

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\(^{36}\) Ibid.


\(^{39}\) Ibid.
occasioned much scholarly disagreement. To what extent was the church to be mute on social matters?

D.) The Dual Role of Clergy as Pastors and Public Intellectuals

Perhaps we begin to arrive at something of an answer if we consider that the clergy occupied a role beyond their official pastoral role. Nineteenth-century ministers were among the most well-educated members of their communities. They were beneficiaries of integrated academic disciplines and often occupied roles later thought to be secular, including heading state colleges. They saw little, if any, divide in their thought between sacred and secular, though they distinguish between minister and academic. In other words, their religious commitments informed their ‘secular’ scholarship and public writing, yet they saw themselves in two distinct roles, one as Christian public citizen and one as clergy. As clergy, their exclusive concern was the human relationship with God; as Christian public citizens, they were concerned with social affairs.\(^{40}\)

This is similar S. T. Coleridge’s view, expressed in *Church and State*. Coleridge put forth the idea of a ‘clerisy,’ an intellectual establishment that included the members of the clergy, but also intellectuals of all sorts. Peter Allen contends that the clerisy was ‘inclined to ignore the material basis of their social power,’ because they viewed themselves as concerned solely with ‘transcendence of worldly interests.’\(^{41}\) Palmer was the best-compensated pastor in the old South, and thus wielded a great amount of social

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\(^{40}\) Cf. Morton H. Smith, ‘It should be said that Calvinism does teach a world and life view, in which men are to apply the faith in every area of life. The historic Southern Presbyterian position of the separation of church and state into different spheres, however, is very closely akin to that which was developed by Abraham Kuyper in The Netherlands...This view sees the Church as an entity with one mission, the school, the family, the state, as different spheres with different missions. The Christian lives in all these areas...yet in each he is to be a Christian.’ In *How Is the Gold Become Dim: The Decline of the Presbyterian Church, U. S., As Reflected in Its Assembly Actions* (Greenville, SC: Southern Presbyterian Press, 1973), 136.

power. He did, however, stake out positions that went against the cultural current and thus was not merely concerned with maintaining the status quo. It is more probable that he was so immersed in his culture that he could not view it objectively. At the same time, there is little doubt that the elite clergy had a vested interest in maintaining white planter privilege and power.

Coleridge presented the clerisy as a fundamental building block of society, interpreters and mediators between government and the citizenry. He argued that the social function of the clerisy was to inculcate knowledge, cultural values, historical memory, and civic virtue among the population. He maintained that theology taught both religious and social duty. The clerisy had never confined itself to mere theology but had always served as an intellectual class across the span of human knowledge. They thus served as social ballast and a conduit of shared cultural values to succeeding generations. Moreover, they were ‘to form and train up the people of the country to obedient, free, useful, organisable subjects, citizens, and patriots, living to the benefit of the state, and prepared to die for its defence. The proper object and end of the National Church is civilisation with freedom.’ That concept may strike the modern hearer as totalitarian, yet such was not Coleridge’s point. He here argued that the clerisy equipped a populace to live virtuous lives, and thus be equipped to be members of a free society.

Interestingly, Coleridge believed that the spiritual functions of the clergy must be kept wholly distinct from their civic functions. The Christian minister may perform both discrete functions, yet Coleridge cautioned, ‘great and grievous errors have arisen

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45 Coleridge supports the Anglican establishment, but his idea of the National Church should not be equated with the Church of England. His concept of the National Church ‘comprehend[s] the learned of all denominations.’ Ibid., 36.
from confounding the functions; and fearfully great and grievous will be the evils from
the success of an attempt to separate them.' The clerisy were transmitters of a
temporal culture, and also the guides to humanity's spiritual and eternal aspirations.
Those functions must remain separate, lest one fall into the errors of the Roman church-
state. The church as spiritual institution, 'asks nothing of the state but to be left alone.'
The two functions of the clerisy must not be disconnected, allowing society to become
secularised and fall into the error of Jacobinism. Palmer's understanding of the clergy's
relationship to society is nearly identical to that propounded by Coleridge.

In Coleridge's view, then, the clerisy wore two distinct hats, one spiritual and the
other temporal. Even so, the values they expressed in each role were not distinct but
drawn from the same body of truth. This was how the Southern divines saw themselves.
As broadly educated public figures, their cultural opinions carried weight, and they were
recruited to serve in the 'secular' academy. They saw themselves as purveyors of
cultural values and memory, as well as patriotic duty. We will note this especially in
Palmer's spearheading of the opposition to the Louisiana State Lottery. Antonio Gramsci
argues that the clerisy was a fundamentally socially conserving force, bringing about the
'spontaneous consent' of the majority to the will of the ruling elite. His fundamental
point is that the social prestige and power of the clerisy helped mould the popular will
to the opinions of the upper class.

Palmer's nigh ubiquity during secession and the war, his presence speaking
before troops and legislatures, the credit contemporaries and enemies give him in both
secession and the lottery campaign, and his prolific pen, demonstrate his prominence as
a public intellectual. Moreover, Palmer's public orations and writings were nearly all
concerned with moulding public opinion in accord with his public theology. Palmer

46 Ibid., 45.
47 Ibid., 99.
interpreted events in ways mostly favourable to existing Southern culture and sought to pass on this cultural vision to rising generations, Coleridge's very definition of the role of the clerisy. It also clearly tied in with Palmer's understanding of providence, which was the pastor as public intellectual who interpreted the will and hand of God in the public life of the nation. He was uniquely gifted to see God's purposes in the events and cultural currents of contemporary life.

We must be careful to differentiate between this view and that of James Silver and H. Shelton Smith, who argue that the Southern Presbyterian divines were cynical propagandists for the white power elite. In Coleridge's view, on the contrary, the cultural value of the clerisy was not as propagandists for the regime, but rather as a sincere mediator between the population and the government. Its intention was not to mislead a populace, but to inculcate a sense of heritage by transmission of cultural values. The clerisy placed individuals and events into a larger providential context. They interpreted the meaning of historical events and urged individuals to order their understandings and lives accordingly. As we have seen, this functional distinction of roles between spiritual instructor and public intellectual would account for the seeming contradiction in Thornwell and Palmer's practice, of both upholding the spirituality of the church, and yet being outspoken and prolific public intellectuals.

E.) B. M. Palmer's Self-Understanding as a Public Intellectual

Palmer occasionally reflected on his role as public intellectual. For instance, in the 'Thanksgiving Sermon', he claimed he had never 'intermeddled with political questions,' because there were 'thousands around me more competent to instruct in

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49 H. Shelton Smith writes, 'Long before the guns fired on Fort Sumpter (sic), southern civilization had wrought out an ideology that was as dogmatic as Marxism has ever dared be... Those who rejected this ideology were promptly silenced or ushered into a cooler climate.' In 'The Church and the Social Order in the Old South as Interpreted by James H. Thornwell', 115; Cf. also James W. Silver, Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1967), 101; and James W. Silver, 'Propaganda in the Confederacy', The Journal of Southern History 11, no. 4 (November 1945): 493.
statesmanship’. Thus, he ‘preferred to move among you as a preacher of righteousness belonging to a kingdom not of this world.’ By November 1860, things had changed. Now, a crisis had arisen that made it imperative upon me as a Christian and a divine to speak in language admitting no misconstruction...Whoever may have influence to shape public opinion at such a time must lend it, or prove faithless to a trust as solemn as any to be accounted for at the bar of God. Is it immodest in me to assume that I may represent a class whose opinions in such a controversy are of cardinal importance? The class which seeks to ascertain its duty in the light simply of conscience and religion; and which turns to the moralist and the Christian for support and guidance.\(^50\)

Palmer referred to himself as the member of a ‘class,’ a moralist intelligentsia whose duty it was to speak on an issue of such signal importance as secession. This he believed he must do because politicians were looking to the Christian moralist for ethical guidance for a populace ‘on the brink of revolution.’ His goal, he said, was to ‘state the duty which...patriotism and religion alike require of us all.’\(^51\) He claimed the right to interpret public events in light of the overall providential purposes of God. Whether the advice sought by public officials from religious leaders was through personal counsel or public media, it does seem to make the line between pastor as a public intellectual and pastor as clergy even harder to discern. Palmer clearly equated the cause of religion and Southern secession; it appears impossible to separate out his functions as a public figure and Christian pastor. He was transmitting cultural values to a populace and seeking to inform and persuade their opinion. As we noted earlier, those in his day and since credit Palmer with tipping the scale towards secession in Louisiana.\(^52\)

Later in the War, Palmer wrote a pamphlet decrying those who had submitted to a Federal oath of allegiance in the reclaimed secessionist territory. He wrote, ‘Should apology be needed for this obtrusion of private criticism, let it be found in the relation I have long sustained as a religious teacher to the people of Louisiana, and my common

\(^{50}\) Palmer, ‘Thanksgiving Sermon’, 5–6.
\(^{51}\) Ibid., 6.
\(^{52}\) Silver, *Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda*, 95.
participation as a citizen in any reproach which may tarnish the fame of that gallant State.'

Palmer went on to label any who submitted to the loyalty oath as ‘traitors,’ and invoked the language of 1 John 2:19, ‘they went out from us because they were not of us.’ Palmer saw himself, not just as a local pastor, but also as a religious instructor of the entire populace. Palmer regarded himself as a moulder of popular opinion. In his extant Sunday sermons, there is no trace of public commentary; his sole concern is with Christian piety. Palmer performed a dual role, precisely as Coleridge envisioned.

Moreover, it is Coleridge’s distinction between roles that allowed Palmer to maintain that his ministerial efforts were solely spiritual, despite his prominence as a public theologian.

In an article devoted to what Palmer saw as the entwined disciplines of divinity, medicine, and law, Palmer wrote, ‘Upon whom shall truth call for this supreme devotion, if not upon those who are recognised as professionally the leaders of public thought?’ He here lauds the notion of a Coleridge-style clerisy, as he goes on to add a fourth intellectual class to his examination, ‘the large body of educators rapidly swelling into a distinct and recognised order.’ For Palmer, it was the responsibility of this thinking class to give thought to abstract truth, as three-fourths of the human race merely subsisted, and a large number of others were concerned with the more pragmatic matters of science and technological advance. Among this public intellectual class, the clergy reigned supreme:

Their office is to deal with mind, and thought is the very instrument of their labour...Their entire training is that of an intellectual athlete, under the discipline of philosophy...They bow, it is true, to the authority of divine revelation; but this does not exempt them from the exercise and responsibility of reason...Society can lay upon it the supreme obligation to sift the teachings of all the schools, that a spurious philosophy may not go forth to debauch the intellect and conscience of mankind.

54 Ibid., 5.
56 Ibid., 197.
57 Ibid., 199.
Palmer clearly saw his role as an authority on public matters, but, at the same time, held such a role to be completely separate from his functions as a gospel minister, though not from the substance of what he believed. Once again, we see how the principle of induction served Palmer’s overall understanding of how providence was to be interpreted. Induction allowed the clerical, public intellectual to tie both doctrine and hermeneutics into the present reality of God’s unfolding plan, and then to reveal to the populace what God was doing.

II. Palmer’s Understanding and Practice of the Spirituality of the Church

A.) The Foundation of Palmer’s Understanding of Church and State

In 1849-50, B. M. Palmer wrote the two-part article, ‘Church and State’. The dates are significant because, while sectional tensions were present at that time, they were far from the boiling point reached by 1860, when Palmer’s practice shifted.

Palmer began by extolling the American separation of church and state but contended that Americans had not thought through the issue as thoroughly as they ought, unlike the British. He began his survey with the work of William Warburton. He noted that, for Warburton, ‘the State and the Church are originally both independent and sovereign societies; having different ends in view, and hence not clashing, although the same persons may be under the jurisdiction of both.’ Warburton saw the Church, which furnished rewards for good behaviour, as the natural complement to the state, which could only punish bad behaviour. Therefore, the State offered the church an ‘alliance’ wherein it protected and funded the church, and the church, in turn ‘len[t] her whole influence to the State.’ To do this, the Church acquiesced to the State as her head.

59 Ibid, 214.
and submitted her laws to the state for approval. In turn, the church was given representation in government. Palmer confessed some affinity for Warburton's argument, but quickly noted 'very grave difficulties.' He contended that just because the church was necessary to a well-ordered society, it did not, therefore, follow that the church ought to be established by the state: it could perform this task better as a separate entity. Palmer did not dispute that the clergy served the function of a culturally stabilising and patriotic force. He merely pointed out that the state loses when it selects only one established church when it might benefit by all the sects fulfilling this stabilising function.

Palmer argued further that history showed that a church-state alliance, so far from protecting right doctrine, practice, and discipline, tended to degrade it. He noted with approval Warburton's claim that 'sovereign and separate societies do not clash, simply because they compass different ends by different means', even as he noted what he believed was Warburton's inconsistency on this point. This supports our earlier contention that, in Palmer's reckoning of the spirituality of the church, the church and state could be institutionally separate, and still the state remain a Christian entity.

Palmer turned then to Thomas Arnold's argument for an established church, which Palmer said hinged upon a misunderstanding of the function of the state. Rather than the state existing for the 'protecting of life and property,' it had 'the more general end of promoting, by all methods, the moral and intellectual improvement of men.' He contended that owning the latter doctrine of the state led Arnold 'to avow the most glaring Erastianism. As the end and aim of the Church are defined by him in precisely the same terms, it follows that the two societies are identical.' Palmer heaped scorn on

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60 Ibid., 215.
61 Ibid., 215–16.
62 Ibid., 216.
63 Ibid., 226.
such a view: ‘we have a nation Christianized by an infidel church.’ Palmer agreed with Warburton. The Church and state, in their original intentions, have completely different ends in view. The church was dedicated to matters spiritual, and the state, to matters temporal.

We get Palmer’s clearest statements about the spirituality of the church in his response to W. E. Gladstone’s work, *The State in Its Relations to the Church.* Palmer made the statement, ‘If (Gladstone) aims only to say that men who refuse to govern their conduct and to regulate their opinions by the teachings of Revelation, are, in so far, disqualified for the duties of legislation...we cordially and fully agree with him.’ Palmer stated that he believed in the legitimacy of a Christian religious test for public office. At the same time, because the State was not a person, it could not be religious, contra Gladstone’s assertion, and Palmer’s own later thinking on the subject. Palmer wrote,

> We cannot predicate religion of any who have not a soul in the most strict and proper sense of that word; a soul capable of receiving communications from God, comprehending duty, and conscious of its subjection to the Divine law...Unless, then, the State, in its corporate character as State, has a soul –is immortal—can fall from holiness into sin—can be the subject of a spiritual birth—can stand at the bar of judgment—and suffer eternal damnation—it is not a subject of religion.

At this point, at least, Palmer appears not to have considered the theocratic state of Israel as a corporate spiritual entity before God, capable of being judged by him.

Palmer’s understanding of the spirituality of the church comfortably coincided with the belief that the state ought to operate on Christian principles, even if it were not, properly speaking, ‘religious’. Our efforts to understand this may be an attempt to

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64 Ibid., 230.
67 By 1861, Palmer’s thinking on this subject had changed markedly. Cf. for instance ‘National Responsibility before God: A Discourse, Delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Appointed by the President of the Confederate States of America, June 13, 1861’ (New Orleans, 1861).
68 Palmer, ‘Church and State (2),’ 581–82.
impose consistency where there is none to be had. Nonetheless, the articles remain as evidence of the amount of thought Palmer has put into this issue. For instance, Gladstone asserted that the state must be a corporate entity because it is held morally responsible for unjust wars and breaking of treaties. Palmer, although he contradicted this assertion elsewhere, here argued that it is persons, not whole nations, who break the treaties. It did not appear to occur to him that the war that may follow a broken treaty was declared against the nation as a whole, not merely upon the ruler whose actions may have broken the treaty. He likewise argued that, although the United States Congress invoked divine blessings ‘through a Chaplain, it is not…the nation, which as a moral unit offers a State-worship to God; but these functionaries, as individual men, recognise their individual dependence upon God, and confess their personal responsibility to him.’

As we have noted elsewhere, both Palmer’s opinions and practice in this regard shifted markedly with the onset of war. At this point, however, he argued, ‘As statesmen, engaged in the discharge of difficult duties, they acknowledge their need of divine direction, precisely as they should do in their own more private affairs.’ Likewise, he contended that, despite public feast and fast days, the state was not ‘religious.’ He wrote,

When the chief magistrate recommends a public fast or a public thanksgiving, he does not, as the High Priest of the nation, offer a national worship; but simply as the representative of a Christian people, and merely as their voice, he gives utterance to the general sentiment pervading the hearts of all, which calls for the recognition of God in his providence. The worship at last is that of individuals who are brought into concert.

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69 Ibid., 582.
70 Ibid., 583.
71 Palmer, ‘National Responsibility before God: A Discourse, Delivered on the Day of Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer, Appointed by the President of the Confederate States of America, June 13, 1861’.
72 Palmer, ‘Church and State (2)’, 583.
The question remains, then: did Palmer thus believe in a purely secular state, in which religion is only invoked for personal wisdom and guidance, or, did he believe in a state that is in some sense ‘Christian’, even if not one that is entwined with the church as an institution? Palmer’s argument against established religion, yet in favour of a Christian nation, appears to suffer from too many qualifications. Unlike Dabney, Robinson, Peck, and McPheeters, who argued that the state was, in no sense, a Christian entity, Palmer attempted to hold in tandem both a Christian commonwealth and a state and church that are utterly separate.

Interestingly, Palmer then turned his attention to Burke and Coleridge, though his critique of both men seems to hinge on his misunderstanding of their use of the word ‘state.’ Palmer conflated the meaning of ‘civil government’ with the term ‘state,’ while it appears that both Burke and Coleridge (as, according to Mueller, Hegel) used ‘state’ in the more expansive sense of society as a whole. Palmer quoted Burke’s *Reflections,* ‘Wherever the nation or government is avowedly Christian, the State or the nation is virtually the Church.’ The State, according to Palmer’s reading of Burke, has ‘a partnership in all science, a partnership in all art, a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection; a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living and those who are dead, and those who are to be born.’ He likewise argued that Coleridge conceived of the State as the union of three estates: landowners, whose influence is largely conservative, merchants and artisans, whose influence is innovative and tends towards personal liberty, and the clerisy. Palmer expressed his general appreciation for Coleridge, saying, ‘This striking theory, characterised by that originality which marks it as the speculation of a profound thinker, we have not subjected to critical

74 Palmer, ‘Church and State (2),’ 585.
examination, for an obvious reason, namely that it is something novel, not found in the other works.\textsuperscript{75}

Palmer did not see himself in Coleridge’s definition of the clerisy, but this is because he misunderstands Coleridge. He asserted that Coleridge was guilty of the same mistake he saw in Gladstone and Burke, in making the State’s’ goal promoting ‘in every conceivable way, the highest happiness of men.’\textsuperscript{76} While Palmer may have disagreed with Coleridge on the issue of state patronage for the clerisy, it does not mean that Palmer did not fit the definition. Whether or not he acknowledged it, Palmer fulfilled the dual role of spiritual guide and mediator of public values that Coleridge envisioned.

Palmer was jealous to retain independence for the church, even as he asserted the necessity of a religious populace:

\begin{quote}
We admit that without the influence of religion, men can never be brought into subjection to any government –that without it, rulers will always be tyrants and subjects always rebellious. But it is one thing to admit that religion is necessary to the existence and perpetuation of the State, and a far different thing to admit that the State should furnish and control it.\textsuperscript{77}
\end{quote}

Although apostolic teaching commended being in submission to the ruling authorities in Romans 13:1-7, 1 Peter 2:13-17, and elsewhere, it is impossible to substantiate this claim. Christian populations had rebelled against ostensibly Christian rulers. It could be that Palmer is making a non-falsifiable claim: Christian people would not rebel against a Christian ruler, who was ruling according to Christian principles. If the population did rebel, then that the ruler was not sufficiently Christian. The difficulty thus is whether ruler and people see Christianity in the same way. History would indicate that the popularity of Christianity made a culture no more or less prone to rebellion.

Nevertheless, Palmer’s main claim here is that Christianity is good for society, but that this does not mean it is the state’s responsibility to maintain or oversee it.

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 586.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{77} Ibid., 588.
Having established that the church should be a separate entity from the government, Palmer then turned his attention to the church itself. What was the church’s spiritual mission? He wrote:

The Church effects her spiritual ends by spiritual, not carnal, means. Her armour is truth; and her appeal is to conscience. She takes cognizance of sins, and her penalties operate only upon the religious nature of men. Christianity with its holy instructions, the godly example of its subjects, and its gracious control over the heart, seeks to make men better as men; and therefore, better in all their social relations...But the moment the Church seeks alliance with the State...she simply loses, on her part, that spiritual control which her peculiar mission gives over the conscience.78

Palmer concluded by giving this definition of the spirituality of the church, ‘The two institutions should work on harmoniously, each in its sphere doing its work, and without thwarting the plans of either. The State protects her citizens in the enjoyment of their religious privileges, and the church enjoins upon her members the Christian duty of reverence to “the powers that be.”’79

Palmer had no sooner declared the matter simple than he demonstrates its complexity:

It has been said that the separation of the Church from the State tends to make the latter Atheistical. Lawgivers and magistrates inducted into office without religious tests will cast off all restraint, and the affairs of the nation be conducted upon the most infidel principles. The distinction is again overlooked between the nation and the State. The latter, as a unit, is incapable of religion...the former, as embracing individuals, may and should be Christians. Legislators and governors are under the same individual responsibility with other men; and in their public functions, as well as in their private relations, are bound to make God’s word a lamp to their feet and a light to their path.80

78 Ibid., 590; Palmer does not appear to have much considered the morality of actions in war, though he does consider, and believe in, the morality of war for just causes. He was convinced that the Southern cause is just. He notes that true Christians in the North hold the opposite opinion, and grants they may be right. Such a matter can only be sorted out by war. He reflects on this at some length in his ‘Address before the Crescent Rifles, on Sabbath Morning, May 26, 1861’, The New Orleans Sunday Delta, 2 June 1861; He makes a similar case, decades after the war ends, in ‘Orator of the Occasion’, Confederate Veteran 8 (1900): 248–55.
79 Palmer, ‘Church and State (2)’, 605.
80 Ibid.
He asserts that Americans ‘are a Christian people, a Christian nation’, and ‘the laws
framed for our government respect us as such’.

How could it be less, given its providential mission? We see here that Palmer conceives of a Christian republic in which the church and state are functionally separate, as the foundation of his understanding of the spirituality of the church.

B.) Spirituality and the Formation of the Southern Presbyterian Church

As we noted previously, the rupture in the Old School did not occur immediately upon secession. It was not until the General Assembly of 1861 passed the Spring Resolution that the Southern presbyteries withdrew. The Presbytery of New Orleans met on 9 July 1861, ‘to consider the course pursued by the late General assembly with matters pertaining thereto; and also to take whatever action might be judged necessary in the premises.’

The meeting consisted of seventeen men, with Palmer’s name listed first. He was one of four ministers chosen to draught a statement of the presbytery’s views. The resulting paper stated that, according to the Spring Resolution,

This Church is required to profess its unabated loyalty to that central administration, which being at any time appointed and inaugurated according to the terms prescribed in the Constitution...is the visible representation of our national existence. This extraordinary action was taken in opposition to the notorious fact, that eleven sovereign States had withdrawn from the Federal Union and had established a government of our own; and in opposition to the fact that a large portion of the Church —was embraced within these seceded States; and obliged therefore by their own views of patriotism, and the word of God to support a government entirely distinct from that so arbitrarily patronized by the Assembly.

The Presbytery of New Orleans believed that the action was, ‘unconstitutional and Erastian to the last degree, since in undertaking to determine questions of political allegiance, it transcends all the powers granted by the Scriptures to the Church of

81 Ibid., 606.
82 Johnson, Life & Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 240.
83 Ibid., 242.
Christ.’ Moreover, they protested that ‘it enjoins that which would be treason against the government under which we live, and which as citizens we cordially and conscientiously support and cherish.’

