Journal of Presbyterian History

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Journal of Presbyterian History

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By Haskell Monroe

Dr. Monroe is Assistant Professor of History at Texas A and M University. He is the editor of the forthcoming series of the Papers of Jefferson Davis and is at work on a book-length study of the division of the Church in 1861 and the formation of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States.

SOUTH CAROLINIANS AND THE FORMATION OF THE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH IN THE CONFEDERATE STATES OF AMERICA

In the summer of 1861, many Presbyterians in the South anxiously considered the formation of a new independent organization for their denomination in the Confederate States. While numerous suggestions circulated in regard to this matter, one South Carolina minister called for decisive action. "There should be no time lost in the permanent organization of the Confederate [Presbyterian] Church," he declared. "She should be getting ready for embarking fully in the work of her Master. She should have, as speedily as possible, her Committees of Missions, Foreign and Domestic, of Education, and, if need be, of Publication and Church Extension. A great work is before her. Let her gird up her loins, and set resolutely about it."[1]

The author of these remarks was James Henley Thornwell, the recognized leader among Presbyterians in the Slave States and one

[1] Benjamin M. Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (Richmond, 1875), 495.

of the foremost churchmen of his section. This native Carolinian possessed numerous academic and theological honors, served as a member of the faculty of Columbia Theological Seminary, and ministered to the Presbyterian congregation in the state capital. Although a tiny man physically, weak in body but powerful in spirit, some Southerners, especially orthodox Calvinists, thought of him as almost an oracle on theological matters. For some years Thornwell, and many of his ministerial colleagues in the South, had taken a deep interest in the public issues before the nation. In South Carolina, this interest in topics of public concern was particularly evident. There many citizens referred to Thornwell as the "Calhoun of the Church," indicating the vigorous manner in which he defended Dixie, in political as well as religious matters. But he was not alone in this role. Indeed, many clergymen began to reflect the attitudes of the Southern politicians. Thus these men of the cloth offered theological support for the proponents of state rights. By 1860, it was difficult for any South Carolinian to remain silent on such heated subjects as state rights and slavery.

As the sectional crisis moved nearer civil conflict in 1860, South Carolina Presbyterians took an active part in both the political and religious affairs of the state. These denominationalists attended services in congregations allied with one of three different religious bodies. The overwhelming majority belonged to the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, Old School, which dominated Presbyterian affairs in the state. This conservative group dated from a schism of conservative and liberal factions of the national denomination in 1837 and 1838, and included more than one hundred thousand communicants in the Slave States. Other South Carolinians were members of the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod of the South, a group of less than ten thousand believers, or the Independent Presbyterian Church, an organization of four congregations in the vicinity of Yorkville, South Carolina.

The Old School Synod of South Carolina, composed of the Presbyteries of Bethel, Charleston, Harmony, and South Carolina, numbered one hundred ministers, ten licentiates, seventeen candidates, and one hundred and thirty-three congregations. Largest of these local organizations was the John's Island and Wadmalaw group with 570 members, closely followed by the Second Church of Charleston, the Zion congregation in the same city, (composed almost entirely of

Negro slaves shepherded by white church officers), the group at Indian Town, and the venerable Upper Long Cane Church near Abbeville Court House.[2]

The Seminary at Columbia was the focal point for the denomination in the state. This institution, founded in 1828 and administered by the Synods of South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama, had furnished many of the ministers in the southeastern states. In addition to Thornwell, the Seminary's highly respected faculty included George Howe and A. W. Leland, both with almost thirty years' experience, and John B. Adger, an accomplished linguist and church historian. Then in 1861, James Woodrow, a Doctor of Philosophy from Heidelberg, an ordained minister and medical practitioner, came to the Seminary as the Perkins Professor of Natural Science in its Relations to Revealed Religion. These scholars, plus a theological library of almost 18,000 volumes, a collection probably unequalled by any other theological institution in the nation, attracted a record enrollment of sixty-two men to the red brick buildings of the campus in 1860.[3]

In addition to the Seminary faculty, there were a number of other well-known Presbyterian ministers in the state. This group included Thomas Smyth, the scholarly pastor at the Second Church in Charleston, whose impressive personal library comprised most of the volumes in the Seminary collection. In addition to his pastoral duties, Smyth was a regular contributor to a number of journals and maintained a correspondence with many prominent clergymen in the nation. Also in Charleston, John L. Girardeau, said to be "an able, earnest, and eloquent preacher," attracted Negro worshippers to the Zion Congregation largely by the fervor and impact of his pulpit messages.[4] Both these pastors, and a number of other clergymen in the state, had become actively outspoken on political matters during the years after the Compromise of 1850. At that time, most Presbyterians

[2] "Minutes of Synod of South Carolina, 1858–1881," 97–100 (November 7, 1861), MS, Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, N. C.; *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America* (Augusta, 1861–1863), 212–217.

[3] *Catalogue of the Officers and Students of the Theological Seminary, at Columbia, South Carolina, for the year 1860–1861* (Columbia, 1861); *Memorial Volume of the Semi-Centennial of the Theological Seminary at Columbia, S. C.* (Columbia, 1884), 155.