We cannot ascertain with certainty that Palmer was the author of this resolution, although such would be highly likely given his stature. We do know, however, that he was an enthusiastic advocate for it. One can see the spirituality doctrine at work here. The church had usurped her spiritual bounds in demanding fealty to the state, in a certain sense. Even this is confused, however, because the Presbytery (and eventually the Southern Assembly) would be guilty on this very point. The Southern Church was intermingled with the political life of the Confederacy because it could not avoid it. The larger question is why Palmer could not see this, or why he even attempted such avoidance.

To the Presbytery of New Orleans, only one solution remained: to withdraw from the church in anticipation of a nascent Southern Assembly. They proposed a national meeting on 4 December 1861, in Augusta, Georgia, and sent Palmer to lead their delegation. Palmer was chosen by the assembly to preach the opening sermon, which is remarkable for what it does not say. It contains none of the bellicosity of The Thanksgiving Sermon,’ or Palmer’s other secession-era occasional sermons. What is

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84 Ibid. The Spring Resolution introduced a crisis of conscience, as is noted in several of the protests registered against it at the General Assembly. It was a live question as to whether loyalty belonged to the Federal Government, or whether the individual states were, in effect, the ‘home country’ of their citizens. The view of many in the South favoured the latter. Thus, in pledging loyalty to the Federal Government, one would be disloyal to his homeland, and perhaps forced to take up arms against it.

85 B. M. Palmer, ‘The Church a Spiritual Kingdom’, in Memorial Addresses Delivered Before the General Assembly of 1886 (Richmond, VA: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1886), 52–53 Palmer wrote, ‘Never was there a clearer usurpation by the Church of the prerogative and function of the State. The Supreme Court at Washington could not have pronounced a more judicial interpretation of the Constitution. It undertook to settle the question which had divided the statesmen of this country from the beginning, as to where sovereignty resided, and to whom the allegiance of the citizen was primarily due. This was a question which the Church, from her very nature, was incompetent to discuss; and which, by her express law, she was inhibited from entertaining. This point, purposely left undetermined by the framers of the Constitution in 1787, because it could not be authoritatively decided, was not only determined by a church court, but that decision was bound upon the conscience of her entire constituency throughout the land.’
more, Palmer did not define or defend the spirituality doctrine, though such would have been germane to the occasion. Rather, he extolled Christ’s universal kingship over the nations, and the invincibility of the church even as nations fall. Indeed, the only comment Palmer offers that has any political sentiment is an encouragement for the Confederacy to embrace Christianity. He said, ‘Let us take this young nation now struggling into birth…and seal its loyalty to Christ…The footsteps of our King are to be seen in all the grand march of history, which begins and ends in a true theocracy.’

Later, he would lament that this had not happened. Whatever Palmer’s allegiance to the spirituality doctrine, it did not preclude him urging the church to petition the state to declare itself Christian.

Shortly after the close of the war, efforts to bring the Northern and Southern churches began on both sides. Palmer would voice his opposition over the course of several decades. In Palmer’s mind, there were many issues in the Northern church that precluded the desirability of reunion namely doctrinal laxity, the ecclesiastical equality of African Americans, and statements made during the war about the sinfulness of the Southern rebellion. Chief among these issues was the spirituality of the church, which Palmer called ‘the first barrier to union.’ Writing in 1887, Palmer admitted that, ‘Northern Presbyterians by no means deny the spiritual nature of Christ’s Kingdom as an abstract doctrine.’ The difference was a matter of interpretation. The Northern church, Palmer contended, viewed the patriotic exigencies of the hour as having superseded that commitment, ‘A higher law suspended the operation of the lower, rendering consistent legislation which trampled upon the letter.’ Moreover, the Northern church, for the twenty years since the war, had defended such actions as ‘just and proper.’ Thus, the Southern church, in the mind of Palmer and his co-signatories, remained ‘separated

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86 Palmer, ‘The Opening Sermon of the First General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, 4 December 1861’, 261.
from the Northern by no lingering resentment of the war, but by a principle for which, in
the Providence of God, she was solemnly appointed as a witness.’\(^{87}\)

Here we see another application of Palmer’s view of providence and purpose, not
here applied to a nation, but rather a denomination. How Palmer divined to what
purpose God had appointed the separate existence of a Southern church he does not say,
but nonetheless the purpose assigned to it by providence was to safeguard the
spirituality doctrine. The Southern church understood that she was ‘restrained by her
organic law from intermeddling in the affairs of Caesar.’ The church had ‘other and
higher functions than those assigned to the state— that as a non-secular and non-political
body, the line is to be clearly drawn between herself and the Commonwealth, which no
sophistry shall be allowed to obscure.’\(^{88}\) If the Southern church surrendered on these
points, she would ‘surrender her testimony we have been called to bear as the true
nature of Christ’s kingdom upon earth.’ Palmer did have a somewhat nuanced view of
the Northern church’s political pronouncements:

They at the North...accept the general truth as to the Spiritual nature and
functions of the church, albeit with a wide margin of interpretation; so that
whenever politics shall arise into the sphere of morals, it is brought fairly within
her jurisdiction. It does not seem to occur to them that every question which
touches man in his social relations, has necessarily a moral side and that the
principle avowed by them...sweeps everything into the domain of the Church.’\(^{89}\)

We note, however, that the Southern church itself had declared just such a
distinction in its ‘Address to all the Churches’, saying that it was the church’s duty to
commend what was right in public life, and to condemn that which was evil.\(^{90}\) Here,
Palmer said just the opposite. It is not difficult to discover where scholars get the idea
that the doctrine itself was so malleable as to be without meaning, and merely served as
a way of justifying the status quo. Palmer does not give even a hint that he saw a

\(^{87}\) Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘An Open Letter to the Members of the Southern Presbyterian Church’, The
South-Western Presbyterian 19, no. 29 (18 August 1887): 1–2.

\(^{88}\) Ibid., 1.

\(^{89}\) Ibid.

\(^{90}\) Thornwell, ‘Address to All Churches of Christ’.

potential problem in his position. The Southern church had found it impossible not to
intermeddle in worldly affairs because it was bound up in the midst of them, particularly
in its justification of slavery and secession, not to mention Palmer’s personal pulpit
pronouncements before and during the war. Earlier Thornwell and Palmer had
indicated that they did not object to a church encouraging loyalty to a government, only
to which government a church urged that loyalty, and they had done so on the basis that
such commendations are found in the New Testament itself. Here, Palmer said that all
such church pronouncements are at odds with the church’s spiritual mission. Whatever
the reasons of the Old School divines, they were successful in their efforts to thwart
reunion between the Northern and Southern churches until late in the twentieth
century.

C.) Palmer’s Political Preaching

Politics were not part of Palmer’s regular Sabbath preaching, which was in accord with
his convictions about the spirituality of the church. As we have seen in previous
chapters, however, his public preaching to various groups was another matter. In his
half century of ministry in New Orleans, only three times did he preach political sermons
in his own pulpit: the ‘Thanksgiving Sermon’ of 1860, the ‘Address to the Crescent Rifles’
on Sunday Morning, 26 May 1861, and the ‘Century Sermon’ of 1 January 1901.91 His
words demonstrate that he believed this to be a deviation from his normal method.
Palmer preached a bellicose sermon to the Crescent Rifle Division as they departed New
Orleans for battle. He noted that Christianity was a religion that proclaimed ‘Peace on
earth, good will towards men’, and yet under some circumstances, Christianity lent its

91 Palmer, ‘Thanksgiving Sermon’; Palmer, ‘Address before the Crescent Rifles, on Sabbath Morning, May
Day of the New Year and Century in the First Presbyterian Church, New Orleans, LA., at the Request
of Citizens, and Members of the Church, of Which He Has Been Pastor Since December 30, 1856’ (The
Brotherhood of the First Presbyterian Church, 1901).
blessing to ‘the propriety of war.’ He picked for his text Psalm 144:1a, ‘Blessed be God, which teacheth my hands to war.’ Employing his simple hermeneutic, Palmer contended that, as God had equipped David to fight a holy war, so he had this regiment. He sounded the familiar notes equating abolitionism with atheism, and Lincoln with Charles I. The sermon is not so notable for its content as for a conscious setting aside of an apolitical pulpit. Unlike Palmer’s other wartime sermons, given in arguably secular contexts, he proclaimed this from his pulpit, within the confines of his church, on Sunday morning. Palmer was not unaware of the shift; to him, the exigencies of the hour demanded it. He had said in the Thanksgiving Sermon, ‘I sincerely pray God that I may be forgiven if I have misapprehended the duty incumbent upon me to-day; for I have ascended this pulpit under the agitation of feeling natural to one who is about to deviate from the settled policy of his public life.’92 The truth, however, is that Palmer’s policy in this regard had never been settled. In 1853, he wrote an article concerning the supposed theocratic designs of the young Mormon Church:

To a philosophic observer, probably the most striking feature of Mormonism is, the attempt to realise the conception of a Theo-democratic government...The fundamental postulate...that God is the true Governor of nations, and the best administration is that which most perfectly conforms with the Divine will, is one of the most unquestionable and sublime truths ever enunciated.93

Palmer here agreed with the Mormon Church on the principle of theocracy, although he believed it to be impractical in reality. In 1860, he called for the Confederacy to acknowledge Christ’s Lordship.94 Earlier, he had argued for a strict separation of the

92 Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The South: Her Peril, and Her Duty. A Discourse* (New Orleans: Printed at the office of the True witness and sentinel, 1860), 6 Palmer’s Biographer Thomas Cary Johnson notes that ‘The divisive consequences which usually flow from political preaching were not wanting...indeed [Palmer] is said to have repented preaching the discourse’ Later, he wrote, ‘The preaching of political sermons and the discussion in religious papers of political questions, by Old School divines, was ominous. ; *Life & Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer*, 223 & 239. Johnson, himself an Old School Southern Presbyterian professor, obviously took a dim view of Palmer’s deviances.


church from matters of social reform, either by influencing the government or by involving herself in moral crusades.\textsuperscript{95} By 1872, he told another congregation,

I am exceedingly jealous for the honour of the church as the Divinely appointed institute for the renovation of society. Laudable as the motives may be which lead us to attack special forms of vice, and charitable as the disposition is which constructs agencies for the relief of suffering and want, these fail utterly to probe the sores which fasten upon our social system. ...If others have a faith in these nostrums greater than I am able to command, I am silent, so long as the attempt is not...to lessen confidence in her as the true and only reliable instrument for the reformation of morals.\textsuperscript{96}

Despite this, Palmer involved himself in two great public moral crusades, two of which we take up presently.

\textbf{III. Palmer on Moral Reform in Society}

Palmer believed that the Church not only ought to be mute on political matters but also that it ought not to involve itself in moral reform movements. Earlier in his life, Palmer had been active in temperance efforts, but he later believed such had been in vain.\textsuperscript{97} Despite this, Palmer lent his support, as a gospel minister, to two great reform movements in New Orleans. Palmer protested that he maintained his commitment to the spirituality of the church, because he was involved in these enterprises as a private Christian citizen, and did not enlist the support of his church. It seems dubious, however, that any who read or heard Palmer address these issues would categorise him as anything other than a spokesman for his faith, and using his clout as prominent pastor to influence legislation.


\textsuperscript{96} Benjamin Morgan Palmer, \textit{An Address at the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Organization of the Nazareth Church and Congregation in Spartanburg, S. C.} (Richmond, VA: Shepperson & Co., Printers, 1872), 34.

\textsuperscript{97} Palmer, ‘Lay Evangelism and the Young Men’s Christian Associations’, 361.
A.) The Sabbath Observance League

The Sabbath Observance League was formed in 1882 as a combined effort of Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, to urge the observance of the Sunday Sabbath.\(^{98}\) Although the League did not favour Blue Laws, the state legislature passed a Sunday Closing Law in 1886.\(^{99}\) Palmer spoke of the League in a sermon he preached on 14 January 1883, entitled ‘Signification and Obligation of the Sabbath.’ Palmer claimed that it was formed to arouse ‘the attention of our fellow-citizens by persuasion and argument, without resorting to those legislative measures by which individual liberty may be restrained.’\(^{100}\) The League was formed to sway public sentiment towards ‘a better observance of the Sabbath’ because they believed that the Sabbath was a gift, and could not be profaned without harming the community or individuals.\(^{101}\) For Palmer, the issue was one of social justice. He noted that the inequities of life between capital and labour were a fixture of human existence. Yet, for those in the lower classes, even though their servitude ‘may not be in the severe form of slavery,’ these ‘children of toil’ ought to ‘welcome the Sabbath, which blots out for a little moment these artificial distinctions, and brings the whole race to equality before God!’\(^{102}\) Palmer who had believed in an inescapable social stratification, here called such divisions ‘artificial,’ and argued that a generally-observed Sabbath was a token of the essential equality of capital and labour in the eyes of God. In this, he said, the Sabbath was a foretaste of Heaven, where all such

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\(^{101}\) Ibid., 13.

distinctions ceased. Even more so, the Sabbath was a blow against unchecked capitalism:

The Sabbath is commended to our special care, because assailed by combined forces in the day in which we live. The insane passion of men for the accumulation of wealth, denounced even by heathen moralists as the accursed lust for gold; the sensuality which would appropriate its leisure for the indulgence of its lusts; the infidelity which, as in the French Revolution, would destroy the Sabbath as the bulwark of Christianity; and above all these in the sweep and power of its influence, the greed of soulless corporations, pleading the necessities of commerce for the obliteration of this sacred landmark of time from the beginning: all these seriously threaten the existence of this holy day even in this Christian land in which we live.'

Here is one place where Palmer, the champion of progress, saw its danger. The migration from farm to factory had come late to the South, and Palmer saw in it bane as well as a blessing. Far from granting the labourer more rest, it increased his toil. It should be noted that this sermon was preached in 1883, and indicates that Palmer’s understanding of social stratification softened with advancing age. In younger years, Palmer had viewed social stratification as God’s will; here, it appears as a lamentable fact of human existence. It would not be a feature of the eternal kingdom, and God had intervened into the present fallen world to mitigate its ill effects.

Because the League membership spanned Protestants, Catholics, and Jews, the observance of the Sunday Sabbath was regarded with great latitude. Interestingly, the League urged those who employed ‘servile labour,’ to grant their household staff Sabbath rest. Palmer, who elsewhere championed technological progress, decried the toll it had taken on the observance of God’s Law by the broader society. Despite what Palmer had said in the 1883 sermon, elsewhere he did enjoin the church bringing pressure to bear on the civil government regarding Sabbath legislation. He wrote, ‘If the Church as such appears on the arena and carries the cause through her influence and

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103 Ibid., 163–64.
104 Ibid., 162.
government, then the door is open to wider evils than this from which she seeks to escape...But what she cannot undertake in her organized form she may accomplish through her members as citizens of the Commonwealth.’ Once again, this appears to be a rather fine delineation without explanation. On the spirituality of the church, Palmer was conflicted. He regarded the separation of the church from the political life of the nation as an important principle. He had often spoken in its defence and excused his inconsistency when he was untrue to the principle. When it comes to his practice, however, he simply could not avoid the temptation for the church to seek to influence public policy, even if indirectly by encouraging its members to exert influence on their legislators. Even when Palmer protested he sought only to influence public behaviour and not legislation, eventually that resolve gave way. This was perhaps nowhere more noticeable than Palmer’s influence in the push to decommission the Louisiana State Lottery.

B.) The Anti-Lottery League

The Louisiana State Lottery was a massive private concern located in New Orleans, exercising great influence in public life. The idea of a publicly chartered, privately-held lottery had a long history in Louisiana. First Presbyterian Church itself had requested one to pay off its building debt in 1822. In 1868, a group of investors applied to the Reconstruction legislature for a lottery charter. It offered to support a children’s hospital for $40,000 per year and was given a state monopoly for twenty-five years. After initial failure, its stock increased by 3,500 percent in eleven years. At its height, the market value of its stock was more than twice the banking capital in the entire state. The lottery broadened its market to the entire country. Its charter was to expire on 1 January 1894,

and the Anti-Lottery League was organised in New Orleans in 1890 to fight against its renewal. John Smith Kendall reported,

> The anti-lottery campaign opened at a great mass meeting in New Orleans, at the Grand Opera House at which Rev. B. M. Palmer made an address which was one of the turning points in the struggle. The effect of this single oration was electrical. There are many who believe that it decided the issue of the campaign. However, whether it did or not, it must be counted as a factor which affected notably the final result.¹⁰⁷

Nor was he the only one to report the magnitude of Palmer’s influence. Likewise, Palmer had written to anti-lottery Governor Francis T. Nicholls lauding his opposition to the lottery.¹⁰⁸ The result is that the lottery re-charter, which had been put to a public vote, was defeated, and the company disbanded. Though there were many forces at work, Palmer’s influence in this effort cannot be denied. His opponents had significant financial resources and public clout. This is the clearest example of Palmer bringing his pastoral influence to bear on public policy. In addition to his individual efforts in the Anti-Lottery League, he lent his efforts to a presbytery petition to the federal government to propose a constitutional amendment outlawing the lottery.

The response was enthusiastic to Palmer’s extemporaneous remarks at the anti-lottery rally of 25 June 1891. The next day, Rabbi Isaac Leucht told a companion, ‘Mr. B., you had better draw out of the lottery. It is doomed…Dr Palmer has spoken.’ The speech was not greeted with universal acclaim, however. The *New Orleans Times-Democrat* called it ‘at once sophistical and incendiary.’ The article asserted Palmer’s speech was ‘full of false assumptions, misleading analogies, unsound deductions, and vehement denunciations, which with thinking people, will rob it at once of any value it may have otherwise possessed.’¹⁰⁹ One newspaper editorial went so far as to state, 'Such glaring inconsistency...warrants all fair-thinking people in doubting and challenging the quality

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of [Palmer's] Christianity. Is Dr Palmer a Christian?” Eubank notes that in this foray into the political arena late in life, Palmer was attracting public hostility that he never had before experienced. If it were a concern of the proponents of the spirituality of the church that the reputation of Christ and his church would be sullied if it ventured into the political arena, Palmer’s experience here might validate such. In private correspondence, however, Palmer seemed quite satisfied with the response of the press:

I knew of course that I was going to strike with a mailed hand, but I did not know it would prove so ringing a blow. The Pro-Lottery Press in our City have been on a regular howl ever since; to which I listen with incredible satisfaction, as revealing the central spot where they are to receive their death-wound. The speech has spread over all the country; and I am receiving letters, two or three a day, from the far North asking for a copy of the same...The Mail of yesterday brought me a stinging letter from your sister, Mrs Morris, seven sheets long. If she could only know how much pain it gives us, to give pain to her: and that to her, and personally to her husband there is no feeling in our hearts but that of kindness –and I may add, of admiration for many noble natural traits which we recognise beneath the disguise of this vicious system inherent in the bald Materialism avowed by him as his only faith...As you well say, however, truth and conscience before every thing else.

These two cases provide an interesting counterbalance to Palmer’s general understanding of providence that what is, is also what ought to be. For Palmer, this view did not hold true in all circumstances. There was wrong in the world that needed to be opposed and set right. We will see this likewise in Palmer’s advocacy on behalf of Eastern European Jewish refugees in the next chapter. The question is whether this is merely inconsistency on Palmer’s part, or rather that his view of providence was a matter of convenience, upholding those social institutions and historical realities that he found congenial, and opposing those he found to be immoral. The evidence tends to favour the latter. These instances appear to be exceptions to Palmer’s overall understanding.

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111 Ibid., 15.
C.) The Spirituality of the Church in Palmer’s Understanding and Practice

The question before us is in what sense did Palmer believe in the spirituality of the church if he often and prominently involved himself in the public arena? At least in the case of the lottery, Palmer’s understanding of the doctrine was that the church and the public Christian must speak if the issue is one of morality. He asked the question as to ‘whether it is competent to any state in the union to commit suicide.’ In other words, he believed that a publicly chartered lottery was essentially the undoing of government itself. He went on to liken a legal lottery to a syndicate to propagate leprosy, or a university founded to persuade the citizenry of the ‘great advantage of lying and of stealing.’ His essential point was that there were certain activities, proper to the functioning of ordered society, that the people and their legislators did not have the right to legalise. To do so was to destroy the very fabric of society: "Is there a legislature in the land, or any people in themselves in convention assembled who would not immediately recognise that in chartering such an institution, they simply dissolve the state?" When we consider the content of the speech in light of the overture of the presbytery to outlaw the lottery, it shows that Palmer believed the church must petition the state to act in a matter of grave moral concern, especially one that threatened the existence of the state itself.

The more consistent spirituality adherents saw its inherent difficulty: the church ought to avoid pronouncements on civil matters because to make such pronouncements was to bind the consciences of members in matters about which there may be legitimate disagreements. In theory, Palmer agreed with that sentiment; in practice, he violated it. He excoriated the Northern Church for its supposed intermeddling in public affairs, but the Northern church likely did so because it viewed the issues at stake as of supreme

moral importance. Southern Presbyterian public theologians merely chose a different list of issues. That they did so calls into question whether what many of them believed was their cardinal distinctive actually existed at all. One might argue that it did exist for Dabney and the border state pastors, who were far more consistent than Palmer was. Yet, the very fact that the border state pastors noted the inconsistency of their Carolina brethren serves to prove the point. In reality, there was no separation of the church from the public life of the nation in the thinking of Thornwell and Palmer. The mystery, then, is why Palmer adhered to such a doctrine at all, let alone upheld it as the chief distinctive of his particular brand of Presbyterianism. It would appear far more congenial for Palmer to have adopted E. T. Thompson’s position that the church was duty bound to make political pronouncements, the position that carried the day in much of twentieth century Southern Presbyterianism.114

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have sought to understand the Southern Presbyterian doctrine of the spirituality of the church. After defining the issue and examining its history in brief, we looked at the various ways it was formulated by Southern Presbyterians. We noted the differences between Thornwell and Palmer, on the one hand, and Dabney and the border state pastors on the other. We noted that the former advocated a Christian state, while the latter opposed any alliance between Christianity and the government. We noted the inherently confusing nature of Palmer’s position, and posited that the best way to understand Palmer was through the lens of S. T. Coleridge’s view of a clerisy that held two distinct functions: one of which was religious, and the other of which was as a purveyor of cultural values and memory, sometimes called a public intellectual. We noted that Palmer, like others of his era, functioned in the ‘secular’ arena as a Christian,

whilst maintaining, if only in his own mind, a distinct separation between his clerical and public roles. We noted how Palmer saw himself as an interpreter of providence, able to cast current events in light of God’s overall purposes, and that this position inherently fused religion and public life. We then noted how neither Palmer’s particular view of providence did not hold true on certain matters: Southern secession, national allegiance, the Sabbath, and the lottery.
Chapter 7:  
The Providential Role of Race  
in the Public Theology of B. M. Palmer

‘They have seen the Bible through slave-holding spectacles; and have interpreted Hebrew words by European and American practices. Successful commentators prove by their very success that they are more or less the exponents of the sentiments of the age in which they wrote.’\(^1\)

–Rev. Jonathan Blanchard, 1845

In this chapter, we examine how B. M. Palmer’s view of race moulded his public theology. We will consider how his philosophical and theological commitments affected his view of race, paying particular attention to Palmer’s view of social structures, as this highlights how he believed that God’s providence provided different historical roles for various races.

Because Southern slavery was enmeshed with white racial supremacy, we will examine Palmer’s understanding and defence of the institution. We will also examine whether and how his understanding of the role and prospects of the black race changed in light of the abolition of slavery. We will also examine Palmer’s unique understanding of the Jewish race, in light of his efforts to settle Russian Jewish refugees in America. In light of Palmer’s racial sentiments, we will examine how he believed the races ought to interact.

I. The Framework for Understanding Palmer and Race

Although today we rightly find Palmer’s racial views abhorrent, they were shared by many in his time and place. We must note, too, that these opinions were not the unique

province of Southern white elites, but many in the North, and in Europe, shared them.² The distinction between Palmer and these others, however, was Palmer’s advocacy of race-based slavery.

A.) The Superiority of the Anglo-Saxon, English, American, and Southern People: ‘The Claims of the English Language’

Palmer esteemed the ‘Anglo-Saxons’, White, Protestant, English-speaking peoples, above all others.³ God had given them the providential charge to lead the world in civilisational development. Palmer argued that English had taken a leading place among languages, a God-ordained means of cultural dominance:

All history will confirm the observation which has been made, that at every period some one nation or race takes the lead so pre-eminently that its superior influence cannot be disputed...the emergent race, which is now for centuries to wield the destinies of the human family, is that Anglo Saxon, speaking the English which we boast as our mother tongue...Where shall the limit be set upon this heroic people?...England and America, sweeping the seas with their universal commerce, enriched by the proud discoveries made in every science, adorned with every art, ennobled by the freedom of their political institutions, and stimulated by the zeal which Christianity inspires, must long maintain themselves as leaders in our modern civilisation.⁴

Palmer argued that the English language itself expressed the character of Anglo-American culture:

English... represents a race bold, daring, and abrupt, full of enterprise, driving on to its aim with an outbursting energy which no obstacles can bind...the English language... presents in varied attitude the great indwelling Saxon race: worthy of profoundest reverence, for picturing thus the noblest people that ever lived for noblest ends upon the earth.⁵

Palmer is straightforward in his hubristic sentiment that his people are superior and thus providentially destined to rule the age, and the globe. Palmer does not appear to

⁵ Ibid., 308.
have considered the fact that the Saxons were German in origin, not English. The Anglo-American culture Palmer trumpets contained many Scots-Irish and other cultural influences. It appears that Palmer tried to find intellectual and Biblical support for the cultural ascendancy of the planter class. For Palmer, perceived reality had once again become a moral imperative. The people destined by God to rule over others were very much like him.

There was, however, a burden that came with superiority. The discrete peoples within Palmer's larger 'Anglo-Saxon' classification each had its providential mandate. In the case of the American South, Providence entrusted the care of the black race to them in slavery:

If then the South is such a people, what...is their providential trust? I answer that it is to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of domestic slavery as now existing. It is not necessary here to inquire whether this is precisely the best relation in which the hewer of wood and drawer of water can stand to his employer...Still less are we required, dogmatically, to affirm that it will subsist through all time. Baffled as our wisdom may now be, in finding a solution of this intricate social problem, it would nevertheless be the height of arrogance to pronounce what changes may or may not occur in the distant future...I simply say, that for us...the duty is plain of conserving and transmitting the system of slavery, with the freest scope for its natural development and extension.

According to Palmer, the South's unique divine charge was to perpetuate race-based slavery. Freed from the shackles of its European past and Yankee tyranny, it had its moment to flourish.

B.) The Development of the Southern Slave Society

Southern support of slavery was not neither static nor universal. Slaveholding Thomas Jefferson had argued for its abolition, and included an abolitionist clause in The Declaration of Independence; the Second Continental Congress removed it. Palmer's

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denomination passed a strongly worded anti-slavery resolution in 1818, which it never rescinded. It stated that slavery was ‘a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature...totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ’, and called upon its members ‘to increase their exertions to effect a total abolition of slavery.’ 9 Early Southern Presbyterians like John Holt Rice supported the gradual abolition of slavery. 10 Anti-slave societies were prevalent in the South. As slavery became immensely profitable, however, and slave uprisings frightened slaveholders, its defenders grew more strident. The heightened sectional tension between North and South over self-determination for newly formed states added to the conflict. 11 Southern slavery became more deeply entrenched until slavery became the defining feature of Southern public life. 12 Southerners felt their way of life was under attack, and they would rise to defend it, first in print, and then by force of arms.

C.) Why Defend Slavery?

Many theories exist as to why Southern thinkers felt the need to defend their ‘peculiar institution.’ Slavery found many of its most ardent defenders among the Southern evangelical clergy. 13 James Silver and H. Shelton Smith intimate that this is because

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10 Rice wrote in a letter in 1799 that he favoured ‘a rational plan for the gradual abolition of slavery: and do it under the influence of religion and conscience, without any regard to law.’ In ibid., 313.
11 The Missouri Compromise of 1820 forbade slavery for any US territory north of the 38° 30′ parallel, Missouri excepted. The Kansas-Nebraska act of 1854 effectively reversed this ban, allowing territories the right of self-determination as to whether to be slave or free. In 1857, the Supreme Court, in the Dred Scott v. Sanford decision, ruled the Missouri Compromise unconstitutional.
13 Mitchell Snay rightly analyses thus: ‘Sanctifying the cause of slavery was the most visible and perhaps the most important contribution religion made to the emergence of Southern nationalism.’ In ‘American Thought and Southern Distinctiveness: The Southern Clergy and the Sanctification of Slavery’, Civil War History 35, no. 4 (December 1989): 311; Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese point out that ‘southern theologians cannot be understood either as corrupt cynics who capitulated to the material interests of their congregations, or as reactionaries who unquestioningly accepted traditional notions of the subordination...of labouring people. Rather, the southern theologians as a group figured as serious and soul-searching participants in the heated and intersecting debates of their era: What should be the relation between religion and society? What should be the relation between theology and modern knowledge, from political theory to science?’ ‘The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society’, The Georgia Historical Quarterly 70, no. 1 (1 April 1986): 3.
churches were simply shills for the extant social order, justifying the privilege of elite white society.\textsuperscript{14} We note, however, that the clergy did take on moral evils and challenged some aspects of the slave society, such as anti-literacy laws and the breakup of slave marriages. They chose to defend slavery because they believed the Bible did.\textsuperscript{15} In their minds, those who attacked slavery also attacked other orthodox Christian doctrines.

It would seem that Southerners began to defend slavery more vociferously just as the rest of the Western world came to the conclusion that slavery was unjust. By and large, these rationalisations developed as a response to the increasing pressure from the abolitionists’ moral crusade.\textsuperscript{16} The issue is more complex than it at first appears, however. Some argue they were seeking to soothe their guilty consciences.\textsuperscript{17} Others rightly find that approach overly psychological and lacking in evidence. If the Southern intellectuals were ‘protesting too much’ regarding the defence of slavery, none ever admitted it. John Patrick Daly suggests that slaveholders felt isolated from the cultural mainstream, and sought to convince others that they belonged to the modern world by a scholarly justification for their way of life.\textsuperscript{18} This assertion is not wholly without merit. Many Southern intellectuals were educated in the North, however, and were sought after for Northern faculties. Southerners were part of the intellectual life of the nation as a whole.\textsuperscript{19} Others assert that the slaveholders sought to maintain an anti-capitalist


\textsuperscript{15} ‘One should not assume that Southerners who insisted that slavery was a moral institution were insincere. For people usually believe their own arguments, especially when they are in accord with both economic interests and other political and social values.’ Thomas Virgil Peterson, \textit{Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South} (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1978), 37.


\textsuperscript{19} Charles Colcock Jones, Sr. (1804-1863), notable for his evangelistic work among slaves, owned three plantations in coastal Georgia, held numerous slaves, and was head of domestic missions for the Old School church, headquartered in Philadelphia, from 1850-1853.
past, over and against the industrialist and financially speculative present. This view discounts just how wealthy the planter, trading, and banking classes grew under slaveholding. Jack Maddex differs, asserting that ‘proslavery Christianity was a conscientious religious expression of class ideology.’ He argues this explains Christian defences of slavery ‘better than does the longstanding hypothesis that it was a superficial defensive argument devised by theologians who, at heart, shared the “American” libertarian norms.’

Drew Gilpin Faust dismantles all these theories, and instead asserts that the Southern intellectual class shared an embarrassment over the South’s perceived intellectual deficiencies, and sought to create a coherent worldview, which ‘served simultaneously to affirm traditional values and to provide a means for advancement in an increasingly dynamic modern world.’ Palmer and his contemporaries were looking for stability amid a changing world, assurance that they were right, that God was on their side, and history belonged to them.

Whatever his motivations, Palmer defended slavery stridently and vociferously, because he believed it was Scriptural. As abolitionist writers pointed out, however, slavery could not be defended in the abstract, otherwise, one might be justified in selling one’s children into slavery. It had to be predicated upon the inherent inferiority of the black race, and its suitability for enslavement. The latter point had to be made because Native Americans were also regarded as an inferior race, but had proved unsuitable

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21 Jack P. Maddex, ‘“The Southern Apostasy” Revisited: The Significance of Proslavery Christianity’, in *Religion and Slavery*, ed. Paul Finkelman, vol. 16, *Articles on American Slavery* (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989), 140 Maddex goes on to argue that his assertion, ‘especially in its Marxist form, promises to make the whole subject more comprehensible’, but fails to demonstrate how. If proslavery Christian intellectuals we’re simply cynical propagandists for the status quo, it seems likely such would show up in their private correspondence with one another, if not in their public writings.


23 Leviticus 25:44-46, Ephesians 6:5, 1 Timothy 6:1-2, etc.

slaves, in part because it remained possible for them to escape to their tribes. The
Southern argument became, in large part, that they should enslave Africans merely
because they could.

The justification of slavery was thus an argument created to legitimate a pre-
existing reality. No one had to argue that establishing slavery might be a social benefit
because slavery already existed. They were thus left to establish the divine mandate for
slavery's continued existence, and how it had served as a social good, one of Palmer's
dominant themes.

D.) God's Plan for the Black Race: 'The South Carolina Discourse'

'Three-fourths of all the Presbyterians, in eleven States "hold slaves for gain."'25
--Rev. Jonathan Blanchard, 1845

B. M. Palmer was coming of age as sectional tensions began to escalate. He would lend
his efforts to the rationalisation of slavery as an institution, and of the enslavement of
blacks in particular. In time, Palmer would give voice to the sentiment of many Southern
Christians when he argued it was the God-given burden of white planters to care for
black slaves because the slaves could not care for themselves.26

Palmer addressed the South Carolina legislature on 10 December 1863, after he
had been forced to flee New Orleans. He asserted that the black race had never
flourished when they achieved freedom, but rather always deteriorated back into ‘its
native condition of fetishism and barbarism...degradation and imbecility.’ 27 If blacks
had developed moral traits, they had only done it ‘in the condition of servitude.’ When

    and Slave a Sinful Relation?,* 62.
26 Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *Slavery a Divine Trust: The Duty of the South to Preserve and Perpetuate the
    Institution as It Now Exists* (New York: George F. Nesbitt & Co., Printers, 1861); ‘When...people believe that
the nature of man is essentially corrupt, they do not seek societal answers to problems of good and evil,
but...seek to maintain institutions that control the sinful nature of man. And white Southerners believed
that the institution of slavery controlled the sinful predispositions of the black race’. In Peterson,
*Ham and Japheth*, 16.
27 Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *A Discourse before the General Assembly of South Carolina on December 10,
1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and Prayer* (Columbia, SC: Charles P.
Pelham, State Printer, 1864), 13.
slaves were freed, they were changed ‘instantly from productive labourers into the most indolent and squalid wretches to be found upon the globe.’ Not only that but blacks had flourished under slavery, becoming ‘the happiest and...the freest operative class to be found in Christendom.’ As reprehensible as these comments are, they are not particularly novel. Many of these arguments had been put forth by earlier Southern theologians like John Holt Rice. To Palmer’s mind, the rigorous control of black men and women enabled them to live productive and happy lives. Apart from such control, they were degraded and self-destructive by nature.

Palmer went on to make the well-worn argument that providence had provided the environment for winning many black souls to Christ:

It is also beyond dispute that a larger number of slaves at the South are in the communion of the Church of Christ, and have been made partakers of the blessings of the gospel, than is furnished in the returns of missionary labour by all the branches of the Christian church taken together, over the whole surface of the globe.

Moreover, since slavery had reached its divinely sanctioned apex in the South, it ought not to be surprising that the South was attacked by the forces of infidelity:

Whilst slavery has existed in every variety of form through the whole tract of human history, it has been reserved to our times to beat up a crusade against it under precisely that patriarchal form in which it is sanctioned in the Word of God.

Slavery was thus a benevolent institution:

My individual belief is, that servitude...is the allotted destiny of this race, and that the form most beneficial to the negro himself is precisely that which obtains with us; where...he is a regular member of the household, and is protected alike by the affection and by the interest of the master.

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid.
Based upon all this moral reasoning, Palmer concludes defiantly, 'I am not in the least appalled by the apparent unanimity with which the voice of Christendom protests against the lawfulness of slavery, and pronounces it both a heresy and a crime.'\textsuperscript{34} Even granting latitude for rhetorical flourish, Palmer’s last statement is staggering. It gave him no pause, he said, that the voice of the church universal declared slavery ‘a heresy and a crime.’ Palmer dismissed such arguments as unworthy of interaction, which was easy enough for him to do because he viewed them as heterodox on matters such as the full divinity of Christ, or Calvinist particulars.\textsuperscript{35} Here, however, he dismissed the universal voice of the church, which was a more far-reaching claim.

Palmer was not mistaken in noting that other Christians, even in his ‘Anglo-Saxon’ world, viewed his position as abhorrent. English-speaking Protestant Christendom was nearly univocal on this point. There were many abolitionists who shared Palmer’s Calvinist convictions, including the Irish and American Covenanters, both the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland, and pre-eminent English Calvinistic Baptist preacher Charles H. Spurgeon.\textsuperscript{36} Alexander McLeod was noteworthy among Old School Presbyterian abolitionist voices. He rose to prominence through extensive involvement in abolitionist causes, and his arguments were in wide currency.\textsuperscript{37} In 1802, he published his work, \textit{Negro Slavery Unjustifiable}.\textsuperscript{38} Palmer, who had been educated at abolitionist Amherst College in Massachusetts, would have been

\textsuperscript{34} Ib., 13–14.

\textsuperscript{35} Cf. for instance Genovese and Fox-Genovese, 'The Religious Ideals of Southern Slave Society', 9; Laura Rominger, 'The Bible, Commonsense, and Interpretive Context: A Case Study in the Antebellum Debate over Slavery', \textit{Fides et Historia} 38, no. 2 (Summer / Fall 2006): 36, 49.

\textsuperscript{36} Daniel Ritchie, 'Radical Orthodoxy: Irish Covenanters and American Slavery, circa 1830-1865', \textit{Church History} 82, no. 4 (December 2013): 812–47; C. Duncan Rice, \textit{The Scots Abolitionists, 1833-1861} (Baton Rouge, LA and London: LSU Press, 1981), cf. esp 121-150 Rice points out that the issue in the Free Church became complicated when it accepted money from American slaveholders and their churches, which were sympathetic to the Free Church’s cause. Cf. also George Shepperson, 'The Free Church and American Slavery', \textit{The Scottish Historical Review} 30, no. 110 (1 October 1951): 126–43.


\textsuperscript{38} McLeod, \textit{Negro Slavery Unjustifiable: A Discourse} (1802).
aware of the arguments contained within the book. McLeod made the argument that, though the Bible did indeed allow for a sort of slavery, it was not the type practised in North America. Southern slavery was criminal because it was ‘man-stealing,’ explicitly condemned by Exodus 21:16. The Bible envisioned indentured servitude to pay debts or make restitution for a crime, McLeod contended, but not for slavery built upon kidnapping of human beings from their homes. Old Testament Israel had been allowed to enslave its enemies, but this was not a general precept for all people and all time, nor was it predicated upon racial inferiority. ‘The slaveholder never had a right to force a man into his service, or to retain him without an equivalent. To sell him, therefore, is...to dispose of that for money, to which he never had a right.’ To steal an individual’s labour, or his person, was a violation of the eighth commandment, and thus a crime.

The indictment went further, however. McLeod argued that slaveholding was also a heresy because it denied the fullness of the image of God in human beings based upon solely upon the colour of their skin. He argued, ‘The inferiority of the blacks to the whites is greatly exaggerated.’ In a footnote, he added, ‘There is no reason to suppose the blacks destitute of mental powers...the Negroes...are as intelligent and active as their masters.’ Every human, regardless of intelligence, had the right to be his or her own master. The slavery apologist had a faulty view of what the Bible taught about human dignity.

We would not be supplying a complete picture of Palmer if we neglected to note that he believed that blacks were fully human, made in God’s image, with immortal souls capable being redeemed by Christ. This, however, did not preclude him ranking the

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39 William Seymour Tyler, *History of Amherst College During Its First Half Century, 1821-1871* (Springfield, MA: C. W. Bryan, 1873), 245–50 Tyler reports that Palmer was there just as abolition grew into a huge controversy on campus.


41 Ibid., 22.

42 Ibid., 23.
races regarding relative superiority, nor enslaving those perceived to be inferior.\textsuperscript{43} Palmer wrote,

\begin{quote}
Among the methods of fixed separation between these original groups was the discrimination effected by certain physical characteristics...so broadly marked in their respective types, as to lead a class of physiologists to deny the unity of human origin. I certainly believe them to be mistaken in this conclusion, and firmly hold to the inspired testimony that 'God hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth.'\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Many in the South had welcomed Louis Agassiz's polygenesis theory, which argued that blacks were a sub-human species because it provided a strong apologia for slaveholding. The Southern Old School Presbyterians stood uniformly opposed to it.\textsuperscript{45} If the Southern Presbyterians had been merely interested in upholding slavery, the idea of blacks being sub-human would have served their cause.\textsuperscript{46} Their strong denial of sub-human origins for blacks shows that their Biblical convictions could trump their blind defence of the slave society. McLeod contended that even this concession was contradicted by them treating other races as inferior: how could anyone regard a co-image bearer of God as inferior? It is curious that Palmer never mentions these arguments, let alone answers them. Invariably he targeted his answers at those whom he regarded as heterodox abolitionists.

\textsuperscript{43} Not everyone was so sanguine about the message of Southern Presbyterians. 'Many slaves viewed the other-worldly pronouncements of white preachers as nothing more than a means of social control to avert their eyes from a hope of justice in this life toward some vague hope of a world to come after death.' Dickson D. Bruce, Jr., 'Religion, Society and the Culture in the Old South', in \textit{Religion and Slavery}, ed. Paul Finkelman, vol. 16, Articles on American Slavery (New York and London: Garland Publishing Inc., 1989), 402.


\textsuperscript{46} Robert Lewis Dabney is representative of the view that all races descended from Adam: 'The unity of race in the human family has been much mooted by half-scholars in natural science of our day, and triumphantly defended...I would merely point out, in passing, the theological importance of this natural fact. If there are men on earth not descended from Adam's race, then their federal connection with him is broken...The warrant of the Church to carry the Gospel to that people is lacking; and indeed all the relations of man to man are interrupted as to them...Unity of race is necessary to relation to the Redeemer.' In \textit{Systematic and Polemic Theology} (St. Louis: Presbyterian Publishing Company of St. Louis, 1878), 292; Cf. also Peterson, \textit{Ham and Japheth}, 4.
Palmer believed that, since the slave was an inheritor of God’s image, and inferior to whites, it was the Christian Southerners’ burden to deal with their slaves benevolently. They was to care for them because they could not care for themselves.\textsuperscript{47} God had providentially entrusted them to him. Such a view does not take into account the cruelty inherent in the slave system itself.\textsuperscript{48} We must not overlook the milieu in which Palmer lived. Louisiana had more free black citizens than Mississippi, South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama combined. Moreover, many of Louisiana’s free black citizens were wealthy and educated; the majority of others were employed in skilled trades. Only ten per cent were classified as common labourers and some had even entered the planter class.\textsuperscript{49} If Palmer had desired a broader body of data, such abounded in the city around him, more so than anywhere else in the South. He nowhere accounts for this reality, however and he is silent about his surrounding environment.\textsuperscript{50} His ‘scientific’ induction has excluded information that might change his pre-determined conclusion that blacks were inferior and that it was the white race’s providential duty both to care for and tightly control them.

Though Palmer makes the Biblical ‘paternalistic’ argument for slavery as both a system of social organisation and a benevolent institution towards an unfortunate race, he did not shy away from stating the advantages of slavery in starkly materialistic terms:

\textit{The argument which enforces the solemnity of this providential trust is simple and condensed. It is bound upon us, then by the principle of self-preservation, that ‘first law’ which is continually asserting its supremacy over all others. Need I

\textsuperscript{47} B. M. Palmer, \textit{The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects} (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1991), 123–44 Palmer said that the paternal duties of masters were: 1.] An adequate provision for the servant’s maintenance, 2.) to exercise authority in such a way as ‘to remove, as far as possible, all irritation from servitude’, and 3.] supplying religious privileges.


\textsuperscript{50} ‘Attitudes of the slaves and free Negroes reflected the unusual scope of freedom they enjoyed [in New Orleans]...In 1806 the legislature...adopted a statute forbidding free Negroes and slaves from presuming themselves “equal to the white.” Seldom has a law been more universally disregarded.’ In Fischer, ‘Racial Segregation in Ante Bellum New Orleans’, 930.
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 labour 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 our entire social fabric? That these slaves form parts of our households, even as our children; and that, too, through a relationship recognised 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 civilisation?\footnote{Palmer, ‘Thanksgiving Sermon,’ 7–8.}

Eugene D. Genovese and Elizabeth Fox-Genovese have argued convincingly that the South was a true slave society. The South did not merely practice slaveholding, rather, its entire social fabric was built upon slavery, and the justification for slavery formed the centrepiece of its intellectual life.\footnote{Elizabeth Fox-Genovese and Eugene D. Genovese, *The Mind of the Master Class: History and Faith in the Southern Slaveholders’ Worldview* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.} Such a thought is borne out by Palmer’s comments here. Those who view Palmer solely as a propagandist for the status quo would be justified in viewing these comments as evidence for their case. He is here emphasising that economic advantage was a primary motivator for Southern slaveholding: without its slaves, the Southern planter class would lose its wealth, prominence, and entire way of life. Gone are the reassurances that slavery is best for the slave, or that it is a mild and benevolent institution. Certainly Palmer here mentions that a slave is a member of a household, but one bought and sold.\footnote{Palmer, *The Family, in Its Civil and Churchly Aspects*.}

**F.) Palmer and Friedrich von Schlegel**

Many of Palmer’s arguments for enslaving blacks were based on induction: simple observation convinced him that African culture was primitive, and slaves showed the same characteristics.\footnote{‘The descendants of Ham...in whom the sensual and corporeal appetites predominate, are driven like an infected race beyond the deserts of Sahara, where under a glowing sky nature harmonises with their brutal and savage disposition.’ Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *Our Historic Mission: An Address Delivered Before the Eunomian and Phi-Mu Societies of La Grange Synodical College, July 7, 1858* (New Orleans: True Witness Office, 1859), 5.} Palmer could not see that the dehumanising nature of slavery,
including the break-up of families, forbidding slave children to be educated, the arduous
nature of the work and the lack of the incentive of fair compensation might be more
reasonable explanations for those conditions, rather than inherent racial inferiority. The
culture Palmer lauds as superior may have produced in the very deficits for which
Palmer faults the black population.

Palmer credited Friedrich von Schlegel [1772-1829] for developing his thought
about the ‘non-historic’ nature of African culture.\textsuperscript{55} Palmer’s reading of Schlegel,
however, is suspect. It is likely he admired Schlegel for attempting a Christian, inductive,
scientific, and ‘conservative’ providence-based philosophy of history. Beyond that,
however, Schlegel provided no fodder for Palmer’s view of the degraded abilities of
black Africans and their descendants. Schlegel insisted that ‘The expression \textit{races}...
applied to man, involves something abhorrent from his high uplifted spirit, and debasing
to its native dignity.’\textsuperscript{56} He argued that ‘primitive’ races were no more savage than the
warfare conducted by the ‘civilised’ Western nations, a position opposed to Palmer’s
halcyon view of the West.\textsuperscript{57} Schlegel’s take on the ‘Curse of Ham’ was that it fell, not on
the black race in particular, but upon all Africa, including Egypt.\textsuperscript{58} It was a false religion,
not a doomed race, that accounted for that curse.

Likewise, Schlegel critiqued the ‘might makes right’ doctrine by which Palmer
lived, questioning whether the powers of nations ‘gifted with universal dominion...were
truly divine, or what were the earthly and pernicious elements intermixed with it.’ He
noted that hegemonic power ‘great and wonderful as it was in its way,’ was inadequate

\textsuperscript{55} Frederick von Schlegel, \textit{The Philosophy of History}, trans. James Burton Robertson (London: George Bell
and Sons, 1883); Palmer, \textit{Our Historic Mission: An Address Delivered Before the Eunomian and Phi-Mu
Societies of La Grange Synodical College, July 7, 1858}, 3; Palmer, \textit{A Discourse before the General Assembly of
South Carolina on December 10, 1863, Appointed by The Legislature as a Day of Fasting, Humiliation, and
Prayer}, 7.

\textsuperscript{56} Schlegel, \textit{The Philosophy of History}, 92.

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 93.

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 206.
to civilise humanity. For Schlegel, civilisation could only be advanced by spiritual persuasion, while Palmer believed it could be advanced by the sword.

By the most generous of assessments, Palmer’s grasp of Schlegel was superficial. Schlegel greatly valued the Chinese, Jewish, and Islamic cultures, which Palmer viewed with contempt. Schlegel documented their successes, while pointing out where the nominally Christian cultures of the West fell short of the Christian ideal, a nuance Palmer lacked. We see the greatest difference between Palmer and Schlegel in Schlegel’s vehement denunciations of slavery and the denigration of individuals based on class and race. Schlegel believed that modern Christian states had superseded those of classical antiquity based on emancipation and the extension of rights to all classes. Schlegel’s theological anthropology held that the image of God in humanity entitled blacks to far more dignity than Palmer granted. According to Palmer, the amount of dignity afforded to others was dependent upon their race more than on their creation in the image of God.

Schlegel likewise had a high estimation of black Africans as a race, using them as a paradigm of good character, who ‘as well from his bodily strength and agility, as from his docile and in general excellent character is far from occupying the lowest grade in the scale of humanity.’ Here, Schlegel’s view stood in complete opposition to Palmer.

G.) The Curse of Ham

According to Palmer, besides their ‘natural’ disadvantages, and not being a ‘historical’ people, black slaves operated under the disadvantage of the ‘curse of Ham’ in Genesis 9.

59 Ibid., 21.
62 G. W. F. Hegel makes a similar argument to Schlegel’s in The Phenomenology of Mind.
64 Schlegel, The Philosophy of History, 92.
Ham had looked upon his father Noah’s nakedness, and Noah, in return, cursed the progeny of Ham’s son, Canaan, to be a race of slaves. The curse was also employed to argue for the Christian European’s ‘eclipse’ of the Jews and their religion. The curse of Ham view had held currency long before Palmer utilised it. It was one of the arguments McLeod raised against racial inferiority. In Genesis 9, the curse falls, not on Ham, but on his son, Canaan, who was the father, not of black Africans, but of the occupants of Palestine. Palmer merely assumed that Ham was the father of black Africans and that the curse that falls on Canaan devolved to them.

Thomas Virgil Peterson and Stephen Haynes explore the curse of Ham in depth. Haynes singles out the curse as the controlling feature of Palmer’s thinking on the subject of race. He traces Palmer’s use of the curse of Ham through the American founding, secession and the postbellum segregation era. As critics of Haynes’s work have noted, Palmer only invoked Noah’s curse a few times, only during the Civil War, and never during his nearly four decades of public life afterwards. Palmer’s noted ‘Thanksgiving Sermon,’ wherein he argues that the South’s historic mission was to perpetuate Southern slavery, doesn’t reference Noah’s Curse at all. Elsewhere in Palmer’s thinking, Haynes conflates Noah’s curse and Palmer’s principle of separation,

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65 The curse of Ham/Canaan is found in Genesis 9:22-27, ‘And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him, he said, “Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his brothers.” He also said, “Blessed by the Lord my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave. God enlarge Japheth, and let him dwell in the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave.”’ (ESV) Arguably, the author of Genesis is making a polemical point about the native dwellers of the land of Canaan, whom Israel was to extinguish, not about dwellers in far-off sub-Saharan Africa.

66 Thomas Virgil Peterson explains the history of this myth and its development in depth in his *Ham and Japheth*.


but Palmer’s point there was not racial inferiority but rather an argument against any one nation growing too large and hegemonic. In fairness to Haynes, he does mention other sources of influence upon Palmer’s thought, particularly Realism, honour, and order, though neglects the concepts of providence and progress that dominated Palmer’s writings. He also neglects to mention Palmer’s address to black educators on Coloured Education Day at the World’s Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans, in 1885. In that discourse, Palmer appeared to have shifted away from his former view of racial inferiority.

H.) Palmer and the Black Race After the War

The surrender of the Confederacy and the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution brought an end to slavery, but also inaugurated a new segregation of the races. Although more ethnically diverse than most other U. S. cities, New Orleans had a long history of segregated public facilities and transport. After a brief respite under Reconstruction, this pattern continued unabated late into the twentieth century. Palmer was an ardent supporter of segregation, believing it to be beneficial for both races. He said,

> The true policy of both races is that they shall stand apart in their own social grade, in their own schools, in their own ecclesiastical organizations, under their own teachers and guides; but with all the kindness and helpful cooperation to which the old relations between the races and their natural dependence on each other would naturally predispose.

For Palmer, the best way to cope with the new reality was to keep it as much in line with the old order as possible:

> It is enough for me, however, that slavery is now abolished. And from a large acquaintance with the views of my own people, I can truthfully say that I do not know an intelligent and thoughtful man, Christian or otherwise, who desires its renewal. It could not now be imposed upon the Southern people, except against

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their most vigorous protest; as it was imposed in the first instance, more than a hundred years ago...If permanent evil shall accrue from the change, we know precisely where to fasten the human responsibility, and if you are disposed to glory in your record on this subject, we are by no means dissatisfied with our own.\textsuperscript{72}

Writing ten years after the war, Palmer desired to exonerate the South for any blame in slaveholding. He contended that it had been imposed on white Southerners by force, and they had done the best they could with it. Now it had been taken from them by force, and, were this to bode ill for the future, it was the solely the fault of the Northern aggressors. Palmer’s reading of past Southern history is without justification. Though slavery was not confined to the South during the colonial era, nobody had forced anyone to hold slaves. Here Palmer’s desire appears to be to exonerate the South both for holding slaves and for what may happen because slaves were emancipated. Palmer’s usual view of Providence is strangely omitted.

I.) The Ecclesiastical Inequality of African-American Christians

'We cannot shut our eyes to the fact that on the subject of the Negro the mass of Northern people has been going wild for half a century; and, therefore, to-day, when the Negro is in a position to be more an element of disturbance than ever, this is the one subject which we cannot trust the Northern Church to discuss for us ...We know the Negro, and he knows us. There is not one of that race who does not confide in the unswerving truthfulness with which we have always dealt with him; and to-day the word of a Southern man goes further with him than the word of any other man.'\textsuperscript{73}

-B. M. Palmer

After the cessation of hostilities, Southern Presbyterians were divided on how to regard their dwindling black membership. Should black Presbyterians be entitled to hold office in the church, serve as clergy, and be full voting members of congregations? J. M. P. Atkinson, president of Hampden-Sydney College in Virginia, along with border state pastor Thomas Peck, argued that blacks ought to be given full equality and that all

\textsuperscript{72} Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 'Dr. Palmer’s Reply to Dr. H. A. Nelson of Geneva, N. Y.', \textit{The South-Western Presbyterian}, 30 September 1875, 1–2.

church offices ought to be open to them.\textsuperscript{74} John L. Girardeau argued that black members ought to be given limited authority within their congregations, under the oversight of white congregations, with the white ruling elders of the overseeing congregation representing them in the higher courts.\textsuperscript{75} Palmer ardently opposed both proposals.

Palmer’s opinions on the position of black Christians within the Southern Presbyterian church were clearly laid out in a minority report he penned in response to actions of the 1887 General Assembly, which had voted to establish closer relations with the Northern Church. Palmer argued that matters of race were ‘an insuperable barrier to union.’ He based his argument in the fragmenting of human languages at Babel, asserting that any movement to ‘amalgamate’ the races was sinful:

\begin{quote}
In all instances where the Caucasian stock has crossed with the others –as when the Latin families, with a feebler instinct of race, have intermingled with the people whom they found in Mexico and in portions of South America –the result has been the production of a stock inferior in quality to both the factors which sunk their superior virtues in an emasculated progeny.\textsuperscript{76}
\end{quote}

He contended that this was why the Southern European powers had lost control of their colonies, and Northern Europeans had taken possession of them. Moreover, the ‘Anglo-Saxon stock’ refused ‘to debase [its blood] by intermingling with inferior races’ and had thus ‘preserved its power and to this day dominates vast empires in which it has planted its banners.’ Once again, Palmer fell back into a version of his providential ‘might makes right’ argument. World domination vindicated both Anglo-Saxon Protestantism and racism, even within the church.\textsuperscript{77}

Palmer feared black Americans assuming power in the church because they were prone to ‘crude superstitions and fantastic usages.’ He maintained that the Northern church simply did not understand the nature of African-Americans because they


\textsuperscript{76} Quoted in Johnson, \textit{Life & Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer}, 472.

\textsuperscript{77} Quoted in ibid.
comprised only a small percentage of the Northern population. There the ‘far superior...intelligence and virtue’ of white Presbyterians would keep the superstitious black Presbyterians from asserting their baleful influence. The danger to the South was far greater, for it was ‘easy to see how, with a view to ecclesiastical subjugation, Negro churches could be multiplied of infinitesimal proportions packing our courts with Presbyters of that race to whom the entire Church would be in hopeless subjection.’

For whatever reason, the numbers of blacks in Presbyterian churches had always been minuscule.

The thought that blacks would ever join the Presbyterian Church in such numbers as to take over the denomination is highly suspect. Therefore, it is unsurprising that, as these debates dragged on over fifteen years, the few black Southern Presbyterians were either organised into a separate denomination or sought the shelter of the Northern church. Palmer’s great fear was ‘amalgamation’ and ‘miscegenation’:

How can the two races be brought together in nearly equal numbers in those confidential and sacred relations which belong to the ministry of the Word without entailing that personal intimacy between ministers and people which must end in the general amalgamation of discordant races? We simply hint at evils which we do not desire to discuss in detail: the mere suggestion of them will put the readers of this paper upon their own line of reflection, filling out the argument to its due proportion.

Palmer hints at the great fear of black men defiling the virtue of white womanhood, and diluting the purity of white racial stock. Aside from blatant fear mongering, his sentiment here begs the question: hadn’t this relationship existed among the races before the War when there were substantial black memberships in all the Southern denominations that would have entailed the same intimacy between ministers and

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78 Quoted in ibid., 473.
79 It seems possible that the Baptists and Methodists held more appeal for black Christians for the same reasons they became popular among white Christians, namely because neither required formal educational training for ministers, thus making the planting of churches easier. It is possible that Wesley’s opposition to slavery formed some of Methodism’s appeal, though Southern Methodists departed from their founder’s convictions on slavery.
80 Quoted in Johnson, Life & Letters of Benjamin Morgan Palmer, 473.
people? Palmer has left any semblance of a Biblical defence for separate ecclesiastical entities, and plunged himself headlong into the peculiar sort of racism that argued that black Christians were morally, as well as intellectually, inferior to white Christians.

McLeod’s arguments that such are foreign to the tenor of the New Testament apply here. In Galatians 3:28, the Apostle Paul had written, ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ The very sort of ethnic gaps that the early church arguably had tried to eradicate Palmer argued needed to be maintained.

Despite all of this, Palmer argued that Southern Presbyterians wished the black population well, desired their advancement in education and in the means of making a living. He also insisted that white Presbyterians desired the spiritual welfare of the surrounding black population. It was the fault, not of white, but of black, Presbyterians that circumstances turned out as they had:

At first, we hoped to hold him in connection with us in our churches, as in the old-time were accustomed to worship together in the House of God. We were slow in coming to this ground when, under the race instinct, he demanded a church and ministry of his own; and now, there is no sacrifice of toil of means which the Southern Presbyterian Church will not gladly make, to bring the race to which he belongs to be ‘joint heirs with us’ among the sons of God. And we are convinced that the policy of a separate church organisation, which the Negro was the first to demand, is the only policy which is practical or possible in the relation which the two races now hold to each other.81

No matter how much Palmer might protest his good intentions, there is no record that he ever acted upon them. Moreover, the Southern church as a whole gave scant attention to the needs of black Presbyterians in the decades following the close of the War, nor did it ever fund the establishment of a separate black Southern Presbyterian denomination.82

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81 Quoted in ibid., 474.
Some of those who shared Palmer's doctrinal convictions and Southern roots stood ardently opposed to the segregation of the church, most notably, Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield [1851-1921], the pre-eminent Old School Presbyterian theologian of his era. Beginning in 1885, Warfield belonged to the Presbyterian Board of Missions to Freedmen. He believed that the church alone held the answer to the social ills that arose with the sudden arrival of a new Southern social order, and nothing less than complete integration would accomplish this. Moreover, the New Testament demanded the erasure of all lines of race and class within the walls of the church. To deny this, Warfield believed, was to sacrifice the teaching of the New Testament to the social mores of the times. Bradley Gundlach contends that Warfield was countering Dabney's racial arguments, although Warfield never named him. Palmer never directly answers these sorts of arguments from his coreligionists. He may just have written them off as more Yankee propaganda.

Closer to home, however, Palmer had the example of New Orleans Roman Catholic Parishes. New Orleans was a majority Catholic city, and Palmer enjoyed cordial relationships with his Catholic counterparts. New Orleans Catholics had been great supporters of the Southern cause, and the diocese held slaves. Their parishes, however, were completely integrated, all members receiving communion from the same chalice. Whatever differences Palmer may have had with Catholic doctrine, he maintained cordial relationships with Catholic clergy, and yet he nowhere remarked upon this

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84 Gundlach, Bradley J., ”Wicked Caste”; Warfield, Biblical Authority, and Jim Crow’, 137.
phenomenon. In the annals of post-war Southern Christianity, however, Roman Catholicism was the sole exception to the reign of Jim Crow.86

Even after the War, Palmer held a halcyon view of what slavery had been, far removed from its brutal reality. Certainly, he occasionally decried the abuse of slaves, but he could not have been unaware of the horrors of the slave market.87 In both Charleston and New Orleans, the domestic slave market occupied a prominent place in the midst of the business district. New Orleans was the United States’ largest slave-trading centre.88 Palmer, to our knowledge, never spoke against slave trading. Rather, he noted that, from time to time, abuses did occur, but that this happened in the Northern factory and every social situation. Slavery's abuses did not negate the validity of the institution itself. Slavery was the ideal social arrangement, practised in its most enlightened form in the American South, and it would form the bedrock of any social progress.

J.) ‘Address…at Coloured Education Day’

The fiery sentiments of Palmer’s protest were not his only thoughts about the welfare of blacks in the wake of emancipation. In his ‘Address…at Coloured Education Day’, Palmer argued that he was interested in helping to find a way to elevate ‘an entire people to as high an intellectual and moral plane as can be done.’89 Although he believed in ‘the instinct of race,’ and saw the maintenance of distinct racial boundaries in the pages of Genesis, he contended that ‘Providence has brought you out as a people and as a race, and put you on this exalted platform to work out your own history and career. I say,

86 ‘Jim Crow’ was the government-sanctioned system of oppression of black Americans.
from the depths of my breast, a hearty "amen" to it all." Here Palmer credited providence for abolition, and he notes he has come to assent to God's will in freeing the slaves. He goes on to urge his African-American auditors, 'If you are to be a historic people you must make yourselves worthy of a history', and then asks, 'What are to be the agencies by which you are to rise to a historic position among the nations of the earth?' What he says next is intriguing: 'when you develop the qualities that are in you, and form a character upon which that history is to be built, unquestionably, according to the appointment of Him who rules the universe, you will have your own orbit described for you.' Palmer here credited the black race with innate virtues that would allow them to develop into a mighty civilisation and noted God had a unique role for them to play. It might be tempting to paint Palmer’s sentiments as those of a dominant white majority that was now washing its hands of any accountability for the development of black culture. On the contrary, Palmer wrote, 'I take the full share of responsibility upon myself.' He continued, ‘If there are any two classes who should be perfectly friendly one to the other, who should rejoice in their mutual advancement and prosperity, they are the Southern whites and the negroes of America.’ Intriguingly, he went on to argue that, among different peoples of the same race, like the French, Germans, and English, that there were vast distinctions of culture. Despite all his earlier pronouncements, the elderly Palmer did not count himself as competent to judge why this might be. He argued that Black American culture would add to this rich melting pot a distinctive voice of its own if it dedicated itself to three great institutions: the home, the church, and the...
Given the occasion of his speech, he focused his attention on the schools, noting that generosity has made possible ‘the higher class of schools’ for African Americans and their children. He did wonder why so much had been given to more advanced schools, ‘and not a little more lower down in the scale of literary development.’ He did not develop this comment further, although he went on to praise the formation of ‘technical schools.’ It may be that Palmer was simply noting that it was unreasonable to expect a group of people to rise from illiteracy to the heights of learning in one generation, or it may be Palmer’s prejudices against black intellect again peering through. Whatever the case, he concluded his speech, ‘in all your efforts to advance yourselves...you have the very heartiest sympathy and co-operation of all wise and thoughtful men upon the face of the earth.’

Clearly, these were the words of a man who believed that racial segregation benefited both races and that black and white Americans were separate peoples with distinct cultures. As we have noted, however, such a position did not yet carry the stigma of violence and injustice that would later prove endemic to the Jim Crow system of legal segregation. Palmer retained some of the old paternalism, but gone is the language of inferiority, of slavery, and of any curse of Ham. The elderly Palmer came to conclude that the black race has just as much chance as any to add to the progress of history.

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94 Ibid., 131.
95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
II. Palmer and the Jews

‘At the sacred shrine of his memory let me say that I believe that it is eminently due to the life and influence of Dr Palmer that a deep, religious peace reigns in our midst.’

--Rabbi Isaac L. Leucht

Perhaps uniquely among Southern Presbyterians of his generation, B. M. Palmer gave a great amount of thought to the history and character of the Jews, which provides an interesting contrast to his thoughts upon the black race. Later in life, he would reveal a deep love of both Jewish acquaintances in New Orleans and suffering Jews in Europe. We do not know with certainty where Palmer developed this affinity for the Jews. It seems likely that Palmer saw his Jewish clerical counterparts in New Orleans being outspoken Southern partisans, despite their foreign and Northern origins, that inspired his confidence to join with them on crusades for Sunday Sabbath observance and the end to the Louisiana Lottery. In turn, his fondness for his Jewish friends, as well as Christian concern for the Jewish people, would lead him to lend his credibility to rescuing Eastern European Jews from the pogroms of the latter nineteenth century.

A.) B. M. Palmer and the Jewish Character

‘The Love of gold, we know, has wretchedly rusted into the soul of the Jew.’

--B. M. Palmer

In Palmer’s early life, his thoughts about Jews were far less cordial. In 1838, the Church of Scotland appointed a committee to study the conditions of Jews worldwide. Palmer wrote an extended reflection on the committee’s findings, expressing disappointment that the report did not provide an analysis of the Jewish character. Palmer set out to undertake ‘an examination of the fixed character of the Jew, both intellectual and moral:

99 Ibid., 33.
and to penetrate, if we may, the causes which have stereotyped it in its present mould.\textsuperscript{100} Palmer noted that the Jewish people have ‘an almost superhuman tenacity’ because they existed without a land, survived dispersion and persecution, and inhabited nearly every region of the earth.\textsuperscript{101} Despite this, the Jews retained both a cultural and religious identity, even when living amidst Christian or Islamic cultures.\textsuperscript{102} Palmer maintained that this was forged into the Jewish character by their times of enslavement in Egypt and Babylon. He noted that, in the Providence of God, since the Jews had been the guardians of true religion, that particular role became infused in their character, and they retained it even after God’s providential purpose had ceased.\textsuperscript{103} Noah’s curse in Genesis 6 said that Japheth would dwell in Shem’s tents. This meant that Christian Europe would be the beneficiary of the kernel of true religion, released from its Jewish husk.\textsuperscript{104} Still, that husk was resilient. The essence of Judaism had changed so that it could survive the destruction of the Second Temple and the cessation of sacrifices. Palmer believed that, when Rome destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple and forbade Jews from settlement or pilgrimage, Judaism might well have ceased, but the rabbinic schools arose and successfully altered Judaism to centre around synagogue and identity markers like kosher regulations.\textsuperscript{105} The Jews, Palmer said, had a vital connection to their history, shown by their veneration of the patriarchs and the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{106}

Palmer was thus not universally negative in his assessment of the Jewish character but noted what he saw as its endemic shortcomings. The prime defect of the Jews, in Palmer’s mind, was their ‘incorrigible worldly-mindedness, and consecration to the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 34. \\
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 35. \\
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid., 40. \\
\textsuperscript{105} Palmer, ‘Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews, from the Church of Scotland, in 1839. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1845 (Book Review’), 41. \\
\textsuperscript{106} Ibid., 44.
\end{flushright}
service of Mammon.’ He noted that ‘the Jew has been, by profession, a money broker, often exacting a rate of interest which neither reason nor conscience can justify.’ He noted that ‘this extortion has been united with a genuine misanthropy,’ which was part of the reason Jews were despised.\(^{107}\) Palmer quickly added that persecution of Jews was in no way justified by Jewish misbehaviour. Palmer believed the Jews had become avaricious because of the constant threat of loss, and their restless industry. He went on to note that, though Jews charged usurious rates, it was understandable because of the regular confiscations of property they had historically experienced. He asserted that Jews were less prone to crime or vagrancy than most other races, and were a highly moral people. These bald assertions once again illustrate Palmer’s racism: he supplies no data to support his claims.

We note here that Palmer is employing his familiar sociological method, determining the character of a whole people by the actions of some, via the inductive method. Jews engaged in commerce in Western and Islamic societies, but multitudes of them were poor peasant farmers in Eastern Europe, a fact that was inconvenient to Palmer’s argument and was thus omitted.

Palmer maintained that, because the Jews were an energetic people, but did not have a place in which to build a civilisation, they had turned to banking and commerce; they were not fitted for spiritual or intellectual reflection.\(^{108}\) Palmer’s sheer prejudice is showing through here, as he sweeps aside almost two millennia of Jewish scholarship as having added nothing to human progress. He noted that the Hebrew mind was defined by ‘its activity and its shallowness. Acute but superficial – these terms sum up the whole.’\(^{109}\) He maintained that the only Jews who accomplished anything in the cultural

\(^{107}\) Ibid., 46.
\(^{108}\) Ibid., 49.
\(^{109}\) Palmer, ‘Narrative of a Mission of Inquiry to the Jews, from the Church of Scotland, in 1839. Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1845 (Book Review)’. 
sphere were ‘men who had emancipated themselves from the trammels of Judaism’, such as Mendelssohn or Spinoza. The Jews had always been in letters, as in trade, mere carriers. They can acquire and exchange the products of mind as well as of matter and realise a profit upon both... They coin nothing...It is impossible that a Locke, a Newton, a Bacon, a Milton, or a Shakespeare could ever have been a Jew –or rather it is impossible that a Jew should ever be any one of these.

According to Palmer, Jews profited from the ideas of others in the same way they profited in commerce. He reasoned that the Jewish mind was seared by its resistance to the truth of Christianity. From the report of the Scottish commissioners, Palmer had drawn the conclusion that Jews could not ‘follow a long argument. They do not feel the power of this syllogism.’ Palmer, who elsewhere derided the syllogism as having imprisoned scientific advancement for a millennium, here said, ‘Not to understand the syllogism the argues imbecility of reason.’ These are staggering claims to make and without any foundation in reality. Palmer offered no empirical argument for his conclusions; they are nothing other than sheer prejudice.

Palmer concluded by noting that he is satisfied that he has avoided ‘the unkind anathemas which for ages have been fulminated against (the Jews).’ He called upon his readers to love the Jews and to pray and long for the day that they would recognise Jesus of Nazareth as their Messiah. Whatever the deficiencies of their character, all would be rectified by owning the truth of Christianity.

In 'The Influence of Religious Belief upon National Character', he contended that the Jew had a bitter hatred of others, because of his exclusion from society. He wrote,
‘Shakespeare has hit this off with great truthfulness in the character of Shylock, who, after all, is not so much an individual as the impersonation of his people.’\textsuperscript{116} He quoted Shylock, “I am a Jew. If a Jew wrong a Christian what is his humility? Revenge: if a Christian wrong a Jew, what should his sufferance be by Christian example? Why, revenge.’\textsuperscript{117} It is a curious thing to caricature a race based upon words put into the mouth of a Jewish character by a Gentile playwright: ‘Here is portrayed to us not more the avarice of the usurer, than the petty vindictiveness of the injured Jew.’\textsuperscript{118} He concluded that ‘all the leading traits of the Hebrew national character, its exclusiveness, its elasticity, that active and supple cunning, may be traced to the influence of their religious sentiments combined with their peculiar circumstances.’\textsuperscript{119}

B.) Palmer and the Jewish People Later in His Life

Nineteenth-century New Orleans had a thriving, prominent Jewish population. Southern Jews, largely Germanic in origin, had achieved a high level of acceptance in Louisiana society. In Palmer's day, New Orleans boasted several thriving Reform Jewish synagogues, whose rabbis occupied prominent places in New Orleans society, perhaps because of the assimilationist impulse in Reform Judaism.

Reform Judaism sought to accommodate Jewish worship and practices to the broader culture, holding services in English, sometimes on Sunday mornings. It shared in the theological progressivism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\textsuperscript{120}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[116] Ibid., 16–17.
\item[117] Ibid., 17.
\item[118] Ibid.
\item[119] Ibid.
\item[120] 'Nineteenth century Reform Jews saw themselves as rational, enlightened, “modern” people and defined their faith in terms that meshed will with the premises of the European Enlightenment. Reform Jews...embraced the idea of progress and developed a liberal messianic understanding of world history compatible with that of postmillennial, progressive Protestant eschatology...Both liberal Christians and Reform Jews saw themselves as committed to embracing scientific discoveries...This embrace ultimately included acceptance of the higher criticism of the Bible.' Yaakov Ariel, ‘Jewish Liberalism through Comparative Lenses: Reform Judaism and Its Liberal Christian Counterparts’, in \textit{American Religious Liberalism}, ed. Leigh Eric Schmidt and Sally M. Promey (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2012), 272.
\end{footnotes}
This is crucial to understand, because, while Palmer certainly embraced the notions of progress and science, he ardently opposed liberalising trends in his tradition. Despite this, Palmer enjoyed remarkable friendships with leading Reform rabbis in New Orleans, James K. Gutheim, Isaac L. Leucht, and Max Heller, joining forces with them on several civic crusades.\textsuperscript{121} Bobbie Malone calls Palmer Heller’s mentor, presumably in matters related to public theology.\textsuperscript{122} Palmer was thus a model of civic engagement to other clergymen. The kinship between Palmer and these rabbis was so strong that Palmer spoke at Gutheim’s funeral, as Leucht would later speak at his. Palmer said,

\begin{quote}
[Gutheim was] the incarnation of virtue and religion...This is a kind of gospel which men easily understand, for while they may fail to read the black letter of our different schools of philosophy, or even to interpret aright the dogmas of a religious creed, these are instantly comprehended when translated into the daily actions of a pure and virtuous life.\textsuperscript{123}
\end{quote}

Palmer’s philo-Semitism bears close examination because it was a unique commitment for an Old School Presbyterian clergyman of his time. It also serves as a potential counterpoint to his negative assessment of other races. Dispensationalist Protestants supported Zionism because they believed Jews played a prominent role in their premillennial eschatology. Palmer, however, did not share that eschatological view. A Jewish tribute to Palmer said that his close friendship with rabbis and the Jewish community was

partly founded upon his Puritan reverence for the Old Testament and the ancient Hebrew polity (on which he wrote a learned disquisition, partly upon the special regard in which he was held by the Jewish population, some of whose observant and loyal members were among his regular attendants.)\textsuperscript{124}

The last clause bears note. Apparently, there was a group of Jews, who had not converted to Christianity, but who were regular attenders of Palmer’s sermons. Scott

\begin{itemize}
  \item\textsuperscript{121} This relationship is explored at length in Langston, ‘Interaction and Identity: Jews and Christians in Nineteenth Century New Orleans’.
  \item\textsuperscript{123} \textit{The New Orleans Times-Democrat}, 15 June 1886.
  \item\textsuperscript{124} \textit{Jubilee Souvenir of Temple Sinai, 1872-1922} (American printing Company, Limited, 1922), 32–34.
\end{itemize}
Langston credits it to an overriding American assimilating spirit, 'Being an American meant...looking past distinctions raised by religion. In other words, Palmer's status as an American helped keep his claims of Christian superiority in check.'\textsuperscript{125} While American toleration may provide some explanation for Palmer’s cordiality with the Jewish community in New Orleans, it did little to mitigate his Christian superiority sentiments. Palmer held, at least earlier in his life, that Christianity had superseded Judaism, and that the Jewish race had not contributed much to the progress of humanity. Despite this, it seems a more likely explanation that Palmer had an affinity for the Jews because he saw Christianity’s roots drinking deeply from their long Jewish heritage.\textsuperscript{126} As a Reformed Christian, Palmer viewed himself as standing in a line of continuity with the covenants YHWH made with the Jews, as they were recorded in the Hebrew Bible.\textsuperscript{127}

Palmer inherited the goodwill from the longstanding cordial relations between Presbyterians and Jews in New Orleans. Before Palmer’s pastorate, when the First Presbyterian Church faced foreclosure, Jewish philanthropist Judah Touro had stepped in to save the building. Later, Rabbi Max Heller would offer his synagogue when First Presbyterian was undergoing restoration. The Jewish community also had high regard for Sylvester Larned, who had founded First Presbyterian in 1817.\textsuperscript{128} The Jewish community held Palmer in remarkable esteem. Temple Sinai paid him great tribute in its fiftieth anniversary commemorative volume. It included a full page photograph of him with the inscription ‘For two generations our foremost citizen.’\textsuperscript{129} They noted,

The commanding figure in this gallery of spiritual and civic guides was, by universal admission, Dr Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a pulpit orator of the highest

\textsuperscript{126} Cf. for instance Matthew 5:17-19; John 5:46-47; John 8:56.
\textsuperscript{127} Reformed Christianity believes that God deals with humanity in a successive series of covenants. While YHWH had made the ‘covenant of grace,’ with Abraham, thus establishing the Jewish people, Reformed Christians believe that the essence of that covenant was, ‘and (Abraham) believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness’ (Genesis 15:6), and that this was promised to believers in Christ. This is sometimes called covenant theology. Reformed Christians thus perceive themselves as standing in the line of the promises God made to the Jews.
\textsuperscript{128} Jubilee Souvenir of Temple Sinai, 1872-1922, 32.
\textsuperscript{129} Ibid., 31.
distinction, a theologian of clear-cut convictions, an eager student of history and literature. His dealings with the Jewish community deserve to stand side by side with Judah Touro’s enlightened acts of religious brotherliness, as shining examples of interreligious respect and sympathy.\textsuperscript{130}

They noted that both Temple Sinai and Touro Synagogue marked Palmer’s seventy-fifth and eightieth birthdays with presentations and addresses. After a streetcar injured Palmer in 1902, the Central Conference of American Rabbis, then meeting in New Orleans, rose to silent prayer for his recovery.\textsuperscript{131} Upon his subsequent death, Temple Sinai issued a tribute that read,

> We had looked upon him, for many decades, as our eminent exemplar of earnest and enlightened citizenship. At every crisis in the destinies of our city and state he had spoken out boldly and powerfully for the aspirations of the patriot, for the conscience of the citizen. We had learned to love him as a great teacher of religious toleration and unsectarian humanity. To him the voice of faith was a call unto peace and love; in his large heart difference of conviction could never trench upon the titles to brotherhood. We reverenced him as a true minister, a humble and sincere servant of the most sacred of callings. We honoured his deep piety, his genuine spirituality, as an inspiration to religious living, as an influence that made for the higher life in all who knew him.\textsuperscript{132}

They went on to note that \textit{The New Orleans Times-Democrat} editorialised that this tribute

> brought home to the people of New Orleans the fact that there is in this cosmopolitan community less religious bigotry and more religious breadth of view than exists perhaps in any other large urban centre on this continent. It emphasised the point that American recognise true manliness and useful citizenship without distinction of nationality and creed.\textsuperscript{133}

Rabbi Leucht spoke at Palmer’s funeral, as Palmer had spoken at Rabbi Gutheim’s. At the centennial celebration of Palmer’s birth, Rabbi Heller gave a speech in his memory at First Presbyterian Church.

\textsuperscript{130} Ibid., 34.  
\textsuperscript{131} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{132} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{133} Ibid.
C.) Palmer and the Jewish Refugees

When Palmer began hearing reports of the pogroms against Russian Jews following the assassination of Tsar Alexander II, he lent his efforts to resettle Jewish refugees in the United States. Palmer took up this mantle when the American Jewish community was divided on the issue: cultured Western European Jews were not always eager to be inundated by their Eastern European peasant coreligionists. The interest of New Orleans society in the plight of the Jews led to the establishment of a short-lived colony at Sicily Island, Louisiana. The nearly three-thousand-acre colony was initially home to one-hundred-fifty-one Jewish farmers. At a public meeting in 1882, Palmer recounted the grim facts of the pogrom: three million Jews terrorised, Jewish homes, farms and businesses destroyed in sixteen hundred towns, as well as eighty million dollars in Jewish property. He added that, though the Russian government was not explicitly culpable for the pogrom, its approval rendered it guilty. Moreover, ‘since the authors of these wrongs were the Christian name and profess the Christian faith, we cannot purge ourselves of seeming complicity in these horrible transactions except by rendering a protest in the most nervous language which a righteous indignation can employ.’ Palmer here owned a corporate responsibility for worldwide Christianity as much of it stood by, or actively propagated, the persecution of an entire race. This is an irony worth noting, considering Palmer’s strident Biblical defence of the enslavement of an entire race. Palmer presciently argued that the Russian autocracy was not as strong as it seemed: ‘the weakest thing on earth is that which men call force; and Russia, trembling at the mouth of a volcano, is the last empire of Europe that can afford to stand against the moral sentiment of the world.’ It almost seems as if the aged Palmer may have had a moment of realisation, as the staunch promoter of a short-lived nation that had stood

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against the moral sentiment of the world. Could he be perhaps advising the Russians from the South’s sad experience of standing alone, and upholding an immoral persecution of a particular race? Palmer maintained that ideas were stronger than arms; the ‘men of patient thought’ not ‘the sceptred kings upon their thrones’ are the true rulers of the earth. Enlightened people knew that the persecution of an entire race was wrong. He noted that America, of all the countries of the earth, had been from its earliest days,

the refuge of the oppressed...When...the Russian Minister of State, with cruel taunt, points to its western border and says that it is open for the Jew to go, let us point to the open port of our eastern border, and say, that they are all open for the Jew to come...Never while this continent lifts itself above the sea let it be anything else than the asylum of the oppressed.’

What is more, Palmer said that this affected him, not just because these were suffering peoples, but because they were Jews. They were chosen four thousand years ago to be the people of God and had passed along the substance of revealed religion. He was grateful to the Jews, for ‘their sacred books are in part my sacred books, and through their hands I derive that religion which is the ground of my hope beyond the grave.’ Even more, however, Palmer’s heart was moved by the long millennia of Jewish suffering, and resolved ‘Whenever persecution bursts upon the Jew there would I be at his side—an Hebrew of the Hebrews—to suffer and to do.’

It may be tempting to dismiss this speech as the well-wishes of a man called upon to give an oration, yet such would not account for the high esteem in which New Orleans’s liberal Jewish community held the elderly Old School Presbyterian pastor. They revered him because he had proven to be their friend, whatever his earlier opinions about Jews had been. On the issue of the Jews, at least, Palmer appears to have changed his mind.

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136 Ibid.
137 Bobbie Malone quotes Rabbi Heller’s sentiment that Palmer’s ‘dealings with the Jewish community deserve to stand...as shining examples of interreligious respect and sympathy.’ Malone, *Rabbi Max Heller: Reformer, Zionist, Southerner, 1860-1929*, 69.
It does raise the interesting question, however, of Palmer’s view about the Jew’s standing before God. Palmer’s Old School convictions bound him to a belief that eternal life belonged only to those, whether Jew or Gentile, who believed in Jesus as the Son of God. While he referenced that sentiment in passing in his article on the Church of Scotland’s report on Judaism, it is found nowhere among his sentiments expressed towards his Jewish friends in New Orleans. What Palmer thought concerning his Jewish friends’ eternal destinies remains a mystery.

**Conclusion: How Palmer’s View of Race Informed His Public Theology**

If public theology concerns itself with social relationships within the wider community, then there was perhaps no more controlling feature of Palmer’s public theology than his views on various races and how they were to relate to one another. When it came to enslaved descendants of Africans, their innate inferiority rendered them both the objects of benevolent oversight and rebellious creatures whose base desires needed to be tightly controlled. Southern slavery was thus the divine prescription for white supremacy. When it came to African-Americans freed from slavery, a rigid system of segregation both in church and in broader society was desirable for both black and white alike. Palmer did not see white and black Americans as two subcultures within a broader assimilative American culture, but rather as two distinct cultures that, while they interacted with one another in their daily lives, had separate institutions and divinely appointed destinies. The white race, in Palmer’s view, had to maintain control over civic institutions, for the benefit of white and black citizens alike.

When it came to Jews, Palmer’s view was far more nuanced and complex. Though early in his life, his view of Jews was based on stereotype and prejudice, friendship with learned rabbis, who were co-belligerents in the cultural war, changed Palmer’s view.
Doubtless, the fact that Jews moved in elite social circles helped their reputation in Palmer’s eyes. Whatever the reason, Palmer’s actions on behalf of persecuted Jews belied a far more benevolent disposition than his empty promises made to black Presbyterians.  

As we have seen throughout, Palmer’s views of race, buttressed as they were by faulty induction, and a view of Providence and history that easily confused ‘is’ with ‘ought,’ formed one of the supporting pillars of his public theology. Palmer’s public theology can be summarised thus: it is God’s will that the various races figure out their divine destinies, and work to fulfil them, without seeking to rise above their proper station. Human progress would look like society owning the fact that it is inevitably stratified, while scientific learning and knowledge brought every arena of human endeavour under the truth that was derived both from divine revelation and scientific precision gained through the inductive method. The triumph of technology and Western industrial and military might would usher in a new era of peace and prosperity, which appeared likely to presage the Christian millennium of Revelation 20. As retrograde as Palmer’s view of race and culture appears from the standpoint of later history, it does not, therefore, mean that he was trying to thwart the tide of history. It is, rather, that he thought history would advance while retaining the social structures of the past that made life better for everyone. Palmer saw the radical egalitarianism of the Enlightenment, which eliminated all distinctions based on race, class, and creed, as a recipe for social chaos and disaster. Society would change and progress, but it could never do it, in Palmer’s estimation, by abandoning the God-given social structures of the past.

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138 For a broad consideration of Southern Presbyterianism’s failure to accommodate or aid its black membership in forming their own churches, see Joel L. Alvis, Religion & Race: Southern Presbyterians, 1946-1983 (University of Alabama Press, 1994).
In this chapter, we have examined Palmer’s views on race, particularly as concerned black American slaves and citizens, and Jewish immigrants and Americans. We explored Palmer’s view that different races, cultures, and ethnicities served God’s providential purposes by fulfilling different roles. We have seen Palmer’s belief that Christian Scripture sanctioned white ‘Anglo-Saxon’ superiority, and that Providence invested Whites with benevolent authority over other races. We noted that Palmer saw the system of race-based slavery as the defining feature of life in the American South and yet adjusted his thinking on that matter with the radically altered circumstances after the Southern defeat in the Civil War. We have examined how Palmer’s views of Jews changed with time and accommodated itself to his life experience learned Jewish friends in New Orleans society. We noted that this was somewhat unexpected, given his doctrinal convictions about the eternal destiny of non-Christians, but that he appeared to have no real burden for Jewish evangelisation, but rather that the Jews enjoyed favoured status with God, and thus were entitled to Christian support whenever they were persecuted. Finally, we noted how Palmer’s views on race undergirded his view of public theology as the progress of an inescapably segregated and stratified social order.
Chapter 8:

An Assessment of B. M. Palmer’s Thought and Legacy

In this chapter, we examine Benjamin Morgan Palmer’s legacy and continuing relevance. We review his pre-eminence as a nineteenth-century public theologian, whose thought strongly influenced debates in the century after his death. We then analyse Palmer’s public theology overall and compare him to a peer who developed an alternate public theology. We then examine how Palmer’s understanding of the place of providence in public theology shaped subsequent debates that took place in, and ultimately helped to fracture, the Southern Presbyterian Church in the twentieth century. We relate the rise of the social gospel and Protestant Liberal movements to Palmer’s thought. We also highlight how the spirituality doctrine coalesced with Palmer’s Providence-centric public theology to buttress Presbyterian support of segregation, and in the formation of new organisations. Finally, we see how Palmer’s understanding of providence, entwined with his view of the Christian’s role in the world, is the crucial element for making sense of his public theology. We evaluate the worth of Palmer’s thought, and why it is important to understand his public theology if we are to understand the mind of the nineteenth century Southern Christian public intellectual.

I. An Analysis of B. M. Palmer’s Public Theology

In this thesis, we have demonstrated that the unifying factor in Palmer’s public theology is that he equated historical ‘is’ with divine ‘ought to be’, or a confusion of the decretive and preceptive will of God. This understanding of Providence enabled Palmer to construct a hegemonic worldview that justified the status quo while selectively
incorporating change, misfortune, and technological advance in such a way that served the interests of Palmer's affluent white constituency. As we have seen, Palmer developed a public theology that surpassed that of his peers in scope. Moreover, Palmer's providential public theology influences the debates within Southern Presbyterianism until the present. It concerned the sorts of issues that contributed to a conservative exodus from the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1973 and led to a reunion between Northern and Southern Presbyterians in 1983. The present question, however, concerns the continuing value of Palmer's thought itself. Both Palmer's education and his Realism stressed the inter-relation of philosophy, theology, history, and science. At the same time, he lived amid the ascendancy of social science, which attempted scientifically to quantify what had previously been the realm of philosophy. Palmer was planted in the older order of the unification of all knowledge. He did not hesitate to opine on science, politics, or the social order, or to entwine them together, because these were the unfolding of the divine mind. God revealed himself in nature and history, and the human observer was equipped to discern morality from these revelations. At the same time, technology was changing the life of both worker and consumer in unprecedented ways. Newfound wealth masked a host of new social ills that accompanied industrialisation. Palmer was not unaware of these issues. Much of his public theology was an effort to make sense out of this rapidly changing social scene.

In his attempt to cling to older virtues and yet accommodate change, Palmer gave much thought to order and stratification in society. He believed slavery preferable to Northern industrialism because a master had far more vested interest in the well-being of his property than the factory owner did in his employees. God's Providence had assigned roles of master and slave, and each had its peculiar burdens and blessings. The temporal order was imperfect and fading, and eternity might well turn the established arrangement on its head. Observers then and since have thought such an argument
convenient in bolstering the authority of those already in power, yet there is no
evidence that Palmer's public theology was a cynical ploy to retain power among the
white elite, while we admit that Palmer saw white rule as best for both the black and
white races.

While Palmer marvelled at social and technological advance, he was not unaware of
the dangers created by wealth. Time would reveal Palmer's significant blind spots, and
data that he left out of his inductive calculations. His view was, in part, limited by his
circumstances. Palmer attempted to interpret the present while retaining the ancient
moorings of allegiance to an inerrant Scripture and a seventeenth-century creed. He is
worthy of historical consideration because his work presents insights into the mind of
the Calvinist intellectual class of the nineteenth century American South, both because of
his longevity and his continued adaptation to a changing society. Still, though Palmer
clung to the Westminster Confession of Faith, such a commitment was in tension with
his Realist faith in human ability inductively to derive the truth from observation of the
created order. He believed that not only natural phenomena, but also history and society
could be scientifically studied, and supposedly incontrovertible conclusions reached via
the principle of induction.

At the same time, Palmer's effort to integrate all knowledge suffered from serious
flaws, most notably confirmation bias in his inductive sampling. Too often, Palmer
admitted only such data as confirmed his pre-existing biases. Unlike scientific discovery,
where hypotheses are tested and verified based on hard data, there is no evidence that
Palmer's inductive inquiries ever did anything but confirm his pre-existing opinions
about society and race. Likewise, Palmer's opinions about white 'Anglo-Saxon'
Protestant superiority, over and against the supposed defects of Catholic, Islamic,
Chinese, Jewish, or African cultures failed to heed the sorts of critiques of Western culture that Friedrich von Schlegel had issued, whom Palmer admired, but misread.¹

A.) Realism: General Revelation and a Natural, Public Theology

Throughout this thesis, we have maintained that Palmer derived his public theology more from philosophical sources than from his creedal heritage or Scriptural commitments. His public theology thus falls under the rubric of natural theology. As such, it falls prey to its pitfall, that there is no final arbiter of this revealed truth. Often, natural theology has been regarded as a buttress to God’s more precise revelation in Scripture, chiefly functioning as apologetic testimony. For Palmer, it assumed a far broader role, becoming the touchstone for a comprehensive world-view. Palmer’s view of Providence intuited what God both was doing, and what God desired, from nature, human society, and historical events. In Palmer’s estimation, by considering the data objectively, a thoughtful observer could accurately determine the will of God.

Why did Palmer’s Biblical commitments rest lightly on his public thought? Perhaps a partial answer lies in Palmer’s understanding of the spirituality of the church. Palmer believed that the Christian interacted with the world on the plane of natural revelation, equally accessible to believer and unbeliever alike. There could be general agreement on matters of public morality and legislation because God inscribed the law on the hearts of all humanity. Thus, the world could be observed in light of God’s commandments, and an inductive examination of the data could determine God’s will. Even here, Palmer was inconsistent, sometimes longing for a Christian commonwealth akin to Kuyper’s Holland. The bulk of his writing demonstrates that he derived his public thought from observation and philosophy.

¹ Cf. chapter 7.
We have noted tensions between Palmer’s Calvinism and his Realism. Calvinists believe that human nature is so corrupt that it purposely distorts the knowledge of the truth that it obtains from creation. Such a conviction would lead twentieth-century Calvinist thinkers Cornelius Van Til and Karl Barth to reject natural theology altogether. Neither saw any point of connection between what could be understood from nature and what could only be understood by ‘grace’. ² Other Calvinists were more moderate but noted that the human ability both to know and be objective about what one knows were hindered both by creaturely limitations and the sin nature. It was this tension, in part, that caused many Calvinists in Scotland to look askance at Realist philosophy, while their American counterparts were far more enthusiastic. It may have served Palmer well to have heeded this caution. Palmer’s Bible instructed him that the structures of power and wealth were often inimical to the purposes of God. The false prophets were the defenders of the oppressors, the true prophets challenged the injustice of the status quo, often to their detriment. We must grant that there were impulses in Palmer in this regard, particularly as concerned the plight of Russian Jews. It may be far less costly to challenge injustice in a foreign land than it was amongst one’s surrounding culture, however. Palmer seemed to have a rosier view of the structures of power, wealth, and authority than were merited by Calvinism’s assessment of human nature as thoroughly corrupted and its view that the world often is a hostile place for God’s people, who are pilgrims on a sojourn to a better country.

B. History, Hermeneutics, and Eschatology

Palmer’s view of social progress derived from eschatological postmillennialism. This conviction commingled with nineteenth-century progress and blinded him to the suffering brought in its wake. His idea of advance towards the Millennium had a far

more secular cast than that of many earlier Reformed theologians, centring upon the
advance of Western social values more than on the advance of the Christian gospel.

Palmer employed Biblical terminology when discussing American social issues, going
far beyond metaphor. The Southern cause had all the trappings of religion, including
public services, creed, infidels, apostates, martyrdom, and a partisan God. For Palmer,
the Millennium would be the worldwide triumph of the Southern evangelical, agrarian,
hierarchical, slave-based social ideal. The enemy was the heterodox, Utopian North. He
viewed the North through the lens of the French Revolution, where belief in the
perfectibility of human beings had wantonly destroyed society. The French Revolution
represented Anti-Christ, bent on the destruction of the church, the predictable result of a
society that replaced the Christian God with reason, and located human rights in
humanity itself, rather than in the image of God. Palmer was heavily influenced by the
conservatism of Burke, Coleridge, and Hegel, favouring stability while not denying the
need for societal reform. After the Civil War, Palmer made peace with the reunified
American nation and championed its territorial advance.

As we explored in chapter 4, Palmer’s thought combined Biblical interpretation,
millennial expectation, and historical observation. In short, not only did Palmer look for
signs of the advance of God’s Kingdom among historical events, he regarded such events
as normative. It was not merely that events occurred in human history, or that such
could be morally assessed, but also that God’s moral directives could be drawn from
historical data. For Palmer, history was the arena of God’s activity, and God executed
judgements on civilisations in time based upon their relative virtue. Here, however, we
see how Palmer’s biases coloured his perception. Looking at history, Palmer adjudged
that certain civilisations were defeated because of their wickedness. In the defeat of the
American South, however, Palmer saw no such judgement upon the Southern way of life.
A defeat was a chastisement for the South for failing to live up to its ideals, not a
judgement on the ideals themselves. Providence, as revealed in history, was open to widely varying interpretations, and tended to favour the worldview and cultural preferences of whoever were interpreting it.

C.) Government, Social Structure, and Authority

Palmer believed that the universe had a hierarchy of authority, in which God reigned supreme. God extended authority to patriarchs, which they voluntarily ceded upwards to centralised authority.\(^3\) Human progress depended on maintaining order. This was accomplished by keeping everyone in the role that providence assigned, as either one invested with, or one under, authority. Chaos ensued when groups sought to assert themselves beyond their divinely-assigned roles. Assertions of female or African American rights were thus threats to providence itself.

In short, order was the way providence led the world towards its ultimate goal of the Kingdom of God. Government provided the stability to allow the Kingdom of God to thrive on its own initiative. The church and the state were not to be in any way formally connected. Even so, each needed the other performing its unique symbiotic role. The purposes of God advanced most clearly when the state structured itself according to divine mandates, and the church carried on its unique mission of reconciling souls to God, equipping its members to live Godly and productive lives in the present world.

We must understand, however, that Palmer did not view the current social order as an unqualified good. Gradual progress was the best one could expect in a fallen world. Providence assigned master, slave, husband, or wife as temporary roles in light of the coming kingdom. Submission to God in that assigned role brought glory to God in this life, and to the individual in the age to come.\(^4\)

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\(^3\) Cf. pp. 159-161.  
We discovered, too, that the way Palmer reconciled the secession of the Southern states was by embracing ‘the principle of separation.’ This appeared to contradict his belief that individuals ought to stay in their station, even if it meant forced subservience. Palmer believed that, from the time of Babel, governments tended to make themselves rivals for God. When this happened, God broke empires apart. This may not be altogether different in result from Jeffersonian agrarianism, in its suspicion of centralised authority, and fondness for local control. Even so, Palmer vacillated on this point, eventually reveling in the worldwide reach of the American empire. This demonstrates that Palmer’s adherence to principle was often in tension with his perception that things as they were, were the providential will of God. This is one example where his ‘ought’ on the matter of government often gave way to the ‘is’ of reality.

D.) The Christian Public Intellectual and the Apolitical Church

In chapter 6, we examined Palmer’s understanding of the spirituality of the church, and how he held the church’s a-political mission in tension with his status as a public intellectual. We discovered great affinities between Palmer’s practice and S. T. Coleridge’s notion of a *clerisy*, the public intellectual class which served as interpreters of cultural events. Coleridge held that the clergy had two distinct roles: that of pastors, and that of cultural analysts. This was Palmer’s view of his role. Politics almost never entered Palmer’s pulpit discourse, but they dominated his public writings. All of this comports with Palmer’s notion of providence. If God revealed his moral will through historical events, and it was within human ability to interpret the significance of these things, then the clergy was uniquely equipped to fill this role. We have seen throughout the dissertation how Palmer’s bellwether for determining the morality of historical

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events and public movements was rooted in the occurrence of the events themselves. On occasion, however, the categories blurred, as in his advocacy for public Sabbath observance, and of his opposition to the lottery. For the Christian public thinker, it is difficult to draw a sharp line between sacred and secular. There is always the tension of seeking an authoritative source to instruct a society containing believers and unbelievers alike, to construct a shared sense of cultural values amongst those who disagree as to the source or content of those values. As Palmer wrestled with this reality, he attempted to construct a worldview that was based upon commonly-owned truths. At the same time, it appeared difficult for Palmer to separate his spiritual commitments from particular courses of action, like secession. Palmer himself expressed this tension in his critique of the Mormon church-state, and it seemed he could never quite resolve it. The Christian believes that God is the source of morality, but how may a Christian seek to dialogue with those who do not share that conviction in a pluralistic society? Where can a pluralistic society turn for answers as to what is moral regarding public policy or cultural trends? These are questions without obvious answers, and it appears that Palmer vacillated for this reason. Most often, it seems, his Realism led him to find answers in general revelation, because he believed such was common to all and presented intuitively perceived and self-evident truths.

Another struggle concerned the church’s role in moulding society. Palmer’s dominant sentiment was that the church was concerned solely with matters of eternal salvation and personal conduct. This did not mean, however, that the church had no part to play in social betterment. The church’s role was not to conduct moral crusades or charitable endeavours, but rather provide individual renovation by the proclamation of the gospel. Palmer believed the new birth was the only thing that could work true

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6 Cf. chapter 6 and Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘Mormonism’, *Southern Presbyterian Review* 6, no. 6 (April 1853): 559–90.
reformation of morals. It is this truth that would become the point of contention in the Southern Church in the twentieth century.

The liberal critique of evangelical Christianity centred upon this point, though the liberal synopsis was not entirely fair. Evangelicals had played a great role in orphan care and ending the slave trade in Britain, among other noteworthy endeavours. At the same time, the horrors of white supremacy, the slave society, and segregation lent ammunition to the charge. By and large, it was evangelicals in the South who supported racism and segregation, long after mainline and liberal Christians had turned against it. The church’s silence on such matters became tacit consent. The opposition of Southern evangelical Christians to extending of basic human rights to black Americans bolstered the claim that evangelical religion was merely a scheme for upholding the racial status quo. Moreover, the new birth is not presented in Scripture as a cure-all to human vices. For instance, in Ephesians 4:28, Paul instructed the converted thief to no longer steal but to make an honest living. In other places, he instructed Christians on how to relate to the civil magistrate, and strongly rebuked those who refused to work to make a living. Palmer certainly believed in the necessity of instructing and correcting Christians on matters related to individual piety, and relational responsibilities. It was only in matters of public concern that he held that the church must be mute, even as he spoke to them on the grounds of natural revelation. He was comfortable instructing the wider public on such matters, but not his own congregation. Palmer’s famed preaching concerned itself with matters of personal piety, but his public speaking and writing were nearly completely consumed with preserving white supremacy. Palmer exhibited in his thought the divide between personal piety and public policy, with all its inconsistencies and rationalisations.
E.) Providential Race Roles

We cannot analyse Palmer's view of race without once again stating plainly that his views are abhorrent. As we have seen, there were others of similar religious convictions who did not share Palmer’s racial views. Thus, we cannot excuse Palmer because he was a Southern partisan or a man of the nineteenth century. Nowhere do we see more clearly Palmer’s providential view of history providing the moral ‘ought’ than in his view of people groups. B. M. Palmer was captivated by Friedrich von Schlegel’s notion of great peoples, although he ignored Schlegel’s nuances. Palmer believed that certain cultural markers set apart great cultures from failed ones, including learning, culture, technology, jurisprudence, military might, and statecraft. In general, the lowest cultures were Aboriginal and bore the darkest skin. The greatest cultures were those most thoroughly influenced by Protestantism. Thus, what Palmer termed American ‘Anglo-Saxon’ culture was at the apex of development. Schlegel had cautioned against such a view, noting that the most advanced cultures, by such measures, tended to be the most bellicose and oppressive. Palmer conveniently overlooked this point. For Palmer, the important things to note about peoples was that each was assigned its particular fixed role by providence, to be content, and to fulfil it to the utmost of its ability. The role of master races was to flourish, while controlling races that were unable to care for themselves. God assigned particular duties to each culture, and he would call each to account for how it performed them. The South came under God’s chastisement, not for holding slaves, but for its imperfect realisation of the slave society. The role of the subservient races was to fulfil the mandate of Ephesians 6:6 that servants obey their masters from the heart. Whatever one’s opinion of Paul’s instructions, it is important to note that Paul nowhere based his understanding of slavery in racial supremacy theories. Palmer combined his view that certain races were destined to be subservient with the Biblical instructions to master and slave and concluded that God consigned the black
race to subservience. What is more, providence determined that the black race was uniquely suitable to slavery. Palmer’s inductive observation was grossly skewed by his prejudices and his self-serving inductive sampling. It also bolstered, and was bolstered by, his providential view that Blacks were slaves and therefore God intended for them always to be enslaved. As we noted, Palmer conveniently overlooked New Orleans thriving free black population in his inductive calculations perhaps because such did not fit his argument.

F.) A Moderate Counterpoint to Palmer: Thomas Smyth [1808-1873]
Throughout this dissertation, we have analysed Palmer by comparing him to others. Thomas Smyth provides perhaps the most interesting counterpoint to Palmer. Smyth’s public theology tended towards more nuance and moderation. His opinions on race and slavery caused him to be branded an abolitionist in Charleston. He worked alongside John L. Girardeau to found Zion Church in Charleston for slaves and free black Christians. Unlike Palmer, Smyth was willing to challenge the racial status quo, even while occupying the prominent pulpit of the Second Presbyterian Church of Charleston from 1834 until his death in 1873. It is not surprising, therefore, that his understanding of the spirituality of the church differed from Palmer’s.

There was a marked difference between Smyth and Palmer on the acceptability of slavery. Palmer believed that slavery was the South’s divine trust. Smyth wrote, ‘Slavery was an evil, and ought to be removed, as soon as God in His Providence should open the way, and that every Christian man in America, as well as in Britain, as far as he was a Christian, would feel it his duty to aid in its removal.’

Smyth believed that evangelisation was the only way to eradicate slavery, and prepare the black race for freedom. Such ‘would finally remove that evil not only from America but from the

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World.\textsuperscript{8} Smyth, a prominent pastor of a slaveholding congregation, argued for abolition. He demonstrated that it was possible to challenge the slave society and not sacrifice his life or livelihood.

Interestingly, Smyth shared Palmer’s view of providence. He wrote,

\begin{quote}
This war is a judgment upon the North, for its persistent, perjured, Abolition fanaticism...the South...is on God’s side...And if she is found faithful to Him and to this institution which He has put under her spiritual care, then...God will not fail to vindicate His eternal Providence, and defend and deliver His people.\textsuperscript{9}
\end{quote}

Likewise, Smyth shared Palmer’s post-millennialism and his belief that the millennium may be imminent. He wrote, ‘The Bible is now the book of the world, and the principles of the Bible are, or soon will be, the principles of the world.’\textsuperscript{10} Smyth believed that God, in his providence, would bring individual transformation on an ever increasing scale, sweeping away the social evils of his day, slavery included. So, while he and Palmer believed that the ever-growing Christianisation of the world would bring about marked social improvement, each man had a very different idea of what that ought to be.

The remarkable thing, then, is not that Palmer and Smyth shared this view, but that, while Palmer’s view led him to see God as the upholder of the status quo, Smyth came to the opposite conclusion. Erskine Clarke points out that Smyth understood that he was at odds with Palmer on the issue of the spirituality of the church.\textsuperscript{11} He sought a middle path between an overtly political, and an apolitical, church. He wrote that the church and the state are ‘independent and distinct in their whole field of operations; and yet...they are co-ordinate and conducive to the common good of the whole community; so that while they can never commingle, they can never be safely disjoined.’ Smyth believed that the church ought to be chaste in its interference, but ‘when she is required...’

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\textsuperscript{8} Ibid., 309.
\textsuperscript{11} Thomas Erskine Clarke, \textit{Thomas Smyth: Moderate of the Old South} (Richmond, VA, 1970), 62.
\end{flushleft}
to interfere she does so with the voice of a stern and uncompromising moralist, condemning the base truckling of principle to expediency, utterly interdicting the employment of worldly chicanery and requiring politicians not to direct their ear to the voice of public opinion, but to direct public opinion to the voice of God'.

Smyth went on to say that Christianity requires ‘a government founded in right, conducted with a single desire to secure the greatest good of the greatest number. Christianity, therefore, regards the affairs of society as conducted not merely between man and man, but also between man and his God.’ While Smyth certainly upheld a form of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, it was far different from Palmer’s. Smyth envisioned a church that influenced political matters by moulding public consciousness. His thought appears more along the lines of Archbishop Temple in the middle twentieth century than that of his contemporaries Thornwell or Palmer.

Although Smyth shared Palmer’s providential view to a large extent, he clearly believed that the Christian church was a guiding force towards social betterment, and not just private, spiritual concerns. This is important in assessing Palmer because it shows yet again that other options were available within Palmer’s sphere for evaluating the church and its relationship to society.

There were also differences between Palmer and Smyth on how Christianity intersected with moral reforms. Palmer certainly believed Christians ought to be involved in public moral crusades. Palmer was clear that he did this as a citizen, and not as a Christian minister. He based his positions on a shared sense of civic virtue more than on the Word of God. Smyth, on the other hand, believed that ‘Christianity…adopts as peculiarly its own, the poor and miserable and wretched, and blind and naked. It

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12 Ibid., 491.
13 Ibid., 494.
feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, protects the stranger, delivers the captive, and receives the orphan under its protective wing."¹⁵ Nor was this all: Smyth worked for prison reform, and sought to fight the abuses that attended slavery, and to evangelise the black population.¹⁶ He also challenged the Southern honour code, particularly the practice of duelling.¹⁷ Smyth, whose prominence in Charleston equalled Palmer’s in New Orleans, was more adversarial towards the prevailing culture than Palmer was. This helps us to understand that Palmer’s views were more than just a matter of his time and place. Even within Old School Southern Presbyterianism, there were alternate voices on the core concerns of Palmer’s public theology. Although Palmer knew Thomas Smyth and was doubtless aware of his reputation and writings, he nowhere interacts with him. Even so, these alternate voices would grow more numerous in the succeeding century.

II. Palmer’s Twentieth Century Legacy

Though Palmer died in the early years of the twentieth century, he continued to be of relevance in the debates that would take place within the Southern church until its reunion with the Northern church in 1983, and, in some senses, continue to the present.¹⁸ The Southern Presbyterian Church seemingly could never put debates over public theology to rest. Moreover, Palmer was cited with approval both by those who

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¹⁶ Clarke, *Thomas Smyth: Moderate of the Old South*, 75.
¹⁷ Ibid., 79.
¹⁸ Terminologically, it is difficult to keep track of the names of the various Presbyterian iterations, based upon divides and mergers. The original church was the Presbyterian Church (USA), and the northern church retained this name after the Southern departure in 1861. The Southern Church took the name of the Presbyterian Church in the United States following the war; therefore, only the word ‘America’ separated the two completely distinct bodies. In the 1950’s the Northern church merged with the United Presbyterian Church, and became, for a time, the UPC (USA). Then, after reunification with the Southern Church, the combined denomination again took the name PC (USA). In the meanwhile, a split off of the Southern Church in 1973, called itself first ‘the National Presbyterian Church’ and then ‘The Presbyterian Church in America’ or PCA. This is distinct from the divide from the Northern church led by J. G. Machen in the 1930’s, first called ‘the Presbyterian Church of America’ but which is now known as the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.
wished for the church to become more socially activist and by those who wished for it to remain mute on social matters.

Complicating this picture was the ever-present reality of legal segregation in the American South. Many of those who advocated for adherence to doctrinal orthodoxy, and the spirituality of the church, were also vocal supporters of segregation. Palmer’s fear of the rationalistic Utopianism and his promotion of the racially stratified society was carried on by his theological descendants.


Though Palmer did not comment specifically on the theological changes sweeping across the late nineteenth century Protestant landscape, he could not have been unaware of them. Higher criticism was making inroads into American seminary education, and the social gospel bade the church address present social inequities. It seemed at first that the Southern Presbyterian Church would be immune from these new challenges to its orthodoxy. Its leading lights until the end of the nineteenth century continued to be the familiar names of the Old School. Already, however, the change was occurring.

Darwinian science had made inroads at Columbia Seminary, promoted by James Woodrow, who by then also had assumed full editorial control of *The Southern Presbyterian Review*. The ecclesiastical landscape had begun to shift around Palmer, yet his influence remained, as subsequent leaders either utilised, or opposed, his public theology.

Walter L. Lingle, first a professor at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, and later president of Davidson College, was one such leader. A traditional Presbyterian, Lingle was careful to promote the social gospel within the framework of familiar doctrine and

social thought. He stressed that the church’s primary mission was the proclamation of the gospel and that the social gospel could be too this-worldly, and based upon a naïve belief in human perfectibility. Moreover, Lingle expressed traditional concerns about public amusements and liquor. At the same time, he eschewed the view that the church’s sole work was to reconcile humanity to God, and to be relatively sanguine about the suffering of humanity. Lingle sought a third way.

Lingle staked his ground firmly within the Southern doctrine of the spirituality of the church, approving Thornwell’s definition of the church and the state as planets moving in concentric orbits. He asserted that the spirituality doctrine had worked best when governments had stayed out of the larger social questions. In the twentieth century, however, things had grown more complicated. Socially activist governments now involved themselves in social justice and it was thus no longer possible to sort out moral from political questions. At the same time, he wrote that the prime characteristic of ‘we’ Presbyterians was ‘a firm conviction that the mission of the church is entirely spiritual, and in no sense political...This does not keep the church from dealing with great moral and ethical questions, but it should deal with them from a spiritual and not a political point of view.

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21 H. Richard Niebuhr says that, in part, the Social Gospel was about maintaining American cultural institutions, and, ‘they turned, when persuasion failed, to political means, in order that good social habits of temperance and Sabbath observance might be maintained. As propagandists they sought the extension of democratic institutions --if necessary by recourse to military force-- in order that all the world might share in the blessings of the kingdom of God on earth.’ This sentiment certainly applied to Palmer, even though he would have abhorred the title of ‘social gospeler’. In The Kingdom of God in America, Torchbook, 1959 (New York, Hagerstown, MD, San Francisco, and London: Harper & Row, 1939), 183–184.
22 Lingle says, ‘We find ourselves in full agreement with (Thornwell’s) main contention...but it is a great deal easier to write this doctrine down on paper than it is to carry it into practice in actual life. The trouble is that all members of the Church are also citizens of the state, and it is not always easy for one to know when he is acting as a member of the Church, or when he is acting as a citizen of the State.’ In Walter L. Lingle, The Bible and Social Problems (New York, Chicago, London, and Edinburgh: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1929), 185–186.
23 Walter L. Lingle, Presbyterians: Their History and Beliefs (Richmond, VA and Texarkana, AR-TX: Presbyterian Committee of Publication, 1928), 163.
Lingle insisted that ministers continue to maintain the distinction between their clerical roles, and their role as public citizens. As clergy, ministers ought neither meddle in the affairs of state, nor advocate from the pulpit for or against particular candidates.\textsuperscript{24} They ought to issue moral instruction, but not advocate for particular political positions. In their roles as private citizens, however, pastors ought to use whatever influence they had to advance moral causes. He chose one illustration from recent history: B. M. Palmer’s public opposition to the lottery. Lingle noted that, insofar as he could tell, Palmer had never spoken against the lottery from his pulpit. When Palmer went to the anti-lottery rally, it was as a private citizen. He was introduced as the ‘first citizen of New Orleans’, and it was that eminence that entitled him to a hearing. Lingle wrote, ‘But note well that Dr Palmer did not try to lead every social reform. Note well, also, that he had lived in New Orleans a good many years as a minister and man of God before he was accounted the first citizen of that city.’\textsuperscript{25} Lingle tried to maintain the distinction between minister as citizen and cleric as his forebears had done, and yet he admits that Palmer’s reputation was a result of his long activity as a Christian minister in New Orleans. The lines drawn by the spirituality of the church doctrine were no clearer in 1929 than they had been in 1860.

Lingle’s take on these matters would be unremarkable were he not the early primary advocate for the social gospel in the Southern Church. The opposition of those who claimed Palmer’s legacy cost Lingle his seminary chair in 1924. We will see, presently, how this debate begins to widen in the middle decades of the twentieth century when those opposing liberalisation would utilise Palmer for their own purposes. We must note here, however, that many of the themes Lingle developed appear to be directly in line with Palmer’s thought, both doctrinally and socially. Palmer, too, had speculated about

\textsuperscript{24} Lingle, \textit{The Bible and Social Problems}, 177.  
\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 182.
the just relationship between capital and labour and found the answers of the Industrial Revolution largely unjust. Palmer spoke against the greed inherent in industrial capitalism that brought about unjust excesses of wealth, and social inequality. He too had puzzled through the necessity and horror of warfare. As the lingering spectre of the French Revolution had frightened Palmer, so the spreading spirit of the Russian Revolution alarmed Lingle. Lingle was more optimistic about things like the imminent end to warfare, as a rational result of worldwide Christianisation, a belief he and Palmer shared. He commented, ‘Just now it seems to me that men and women everywhere are closer to God’s ideal in their thinking about war than ever before in the history of the world.’ This is reminiscent of Palmer’s optimistic postmillennialism. As the Civil War did not ultimately dampen Palmer’s optimism, neither was Lingle’s enthusiasm dimmed by World War I. Lingle did not see the warless world coming about by unilateral disarmament, but rather through prayer, instruction, and elimination of the envy that, to his mind, was the chief cause of war. Like Palmer, Lingle believed that regeneration would be the great agent of social change.

This was not the only place Lingle hinted at his providential-postmillennial convictions. Earlier in the work he argued,

> God’s ideal for the world is that it should become perfectly like heaven...Jesus did not advocate any particular form of civil government or any particular form of social order...He was tremendously concerned about the perfect establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth.

Later in the work, Lingle clarified his meaning. He contended that the Kingdom of God was far broader than the expansion of the church, but also included ‘the enthronement of God at the very centre of our beings, and the doing of His will in all the relationships of life.’ Even here, however, ‘Jesus does His greatest work for the solution of our social

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26 Ibid., 86.
27 Ibid., 162.
28 Ibid., 33.
29 Ibid., 47.
problems and the social redemption of the world by remaking individuals and sending them out into society as the salt of the earth and the light of the world.’

Lingle said that we pray that God’s kingdom will reign in ‘national and international life’, and in ‘the business, commercial, and industrial world –in the mills and mines and everywhere men toil for others’. This is a very similar view to what Palmer articulated in myriad public addresses and essays.

Besides their shared belief in the spirituality of the church, and their remarkable similarity regarding its practice, perhaps the most striking similarities between Palmer and Lingle are found in their views of the value of sociology. As we contended in chapter 3, Palmer based his public theology on the emerging discipline of sociology, which was innately connected to Realist philosophy and the inductive method. Lingle based his social gospel upon inductive observation and yet incorporated Biblical arguments. The burden on Christians was to fulfil their obligations to one another. He wrote, ‘The Christian businessman must put the Kingdom of God and his righteousness first in his business...He must think first of the men and women who are in his employ, and the men and women whom he serves through his business.’

This is a theme Palmer also sounded frequently in his writings. Lingle contended, ‘The social message of the Bible tells us of our relationships and duties to others...When you take up your Bible and begin to search for the duties which God requires of man, you will discover that the major portion of these are duties to our fellow-men. In other words, they are social duties.’

Lingle asserted that systemic social ills demanded a Christian response. It

30 Ibid., 49.
31 Ibid., 57.
32 Ibid., 84.
33 Cf. for instance Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *Christianity and the Law; or the Claims of the Christian Religion upon the Legal Profession* (1871), ed. G. Wm. Foster, Jr., Digital (Charlotte, NC: Strait Gate Publications, 2009); Benjamin Morgan Palmer, ‘The Representative Life and Character of Dr. T. G. Richardson’, in *In Memory of Professor T. G. Richardson, M. D.* (New Orleans: The Faculty of the Medical Department of Tulane University of Louisiana, 1893), 45–61.
would not do for one to live as an individualist because all of one’s actions inevitably affected others.35 At the same time, because many had misunderstood his writing, Lingle went to pains to disavow any collectivist solution to problems. Solutions must rather come through Christians consciences acting in concert to address the evils of the day. Like Palmer, Lingle was optimistic about the prospects of Christian civilisation and put his faith in the providence of God to bring about social improvement. Unlike Palmer, Lingle was deeply troubled by the status quo. His view of providence did not devolve into Palmer’s ‘what is, is also what ought to be’ stance.

There is much here that is similar to Palmer’s public thought. Palmer was greatly concerned about social ills like temperance and the relationships between races and classes. Lingle’s solutions, based upon free association and not government policy, would have resonated greatly with Palmer. Nonetheless, the very words ‘social gospel’ would be viewed by a large segment of Southern Presbyterianism with great alarm. To them, such a doctrine sounded like nascent communism, levelling class and racial distinctions. Partly in reaction to Lingle’s doctrine, conservatives founded *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* in 1942 to fight the social gospel, the advance of civil rights, and communist encroachments into American culture, all the while trumpeting the spirituality of the church.

Walter L. Lingle was attempting to move his church beyond what he perceived as exclusive devotion to personal piety and evangelism. He wanted his church to meet the challenges of the twentieth century, but to do so without forsaking either the spirituality of the church or past doctrinal commitments. This did not prevent conservatives from being alarmed by his programme. It is striking, however, just how closely both his diagnoses and prescriptions align with Palmer’s, though they wrote in different ages.

Lingle’s social gospel did not abandon evangelical moorings, but rather highlighted their

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primacy. His public theology emphasised individual transformation by the power of the Holy Spirit as the primary means for societal improvement, over and against the collectivist solutions of other early twentieth century public thinkers. What is more, the sort of public role he envisioned for the clergy as public intellectuals was precisely that which Palmer personified.

B.) Ernest Trice Thompson [1895-1985]: Spirituality and ‘the Dead Hand of the Past’

If Walter L. Lingle was careful to frame his introduction of the social gospel in terms amenable to those steeped in nineteenth century Southern Presbyterian piety, his successor, Ernest Trice Thompson, showed no such reserve. Few in the Southern Church enjoyed Thompson’s notoriety or broad influence. For forty-two years a professor at Union Seminary in Richmond, Virginia, Thompson also founded and edited The Presbyterian Outlook, the influential voice of ‘moderate’ Southern Presbyterianism, wrote the official adult Sunday School lesson for decades, and was responsible for much of the Book of Church Order. One of Thompson’s great passions was the reunification of Southern and Northern Presbyterianism. After the Civil War, many on both sides had sought this, but Southern conservatives, led by Palmer, successfully blocked the merger, objecting chiefly on the grounds of the Northern repudiation of the spirituality of the church, but intermixed in the debate were the ever-present issues of white supremacy. In other words, the main division between the Presbyterian Church, North and South, was over the issue of public theology, and the relationship of the church to the status quo.\(^{36}\) For over one-hundred-twenty years the dividing issues remained similar.\(^{37}\) The

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\(^{37}\) The two denominations rescinded many of their mutual anathemas, and commenced fraternal relations in 1882. From 1917-1922, the Southern church sought a ‘federal union’, short of reunion. In 1929, the Southern assembly approved organic union, but subsequent assemblies overruled the overture. In 1936, the Southern church approved organic union with the North, and negotiations continued for nearly twenty years. The final motion failed to carry a majority of the presbyteries, let alone the three-fourths required. The merger finally occurred in 1983, but only after a sizeable conservative exodus of
merger would at last be accomplished in 1983, and then only after a sizeable conservative exodus. As Thompson experienced, the fractious spirit of Palmer had not yet departed the Southern Church. Conservatives sought to thwart Thompson’s progressive agenda at every turn.

Conservative forces in the church subjected Thompson to a heresy trial, and his vindication served the conservative narrative that the Southern Presbyterian Church was descending into liberalism. Unlike Lingle, however, Thompson did not seek to retain past Presbyterian commitments, but wrote of at last freeing the Southern church from ‘the dead hand of the past.’ 38 Thompson echoed Lingle’s call for a church that expressed concern for the great social inequities of the twentieth century, though Thompson devoted himself with more ardour against the racial injustices of the South: he marched with Martin Luther King at Selma in 1965.

Thompson wrote much on the spirituality of the church and providence. As he chronicled the progressive loss of African-American rights between 1865 and the 1890’s, Thompson noted,

The Southern Presbyterian Church, in accord with its “distinctive” doctrine of the “spirituality of the church” remained silent as disfranchisement proceeded, and as segregation became first the practice and then the law of the various states. But its silence gave consent, and such voices as appeared gave religious sanction to the legal enactment. 39

Clearly, the entanglement of the spirituality doctrine and the racial status quo would not be quick to die. Even as racially progressive voices emerged, and churches worked to bridge the racial divides, large segments of Southern Presbyterianism remained committed to white racial superiority and segregation. Thompson charted the rise of the spirituality doctrine as concomitant with the more ardent Presbyterian defence of

39 Ibid., 3:252.
slavery that began in the mid-nineteenth century. He lamented that this doctrine had held his church captive, both regarding understanding its past and its mission, had kept it from pursuing reunification with the Northern church, set it at odds with the National Council of Churches, and muted the message of the church on the great social evils of the day. Many nineteenth century Southern Presbyterian theologians shared the blame for departing from their progressive forebears, but Benjamin Morgan Palmer stood out as a primary villain.

Thompson traced the history of Southern Presbyterian neglect of social problems. He laid much of the blame for this at the church’s largely complacent middle and upper-class constituency; the spirituality doctrine seemed well-suited to those who experienced little deprivation or societal difficulty. He lamented,

For 75 years, three-fourths of our history as a denomination, the generally accepted view of the Presbyterian Church in the United States was that its mission was limited to evangelism and to the fostering of an individual or family morality...its task was conceived to be, in the strictest sense of the word, spiritual, that is, evangelistic and pietistic...the church had little or nothing to say about the social, racial, economic, national, and international problems that were peculiar to our region...nothing about the responsibility of Christian men to apply the principles of Christian love and justice to all the relationships of life. This was not conceived to be the task of the church...the sole task of the church, the sole task [emphasis his], was evangelism. In the field of social ethics our Calvinistic heritage seemed to have been totally abandoned. This conception of the spirituality of the church...was, and still remains to a large extent, the basis of opposition to reunion with the U. S. A. church, and of the continuing opposition to the National Council of Churches...even though social issues constitute only a small portion of its concerns.

Nonetheless, the tide had begun to turn. Thompson credited Lingle for awakening the Southern Presbyterian conscience on these matters. In 1935, the Southern Assembly adopted a re-definition of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church:

We believe...that the church in fulfilment of its spiritual function must interpret and present Christ’s ideal for the individual and for society, must warn men of the presence of sin and of its effects in individual life and in the social life...the Church must also teach men to love their neighbours as themselves, and to do so in every area of life, in the social sphere as well as in the individual sphere, in the

41 Ibid., 40–41.
home, in the school, in the Church, in industry and in politics, in racial contacts, and in international affairs... It cannot discharge this part of its responsibility... unless it deals with those actual evils in the individual life, and in the social order which threaten man's moral and spiritual development, which hinder the progress of God’s Kingdom here on earth.\textsuperscript{42}

The conservative response to Thompson was even more strident than it had been to Lingle. The reasons for this are complex. It seems likely that a large part of the reason was Thompson's willingness to address the issues of racial segregation. Thompson's vision for the Southern Church would provoke the ire not just of segregationist churchmen, but also of evangelicals who were far more moderate on the race issue. These two groups shared commitment to the core evangelical doctrines believed universally in the Southern Church before the incursions of higher criticism. Some stood for Palmer's Old School Calvinism, while others embraced the broader evangelicalism typified by Billy Graham. A common enemy, however, united them: the theological and cultural liberalism that Thompson represented.

Alarm over encroaching liberalism motivated conservatives to form alliances to advance their cause in the Southern church. The concerns were varied but interrelated. Many were concerned to maintain the Southern racial hierarchy. Palmer's views on race and his promotion of the spirituality of the church still predominated in the thought of many. It is interesting to note that the dispute fell out largely along theological lines. Those who favoured theological liberalism tended to forsake the spirituality doctrine, while those who clung to conservative doctrine also clung to the spirituality of the church. We might speculate that the conservatives tended to favour a church whose emphasis was on reconciling humanity to God. At the same time, ignoring social problems, and the possible complicity of one's audience in them, was a way to avoid causing any discomfort to one's auditors, and thus maintaining one's social standing. Liberals, on the other hand, stressed the immanence of the Kingdom of God and forsook

\textsuperscript{42} Quoted in ibid., 42–43.
what they believed to be narrow or outmoded doctrines. Their concern was bettering the lot of those suffering in this life. The irony in this divide in the twentieth century is that Palmer was very much concerned with imminent kingdom values: he was a crusader of a kind for his own ‘social gospel’, one built upon natural theology, his particular view of providence, and what to him seemed to be keen observation of the human predicament. His method was driven more by the insights of the social sciences and the scientific principles of observation and induction than it was by Scriptural exegesis. His conclusions would land him in a very different place than Thompson and his heirs, but the method by which he arrived at his conclusions was strikingly similar.

**C.) Palmer’s Public Theology Reasserted: The Southern Presbyterian Journal**

The sort of progress towards which Thompson and others were leading the church faced a strong backlash across the South. L. Nelson Bell [1894-1973], prominent missionary to China, and father-in-law of Billy Graham, helped to found *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* in 1942, and would go on to serve as its long-time editor. The *Journal* was a publication dedicated to what its editors deemed the historic commitments of Southern Presbyterianism, the ‘old school’ interpretation of Scripture and the Westminster Standards, the Presbyterian form of church government...the spiritual mission of the church, and ‘the purity and integrity of the White man of North America upon whose shoulders are laid the burdens of the world.’[^43] In content, it was the successor to Palmer’s *Southern Presbyterian Review* and *South-Western Presbyterian*. For some time, Nelson Bell would uphold the natural segregation of the races as the Biblical norm although he opposed both legal segregation, and legal efforts to desegregate private institutions. His view would begin to change, however, as Billy Graham made the decision to integrate his crusade events, bringing Martin Luther King, Jr. to the platform.

in New York City in 1957. At the same time, the vast majority of material in the *Southern Presbyterian Journal* did not concern the racialized society, but rather a balanced selection of news, denominational issues, devotional and theological articles, and, most notably for our present discussion, numerous articles on American public theology. The *Journal* owed its existence to the perception of a dire battle for the truth of God and the existence of Western civilisation, both in the Southern Presbyterian Church and in the United States. In its initial editorial, entitled ‘Why?’, Bell set out the reason for the new journal:

Why the journal at this time?...The civilisation of which we are a part is perched precariously on the edge of an abyss...in part, the Christian church is to blame...it has left its God-given task of preaching the gospel of salvation. It is to blame where it has substituted for the gospel of redemption a programme of social reform...stepped out of its role to meddle, as the Church, in political and economic matters, and affairs of State.\(^4^4\)

From the beginning, Nelson Bell cast the *Journal* in the mould of Palmer’s public theology. The first issue would set the course that guided the journal throughout its nearly fifty-year history, mentioning Palmer’s inaugural sermon at the founding assembly of the Southern church by William Childs Robinson, in an article entitled ‘Our Southern Presbyterian Banners’.\(^4^5\) The *Journal’s* editorial committee was greatly alarmed by the perceived politicisation of the Southern Presbyterian Church. They combatted the constant threat of reunification with the Northern Church, which they adjudged to be far more theologically liberal and socially progressive. At the same time, while the church was not to be political, Christians ought to be politically aware and active because Western culture was under attack. To the *Journal*, the enemies of the gospel, and of Western culture, were Soviet communism, the National Council of Churches, and political and theological liberalism in church and state.\(^4^6\) To the editors,

the values of the Christian society were obvious and equated to American political conservatism. As Sean Michael Lucas notes, often the gospel was extolled because it was helpful to the progress of American ideals and prosperity.\footnote{Lucas, \textit{For a Continuing Church}, 187.}

The editors advocated a political stance, which they believed to be firmly rooted in the Christian worldview, but which stood opposed to many within their own church. They did not seem to be able to note the irony that they were every bit as political as their opponents. For instance, the first issue reprinted an article by General Douglas MacArthur, commander of the Allied forces in the Pacific, in which he excoriated the peace mandates of the National Council of Churches. The Christian perspective, to MacArthur and the editors, was bellicose, and it was un-Christian to oppose war, a stance the journal would maintain throughout American military involvement in the Far East. The journal's editors may have had a different political stance than their opponents, but they were no less political. Moreover, they bathed their politics in religious justification just as they accused their opponents of doing. The 'apolitical church' the journal prized was broadly supportive of American exceptionalism and conservative political ideals, and bitterly opposed to perceived threats from church and culture alike. The parallels to Palmer are obvious, because the journal editors' stances on the issues, although separated from Palmer by decades, were very nearly the same. The Northern Church was the enemy, and the same Enlightenment spirit of revolution reigned in elite cultural institutions and theological seminaries. They believed the religious and political liberals cast off God and sought a society that erased all distinctions between individuals. America, on the other hand, in its pristine manifestation, was the ideal proving ground for the flourishing of the Kingdom of God. The preservation and progress of Western cultural values were the primary goals, and the gospel was useful in pursuit of them. As one of the authors wrote, 'Permanent social,
economic, and political reforms in society can be accomplished through a reform of the individuals who compose that society...The place that the church occupies in that social, economic, and political reform is of making better men and women.' From its citation in the first issue of Palmer's charting the course for the Southern Presbyterian church in his sermon at its founding assembly in 1861, the *Journal* followed in his train. This is significant because it was the *Southern Presbyterian Journal*, alongside other conservative advocacy groups and institutions, that would ultimately lead to the rupture of the Southern Presbyterian Church in 1973. The annual ‘Journal Day’ conference served as a rallying point for conservatives trying to recapture their denominational apparatus. Later, as that appeared increasingly unlikely, it provided a forum to plan a conservative exodus. There was no neat, simple departure, however. Not all of those who started the *Journal* favoured leaving the Southern church, least of all Nelson Bell. Not everyone understood the issue of the spirituality of the church in the same way. Morton H. Smith represented Palmer’s view; D. James Kennedy, widely known because of his nationwide broadcasts, preached overtly political messages to his congregation and began ‘the D. James Kennedy Centre for Christian Statesmanship’ in Washington, D. C. Clearly, Palmer’s public theology was at the heart of the movement that led to the denominational rupture, both by those who advocated for the spirituality of the church, and for those who sought to influence the political and social realm for Christ, as Kennedy did.

Nor was this all. Though the *Journal* strove to be moderate on the race issue, its cultural biases showed through fairly regularly. Early contributors J. E. Flow and Guy Gillespie advocated racial segregation in law and the church, based on the old fears of interracial marriage, and the upending of the white power structure of the South. To the *Journal* editors, segregation was a moot point. L. Nelson Bell wrote that the question, ‘Is

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the segregation of the races Christian?' should not be asked 'because it is not a question of Christianity but a question of expediency.' Though he deplored any unkindness shown to anyone because of his or her race, at the same time, he feared racial agitation would 'lead to great harm in the development of a Christian approach to the race problem.' He said that if segregation meant the denial of inherent human rights to any individual, this was un-Christian, but that if desegregation meant 'the right of a minority...to intrude into that realm of personal choice which is inherent in personal freedom as we understand it, then “segregation” is Christian.'49 Not unlike Palmer before him, Bell first denied the propriety of the question and then set about to answer it. He argued that segregation fell within Christian liberty to believe, and then denied that anyone had the same liberty to oppose it. This seemed to be an inherent problem in the Southern Presbyterian understanding of the spirituality of the church: beliefs about things such as secession, racial inferiority, slavery, and segregation were off limits for discussion, except by those who supported them. Guy T. Gillespie picked up the charge in 1957, in rhetoric reminiscent of Palmer. Gillespie argued that only white Southerners, who had lived side by side with black Americans for two centuries, could truly understand the problem. They alone had the inductive, sociological knowledge. Moreover, he said that Southern Christians bore no ill will towards African Americans, but rather 'As friends and neighbours, we wish to see them have better homes, higher standards of living, better schools for their children, and the fullest opportunity for development as law-abiding, liberty-loving, self-respecting citizens.'50 The content of this speech is very reminiscent of Palmer's late in life speech at 'Coloured Education Day'.51 As it was for Palmer, the problem wasn't Southern segregation, but the meddling of

a very considerable group of sentimental enthusiasts whose knowledge of this problem is limited to what they read in the newspapers...and to the grossly exaggerated and distorted information furnished to them by self-serving propaganda agencies, and yet who assume that they have all the answers to this difficult and complex problem, and a divine warrant to solve it by remote control. 52

These were the self-same notes sounded by Palmer against Yankee meddling in Southern affairs. What is more, much like Palmer, Gillespie would seek for answers in Scripture, inductive reasoning, and in the ‘What is, is also what ought to be’ view of providence. Gillespie argued that Southern segregation, though far from perfect, was the ‘result of a gradual process of evolution for many generations’. 53 Certainly, there had been glaring defects, but Southern Christians deplored these. They were not flaws in the system itself, but the result of flawed men and women living within the system. The system itself was ‘amply supported by scientific, historical, and Biblical data’. 54 Gillespie very nearly parroted Palmer’s sentiments about the slave system. The system itself was divinely-sanctioned, the result of providence and its benefits for black and white alike were supported by data inductively gathered. Palmer’s public theology and his view of providence haunted the Southern Presbyterian debates of the twentieth century.

The Journal, as it carried forward of Palmer’s understandings into the mid to late twentieth century was far more than merely academic, but the very concerns that would lead to a rupture in Southern Presbyterianism, and feed into issues that continue to the present, which we now examine.


Morton H. Smith became known as one of the ardent defenders of Old School Southern Presbyterianism in the PC(US) in the twentieth century. His doctoral dissertation was an

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53 Ibid., 9.
54 Ibid.
examination of Southern Presbyterian leaders. Smith would be influential in the training of aspiring gospel ministers, inculcating in them a devotion to Old School Southern Presbyterianism. Smith would also be a key guiding theological light in the formation of the Presbyterian Church in America out of the Southern Church in 1973, and his influence is seen in that denomination’s founding principles. He would serve that denomination as its chief presiding officer from its founding until 1988.

Smith is an ardent defender of the spirituality of the church, identifying it with the ‘sphere sovereignty’ view of Abraham Kuyper. Christ owns every sphere of life, and the Christian is active as a Christian in every sphere, but each sphere has its own set of duties from God, and no sphere has the right to eclipse any other: the state does not have the right to take over family responsibilities or church responsibilities, et cetera.

Morton Smith became known as a defender both of racial segregation in the church and society, and of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. In his thought, as in Palmer’s, these things entwine. We see his rationale in ‘The Racial Problem Facing America’. Smith writes that his stance was one of ‘a seeking Christian’. He said that his hope was ‘to search the Scriptures and determine what God has said, if anything, about this whole matter of race relations.’ He states that his method would be to examine what ‘the Bible has to say about the unity and diversity of the human race’, then to ask whether segregation was necessarily sinful, and then finally raise questions about the contemporary situation.

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60 Ibid., 125.
Smith begins his argument by channelling Palmer on the unity and diversity of the human race. Like Palmer, he points towards the divine principle of separation, evident at the Tower of Babel in Genesis 11, as God’s way of limiting human self-sufficiency, and preventing the building of empires. Part and parcel of this, according to Smith, is the ongoing separation of the races. He references the Apostle Paul, speaking in Acts 17:16, that God has bounded peoples into different nations and groups. This, he maintains, at least strongly suggests that races ought to remain separate, and not intermarry. Smith is careful to add that he can find no clear prohibition of racial intermarriage from the Scriptures, but in another place, raises the old fear of miscegenation and amalgamation.

Like Palmer, Smith affirmed that men and women of every race were human beings created in God’s image, descended from an original human pair. Smith laments that the church segregated itself after the Civil War, though he blames ‘Northern white leaders’ for convincing blacks to withdraw from Southern denominations in the latter nineteenth century. He completely ignores the heated battles over ecclesiastical equality for black men and women in the latter nineteenth century.

Though Smith does not advance the curse of Ham theory, he does reference the sons of Noah as the fountainhead of racial distinctions. Unlike Palmer, he does not assert that non-whites are inherently inferior to whites. The main driver of Palmer’s public theology was fear of the egalitarian spirit of the French Revolution. Like those mentioned earlier in this chapter, Smith shared the twentieth century fear of Communist ‘levelling’; he frets that the Civil Rights movement was merely a mask for Communist advance in America: ‘The reason that so many see a Communist influence in the present

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61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 126–127.
63 Ibid., 125.
64 Ibid., 127.
65 Cf. chapter 6.
movement is that the goal seems to be the same as that of the Marxist philosophy, namely, the levelling of all to a common uniformity.'\textsuperscript{66} This is the same logical fallacy Palmer employed. Two completely unrelated movements may share common features, without equating one with the other. Arguably, the New Testament itself promotes the removal of distinctions that Smith and Palmer both feared: it asserts that ‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus’ and its teaching that Jew was not inferior to Gentile, nor Gentile to Jew.\textsuperscript{67}

Smith's affinity with Palmer's particular view of divine providence is seen in his upholding of the racial status quo of the South. Smith admits that Southern segregation has not always been ‘separate, but equal’ and argues that it should be. He argues that any integration that does not lead to intermarriage ‘is not necessarily unscriptural.’ The Southern case was unique because of peculiar historical circumstances. Because Southern society had arisen amid the ‘relation of master to slave’, therefore ‘it was only natural that there should still exist an inequality of development between the two races, and thus an inequality of treatment of the two.’\textsuperscript{68} Though Smith does not elaborate on what he means by inequality of treatment, he goes on to say,

\begin{quote}
It is striking to observe that the State of Mississippi, which is the most segregated state in the nation, has the lowest crime rate of all the states. On the other hand, other areas have suffered from an exploding crime rate, and the Negro race has played a leading part in this increase of crime, and this in the integrated society.\textsuperscript{69}
\end{quote}

The principle that Smith draws from this is that, when one looks at what happened at Babel and compares it with ‘modern large cities with their high crime rates, [one] wonders whether the principle of separation started at Babel should not be continued

\textsuperscript{66} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{67} Romans 11:18
\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 128.
\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.
Here we see the same sort of ‘inductive’ reasoning about providence that was prevalent in Palmer. Smith selects supposed inductive data like high crime rates in integrated cities, and low crime rates in Mississippi, and reasons from them that segregation is a preferable social order. According to Smith, these historical realities clearly point towards God’s providential purposes in the maintenance of the status quo, even though Smith conveniently overlooked the violence and intimidation of white supremacists in the state, as well as the highly segregated nature of the more dangerous Northern metropolises.

Moreover, Smith shares the same sort of ‘what is, is also what ought to be’ view of providence that characterised Palmer’s public theology. He writes that ‘a segregated or integrated culture is a matter of the liberty of the people of any particular area.’ Like Palmer, he appears blind to the fact that such a view only takes into account the interests of those already in the position of power and privilege. The sentiments of a large segment of the population would not be taken into such an accounting, merely because of its race. Such an ‘is/ought’ view becomes more apparent when Smith says ‘Our relations must be natural and Christian. No court or church can legislate our feelings toward our fellow man.’ That sentiment may be true, and yet we hear echoes of the spirituality doctrine. For Smith, the church and the law ought not to tread on these matters. They are matters of the individual conscience alone, and ought not to be addressed. Racial segregation is merely the way things are, and, as Smith argues throughout the piece, therefore it is the way things ought to be. God’s providence is on the side of segregation, merely because segregation existed:

As one looks at the stance of the Southern Presbyterians towards slavery...one finds that the Church restrained from getting into social issues, and trying to decide such issues, because the Bible itself did not do so. The fact is that God segregated Israel from the Canaanites. It is debatable as to whether the Church

70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
72 Ibid.
should get into the matter of trying to change that particular pattern, and branding one form of culture as sinful as opposed to another.\footnote{Smith, \textit{How Is the Gold Become Dim: The Decline of the Presbyterian Church, U. S., As Reflected in Its Assembly Actions}, 153.}

Morton Smith’s involvement on the entwined issues of racial segregation and the spirituality of the church would continue into the twenty-first century. In 2010, Presbyterian Church in America pastor Craig Bulkeley was involved in a church judicial case against an elder in his congregation, Neill Payne, who had involved himself in Aryan supremacy groups, and publicly written on black racial inferiority. Bulkeley and fellow pastor Jeffrey Hutchinson pursued this issue through the higher courts of the church. Morton H. Smith was one of two pastors who opposed Bulkeley because Scripture did not speak to matters of racial inferiority, superiority, or the propriety of segregation, and therefore neither could the church.\footnote{Sonia Scherr, ‘Church Denomination Roots Out Racism’, \textit{Southern Poverty Law Center Intelligence Report}, 30 May 2010, https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/intelligence-report/2010/church-denomination-roots-out-racism; Smith also advised that a church board was incompetent to rule on racial matters since Scripture did not address them, which he based on the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. See SJC #2009-2 (Standing Judicial Commission of the Presbyterian Church in America 2009).} It is crucial to see how Palmer’s thoughts influenced these debates, and would lead to the formation of a new denomination based, at least in part, on the public theology that Palmer helped to frame.

\textbf{E.) The Spirituality Doctrine and the Formation of the Presbyterian Church in America}

As chronicled earlier, the political pronouncements of the Southern Presbyterian Church provoked the ire of its conservative wing. By the late 1960’s, many conservatives began to lay the groundwork for a new denomination. This denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America (hereafter, PCA), held its first general assembly in 1973. The issues leading to this division are many, and beyond our present scope. Our attention rests merely on examining the place of Palmer’s public theology and the spirituality of the church in the founding of this new denomination. Not all of the founders of the PCA were
unified on issues concerning race and the spirituality of the church. Nonetheless, the steering committee for the new denomination stated that

The constitution of the PCUS calls upon us...to refrain from meddling with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth...Nevertheless, agencies of the General Assembly have deviated from this basic doctrine of the Church, and the Assembly itself has supported civil disobedience. Moreover, said agencies and the Assembly...have unfairly criticised the foreign policies of the United States...We reaffirm our devotion to the Church as a spiritual institution knowing that the Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ is not of this world.75

Officially, the new denomination was placing itself in Palmer’s train. The PC(US) had violated its own principles when it spoke against segregation or the Viet Nam conflict. Except in extraordinary cases, the church should remain mute on these issues. What qualifies as extraordinary cases had long been a matter of debate. It must not be thought that the PCA was founded as a church to preserve white racial purity. Indeed, many were adamant that the new denomination was not founded to preserve the segregated order.76 At least one founder of the PCA, James M. Baird, would do much to combat racism in Mississippi, while occupying the pulpit of a church that had been racially segregated.77 Even so, leaders like Morton H. Smith and John E. Richards represented a sizeable constituency who were supportive of the segregated social order.78 As Kenneth Taylor notes,

A key Presbyterian Church in America founder [Morton H. Smith], the author of the denomination’s official book-length theological manifesto, incorporated a condemnation of ecclesiastical civil rights activism in his arguments as late as 1973, the year of the PCA’s birth. He did so while clinging to the Southern Presbyterian Spirituality of the Church, which, like the southern political tradition of States’ Rights, provided cover for slavery then segregation.79

75 Steering Committee for a Continuing Presbyterian Church, ‘Reaffirmations of 1973’, Contact: Presbyterian Churchmen United, no. 2 (n.d.): 3.
76 Lucas, For a Continuing Church, 271.
The old issue of the spirituality of the church seemed inseparable from preserving the racial hierarchy of the Old South. At the same time, this new denomination would eventually include D. James Kennedy, who had no hesitation in interjecting the church into overtly political causes.\(^8^0\) Even those who did not adhere to Palmer’s doctrine of the spirituality of the church, such as Francis Schaeffer, tended to wave Palmer’s banner of the Christian America, which was equated with politically conservative causes.\(^8^1\) Palmer may have been uncomfortable with the politicised church, but he favoured politically informed and active Christians, as did those who followed in his train. For Palmer, as for Schaeffer, Kennedy, and others, Christianity and political conservatism were inseparable. The PCA would continue to wrestle with the issue of if and how the church ought to address the culture. It debated, but failed to pass, a resolution against women in combat roles in 2001-2002, denouncing racism in church and culture in 2004, and, in 2015, deliberating an overture of repentance for the past segregation of its churches. The issue of the spirituality of the church, and what it means, continues even into the twenty-first century, among a denomination consciously founded to be the continuing faithful remnant of the old Southern Presbyterian Church.\(^8^2\)

We have thus seen Palmer’s continuing significance for ongoing debates about how the church is to exist within, and to what extent and in what ways influence, the world around it. Many referred to him specifically in their efforts to bring forward his theology into the next century. Some, like Walter Lingle, tried to re-appropriate Palmer’s mantle in the interests of promoting a social gospel that was palatable to evangelicals. Others, like E. T. Thompson, tried to free the church from his influence. Many, like the *Journal*

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\(^8^2\) The author was a minister in the Presbyterian Church in America from 1997-2015.
editors and the founders of the PCA, would replicate his arguments in the cultural and ecclesiastical battles of the twentieth century.

**III. Summarisation and Conclusion of this Dissertation**

This dissertation has been a study of the public theology of Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a prominent nineteenth century American Southern Presbyterian pastor and theologian. The particular aspect of Palmer's public theology upon which we have focused is his employment of the doctrine of providence as moral justification for his interpretation of history and society. We discovered that, most often, Palmer employed a view of God's providential control of the world that maintained that 'what is, is also what ought to be,' and that he found moral justification for the status quo, and much of what happened, in the mere fact of its occurrence. At the same time, we noted that Palmer selectively and inconsistently applied this doctrine.

In our review of extant literature on nineteenth-century Southern intellectuals and public theologians, we noted that, although many studies mention Palmer's prominence, very few mention him as a public theologian, and none examine his application of the Calvinistic doctrine of providence in his public theology. Of all who have written on Palmer, only Stephen Haynes examined his thought in any depth, and Haynes's work was limited to an examination of Palmer's employment of the 'Curse of Ham' dogma in support of white supremacist thinking. Other studies confine themselves largely to Palmer's biography, his homiletical abilities, or mention in passing his signal involvement in the secession of Louisiana, or the formation of the Southern Presbyterian Church. Our dissertation addressed this neglected area of academic inquiry, and we discovered that Palmer, regarding longevity, output, the breadth of issues addressed,

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and the significance of his influence, outstripped others whose works have received far more attention. B.M. Palmer gives us a unique insight into the formation and adaptation of Southern Christian public intellectual thought throughout a significant period, as well as one of cultural devastation and rapid social change.

We began our study of Palmer’s public thought by surveying the development of the Calvinistic understanding of providence. We noted that early Calvinist thinkers tended to be very careful in seeking to determine God’s will from the events of history, delineating between what God desired, and what God allowed. We noted how this view began to change in Puritan England, and particularly amongst the leaders of the Puritan movement in the New World. We demonstrated how Palmer stood more in the line of those, like Richard and Cotton Mather, who sought to understand how God’s providential plan culminated in the American colonies, and then the American nation. Palmer’s view of providence aligns with those later Puritan thinkers who tended to equate the prospering of the American colonies, and later the United States, with the prospering of the kingdom of God. Such thinkers viewed Anglo-American culture as the apex of human achievement, a view which Palmer promoted. Palmer’s view of providence, that what occurred was reflective of God’s revealed will, was based on the fact that God had sovereignly decreed all things, and that God’s moral will, could be determined by observing historical events and human society.

We next examined the role of Scottish Common Sense Realism, and the Baconian principle of inductive reasoning, in Palmer’s providential view. We noted how Realism and induction contributed to the rise of sociology, which then provided the tools by which Palmer discerned God’s will from human events and society. We examined Palmer’s view that a scientific study of government and human society could lead humanity towards a better future. We noted the potential deficiencies of such a view, namely the tendency to select an inductive sample that served one’s pre-existing
prejudices, and bolstered the status quo. We noted the tension between Calvinist theological anthropology, which cautioned against humanity's ability to be objective in its observation of the natural order, and Realism’s confidence that human reason could discern truth from nature and history. We noted that Immanuel Kant had observed a fundamental flaw in Realism, namely that it could justify whatever existed as morally praiseworthy. We discovered that Palmer, in practice, based his public theology upon inductive observation far more than he did on Scripture or Christian doctrine. We asserted that such a view provided intellectual support for the slave society. By observation, Palmer concluded that the descendants of Africans in America were suitable for slavery because of supposed genetic predispositions and essentially were suited to be slaves because they were, in fact, enslaved. We noted that Palmer himself believed that Scripture placed boundaries on Realism’s speculation, but that he rarely, if ever, utilised Scripture to interpret his observations of historical and social data.

We next examined Palmer’s view of Biblical interpretation, history, and eschatology. We noted that, in Palmer’s public theology, all three of these areas of thought are bound together. Palmer believed human history would culminate in a millennial golden age, which the Scriptures had prophesied, and was likely imminent. We examined how Palmer’s providential view helped him quickly reconcile himself to a reunified American nation after the end of the Civil War, even while maintaining the legitimacy of the Southern cause. We noted Palmer’s propensity for referring to American history and cultural institutions with Biblical metaphor, and, moreover, directly to connect Biblical concepts and prophecy to the American experience. For instance, he argued that the American form of government was the pre-monarchical Hebrew polity *redivivus*. We noted that Palmer sought to discern divine judgment from the experiences of nations in history, yet he did not view the defeat of the South as a judgment of its social structure, but rather only as a judgment for its imperfect realisation of the slave society. We
explored how Palmer believed that history was the legitimate target for inductive study and that definite, unassailable conclusions could be scientifically discerned about God’s will from the fate of nations and rulers. We then noted Palmer’s irrepresible optimism about the future, and his trumpeting of human progress, which was rooted in his postmillennial eschatology, and also serves to illustrate his conviction that God’s providence is moving history forward in a way congruent with his moral law. We highlighted how Palmer’s vision of future glory was not so much the Christian conversion of the nations as it was the triumph of industrialisation, technology, and the advance of Western civilisation into the more ‘primitive’ parts of the world. We highlighted how Palmer viewed the triumph of white, English-speaking culture over indigenous populations as the judgment of God upon idolatrous cultures that had failed to steward their land and resources to the glory of God, here again seeing how Palmer saw moral legitimation in the historical fact of Western imperialism.

We next proceeded to examine Palmer’s public theology on the role of government and explored how Palmer appropriated the insights of political thinkers Edmund Burke, Beverley Tucker, and John C. Calhoun. We discovered that Palmer, like the thinkers above, believed that human nature was inescapably flawed, but that the way God, in his providence, moved history forward was by the institution of legitimate authority, not so much to reform human nature as to contain it. We noted that Palmer believed that God had designed authority to flow upwards from responsible patriarchal heads of households to a central authority, and not to be imposed from above. Palmer believed that social progress was necessary, and was aided by limited government, but that the danger was of utopian idealism which sought to remake society from above, without retaining the wisdom of the past. Utopian movements, Palmer believed, went against the grain of providence, while allowing a more natural flow of events tended to ‘allow’ the providence of God to bring about a more just society. We highlighted the irony of
Palmer’s holding such a view while advocating strongly for Southern secession, which resulted in a violent effort to cast off existing government authority, and ended in a radical remaking of the society he sought most to preserve. We noted, at the same time, that Palmer’s view of providence allowed him to accept Southern defeat and accommodate himself to the new political reality, and become a champion of American imperial progress.

We also noted unexpected affinities between Palmer and Hegel on government, particularly on the family as the seedbed of authority and submission, and on the nature of true liberty being not a freedom to follow one’s own desires, but the freedom to fulfil one’s obligations to one’s assigned role in society: father/patriarch, submissive wife/mother, child, or slave. This, too, related to God’s providential ordering of the world: in Palmer’s estimation, the family was God’s providential institution and the basic unit of society and governance. We noted conflicts in Palmer’s view about whether or not a government or society could be deemed to be ‘Christian’, and in what senses this could be an accurate descriptor. Palmer believed in the separation of the church from the state, but he also noted the deficiencies of both the American and Confederate constitutions in failing to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ over the nation. We noted that Palmer utilised the ideas of his friend James K. Gutheim in arguing that American federalism was a faithful replication of the Hebrew polity under the judges.

We then examined Palmer’s ardent advocacy for Southern secession from the United States, in light of his thoughts above. We noted how he found in the Scriptures a ‘principle of separation’ that God providentially ordered whenever humanity asserted itself beyond its proper bounds, such as at the Tower of Babel. We noted, however, that towards the close of his life, Palmer had made peace with ‘God’s plan’ to reincorporate the South back into the American nation, and allow it to progress on to its providential destiny as the preeminent force for worldwide civilisation.
Next, we explained Palmer’s understanding of the role of the church, and the individual Christian thinker, in relationship to government and society, which forms the crux of public theology. We explained the distinctive Southern Presbyterian understanding of the doctrine of the essential ‘spirituality’ of the church, which held that the church was to be an apolitical entity, and, as such mute on matters of politics. We surveyed the historical antecedents and creedal formulations of the spirituality doctrine. We then explored the range of Southern Presbyterian understandings of the doctrine and placed Palmer within the range of those who formally held to the doctrine, but who did not view such as limiting the involvement of Christian pastors as public theologians and intellectuals. We noted that Palmer saw and referred to himself as such, but that Palmer virtually never addressed public matters in his regular Sunday preaching. We critiqued the explanations of the doctrine and its implications by historians Ernest Trice Thompson and Jack Maddex, who note its importance for understanding Southern history and justifications for the maintenance of the slave society.

We discovered affinities between Palmer’s understanding and practice of the spirituality doctrine with S. T. Coleridge’s notion of a *clerisy*, an educated class whose function within society was to mediate the formative thoughts and behaviours necessary for social cohesion between the ruling class and the people. We noted that Coleridge, like Palmer, held the clergy’s essential spiritual function as distinct from their function as public intellectuals. We noted that Palmer saw himself in this role primarily as the interpreter of providence – one given a role by God within the broader public sphere to interpret world events and form public opinion. As an educated member of the clergy, it was his duty to explain the mysterious workings of providence so that his readers and auditors could adjust their thoughts and behaviours accordingly. We noted that he did this with apparent effectiveness particularly in the matter of Southern secession.
We then explained Palmer’s role in the formation of the Southern Presbyterian Church, and his ongoing assertion that the distinctive doctrine that separated the Southern Old School church from its Northern brethren was not slavery or secession, per se, but differing understandings of the spirituality of the church. Whereas in Palmer’s estimation, the Northern church abandoned the historic restraint of the Presbyterian church on matters political, the Southern church remained apolitical, and this was the essential sticking point preventing reunion between the two. We noted, however, apparent inconsistencies in both Palmer’s practice, and that of the Southern church at large. We noted how complex a matter it was for the church to attempt to retain neutrality, or to remain mute, in matters roiling an entire populace.

Though, as we stated above, the vast majority of Palmer’s preaching was a-political, we examined the few times in his career when he abandoned this restraint, and examined how Palmer employed Biblical analogy and metaphor as he expounded upon the matter of Northern tyranny and the legitimacy of Southern secession and war-making. Finally, we noted two instances, separate from matters related to slavery and secession, where Palmer lent his public clout and oratory to larger public moral crusades: leading the force to abolish the Louisiana State Lottery, and to promote public observance of the Sunday Sabbath. We saw how these issues formed interesting case studies related to Palmer’s practice of the spirituality of the church. We noted how this public advocacy brought a backlash against Palmer in the press, but that he found this gratifying rather than chastening. For Palmer, retaining the church’s essentially a-political nature did not bind him as a Christian pastor from advocating for what he saw as Christian positions on public policy. We noted the difficulty, and the seemingly arbitrary choices, that must be made as the Christian pastor decides which issues are moral, and which are strictly political. We echoed the concerns of others who have noted that it served the interests of the Southern power elite rather well to have a church that
was silent on the matter of race-based slavery, exempting it as an issue free from moral qualm.

Finally, we examined Palmer’s view of the role of race and ethnicity in the providential plan of God. We noted that Palmer viewed what he termed the ‘Anglo-Saxon’ race, by which he meant white, English-speaking peoples, as having been given the particular duty of God to be preeminent among the ethnicities of the world. It was on the American continent, Palmer thought, that the Anglo-Saxon race came into its own, and had space and natural resources to rise to its full vigour. With great privilege came the great responsibility of civilising the world, and bringing truth to its less-fortunate and benighted peoples. We saw how Palmer asserted that Anglo-Saxon ruled societies, were more peaceable and productive than in cultures where other races attempted to rule themselves. We saw how, within this broader classification, discrete people groups had their own subsets of the divine mandate: the American Southern manifestation of the Anglo-Saxon race had the providential responsibility for realising the ideal patriarchal society, enslaving Africans for their protection and betterment. We noted that Palmer asserted these ideas even as the rest of the world, and the Christian church, denounced them as noxious and heretical. We noted, in particular, the work of fellow orthodox Calvinist Alexander McLeod, who argued strongly against Palmer’s views of black racial inferiority, and against the institution of race-based slavery. We then noted that, even as Southern Presbyterians argued that Africans and their descendants benefited from slavery, they rejected the current science that hypothesised that blacks were a different, inferior species. We noted that Palmer argued that black men and women were descended, like whites, from Adam and Eve, and were therefore created in God’s image, and to be evangelised. We asserted that this was an instance where Palmer’s Biblical convictions kept him from embracing a scientific argument that would have bolstered his trumpeting of white supremacy.
We then noted Palmer’s fondness for German historical philosopher Friedrich von Schlegel, although we asserted that Palmer fundamentally misread Schlegel. Palmer viewed Schlegel’s opinion that great historical peoples had unique contributions to be made to the progress of world history as foundational to his understanding of divine providence. God had assigned roles to civilisations, and they either succeeded or failed at these tasks. We noted that Palmer departed from Schlegel in asserting the inferiority of Chinese and Islamic cultures, which Schlegel viewed as great. We also noted that Schlegel, unlike Palmer, argued for the essential virtue of the black race. What is more, Schlegel argued against the concept of primitive and advanced cultures, asserting that the supposed civilised races were even more barbaric than supposed savages. We thus contended that Palmer misappropriated Schlegel for his own purposes.

We then examined the work of Thomas Virgil Peterson and Stephen Haynes on Palmer’s employment of the ‘Curse of Ham’ doctrine, which was that the descendants of Noah’s son, Ham, were under a curse of perpetual servitude. We noted that Haynes asserts this doctrine as the key to Palmer’s thought, although we differ from him on that point, finding the curse of Ham idea to form a minor note in Palmer’s thinking about race.

Finally, we explored Palmer’s thinking on the relationship between the black and the white races in the decades following the Civil War. In Palmer’s view, God had providentially eradicated slavery, and he therefore had no desire to see it reconstituted. At the same time, Palmer held that God had intended the races to remain separate, both in society and in the church. Palmer believed the Southern Presbyterian Church had a responsibility towards its black members, but that black Christians were genetically disqualified for leadership, particularly leadership over whites. We saw that, in Palmer’s view, the principle of induction and the ‘what is, is also what ought to be’ view of providence extended even to how the church ought to be ordered on issues of race. We
asserted that Palmer viewed ‘obvious’ white giftedness to rule in the world made them alone fit to rule in the church. We noted that Palmer’s fellow Southern Old School Presbyterian, B. B. Warfield strongly opposed Palmer’s view of the ecclesiastical inequality of African American Christians. We noted, however, that Palmer believed the black race capable of ‘improvement,’ and desired African Americans to embrace education and whatever it took to become a historical people, whatever his view of their present capacities.

We then examined B. M. Palmer’s rather intriguing thoughts and interactions with Jews. We noted the close friendships that Palmer developed with leading Reform Jewish rabbis in New Orleans and his work on behalf of persecuted Eastern European Jews. We examined Palmer’s extensive thinking on Jewish history and character and noted that he viewed the Jews through the same sorts of lenses he used to view other civilisations. His uncharitable estimations and prejudiced viewing of Jewish history were, in his mind, provable by the inductive method. For Palmer, God’s providence had consigned the Jews to an interesting history. On the one hand, the Jews were beloved on account of the patriarchs, and the lineage of Christ, as Paul noted in Romans 9. On the other hand, the Jews were destined to be persecuted and despised because of their rejection of Christ and persecution of the fledgeling Christian church. Moreover, their supposed shrewd character made them successful in trade and finance, but, on the whole, in Palmer’s estimation, they produced nothing of value in human progress or terms of goods. Despite all of this, however, Palmer did enjoy the admiration of the Jewish community of New Orleans, which was remarkable considering the doctrinal and social distance between an Old School Presbyterian of harshly bigoted opinions, and cultivated New Orleans Jews. Once again, we saw how Palmer’s ‘what is, is also what ought to be’ view of providence in one sense legitimated Jewish suffering, but that, in this case, Palmer rose above that particular opinion to offer aid and comfort to Jewish emigres.
We concluded our examination of Palmer's view on race as it related to his view of God's providence and public theology by noting that nowhere do we see more clearly Palmer's use of induction, realism, sociological insight, and his providential view than in his view of how races and cultures relate to one another. The status quo, of white, English-speaking world domination was one of Palmer's chief arguments for American supremacy. The mere existence of the global British empire and the expanding American imperial project demonstrated, in Palmer's mind, that God had given the ‘Anglo-Saxons’ the role of shepherd and steward of the world.

This dissertation is a contribution to the scholarly investigation of Southern Presbyterian public theology. In particular, we have asserted the often overlooked application of the Reformed doctrine of providence as a formative principle in Southern Presbyterian public theology. Benjamin Morgan Palmer is the ideal subject for this investigation because he is often overlooked as a theologian, his prominence as a public intellectual, and of the relative consistency of his employment of the doctrine of providence throughout his long career, and the amount of writing and speaking he did throughout the decades of massive societal change in America. Our findings have compared Palmer’s thought to his contemporaries, and to other philosophers and public intellectuals, and we have discovered distinctions between Palmer and his peers, and affinities between Palmer and preeminent political thinkers. We have also interacted with other academic investigations of Southern Presbyterian thought and noted where our findings have differed. Our chief contribution is our examination of the alteration of the Reformed view of providence that was the moulding force behind Palmer's public thought. We have demonstrated that Palmer stands more in the train of British and American Reformed pastors who sought to interpret God's providence from the events of history and the makeup of society than he does in the tradition of the more cautious early Reformers and Reformed scholastics. Other contributions of this study include an
examination of Palmer’s employment of Common Sense Realist thought and the principle of induction to social questions, his particular understanding of the call of God upon particular civilisations in history, and his application of the spirituality of the church principle in a way distinct from many of his peers.

Our findings concerning Palmer’s employment of the doctrine of providence as a way of legitimising the status quo and white power structure of the nineteenth century South constitute our primary contribution to the scholarly discussion of Southern public theology. Our study of Palmer suggests that understanding the ‘what is, is also what ought to be’ view of providence, bolstered by inductive observation, provides answers to the many questions of the academic community regarding the motivating principles behind Southern public theology in the nineteenth century. Since Palmer is representative of a prominent Southern Presbyterian theologian, his employment of the doctrine of providence offers a fuller explanation of the underlying doctrinal commitments and thought of nineteenth century Southern Presbyterianism.
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