[4] Fayetteville (N. C.) *North Carolina Presbyterian*, May 5, 1860.

quietly had supported moderation, but gradually they became more vocal as the sectional crisis deepened.

Public spokesman for these churchmen was the *Southern Presbyterian,* a denominational weekly published in Charleston until the autumn of 1860, when Abner A. Porter became editor and moved the paper to Columbia. From that time, this dynamic and outspoken sectionalist threw the weight of his columns behind the movement for Southern rights.[5] This paper not only presented its readers with material on many topics, but took an active role in verbal defense of the South. So outspoken was the sheet in sectional matters that critics attacked it both as a political paper and as Thornwell's private organ, but, editor Porter replied, everyone "ought to know that Dr. Thornwell is not accustomed to employ others to speak for him, and . . . ought to have the decency and courtesy to suppose that the *Southern Presbyterian* speaks for itself."[6]

Like most other residents below Mason and Dixon's Line, Porter and his fellow Presbyterians tirelessly defended slavery. For many years the "peculiar institution of the South" had been a topic of concern to the General Assembly, but in 1849 the Old School decided to adopt a policy of silence on the subject. This decision ended a long debate over slavery in the Old School Assembly and pleased Southern communicants who insisted the denomination should avoid taking an official position on this topic. The New School actively criticized the basic institution of society in Dixie while Southern clergymen quoted Scripture to support involuntary servitude. Thornwell insisted the church had "no commission to construct society afresh" and could attack slavery no more justly than the jurisdiction of denominational bodies, and churchmen should concentrate instead on promoting the proper relationship between master and slave.[7]

Thornwell and his seminary colleague, John B. Adger, led their denominational brethren in public consideration of the social implications of slavery. Both emphasized the duties of masters to care

[5] Henry S. Stroupe, *The Religious Press in the South Atlantic States, 1802–1865* (Durham, N. C., 1956), 120–121.

[6] Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian,* February 16, 1861.

[7] James Henley Thornwell, *Report on the Subject of Slavery presented to the Synod of South Carolina, at their session in Winnsboro, November 6th, 1851* (Columbia, 1852).

for the material as well as the spiritual welfare of their servants and agreed the foreign slave trade should not be reopened. Should this trade resume, they argued, the entire institution would be changed. The introduction of large numbers of Africans would hinder efforts to civilize the slaves, would invite abolitionist attacks, and would result in ominous consequences for the South.[8]

With such topics on the minds of churchmen, 1860 opened on a comparatively calm note, in spite of the coming presidential election. South Carolina presbyteries were relatively free of sectional discussions in their spring meetings.[9] Perhaps the most disturbing trend in the Synod was the financial difficulty of the *Southern Presbyterian Review,* the praiseworthy quarterly edited in Columbia by Thornwell, Adger, and George Howe. Although this was probably the foremost journal of its type in the South Atlantic States and received wide acclaim, it never was able to avoid monetary worries.[10]

One cause for concern over the well-being of the *Review* was the desire to provide Dixie Presbyterians with a Southern journal and to reduce their dependence on Northern publications. This desire typified the increasing emphasis on sectional bias in all facets of life in the South. This same attitude reminded churchmen in the Slave States of one of their smoldering complaints about the Old School's organizational structure: the powerful administrative boards of the denomination centered in Philadelphia, agencies which often seemed to these critics to operate in a high-handed fashion, almost free of Assembly direction.

One of the most alarming threats to continued harmony within the Old School was the increasing distrust of Southerners for visitors from the North. In most communities, residents wanted no critical evaluation of slavery and frequently suspected travellers of preaching revolt to the Negroes. Fear of outsiders might be directed at any visitor. Such suspicion often affected ministers and more than one

[8] James Henley Thornwell, *The Rights and Duties of Masters* (Charleston, 1851); John B. Adger, *The Doctrine of Human Rights and Slavery* (Columbia, 1849); Palmer, *Thornwell,* 422–423, 436; John B. Adger, "Revival of the Slave Trade," *Southern Presbyterian Journal,* XI (1858–1859), 100.

[9] Close scrutiny of South Carolina presbytery and synod records reveals no mention of dividing the Old School until near the end of 1860.

[10] Stroupe, *Religious Press,* 122; Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian,* March 10, 1860; Fayetteville (N. C.) *North Carolina Presbyterian,* April 14, 1860; New Orleans *True Witness,* April 7, 1860.

clergyman found himself coolly received when he accepted a new pastorate. Significantly, one of the notable exceptions to this trend was the reception given Gardiner Spring, the venerable minister of the prestigious Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City, when he visited Charleston, early in 1860. Low County residents welcomed this aged theologian, one of the patriarchs of the Old School, when he preached from Thomas Smyth's pulpit at the Second Church, and he returned home with a clearer understanding of Carolina religious views.[11]

As the date approached for the 1860 Old School General Assembly, scheduled to convene in May at Rochester, New York, some pessimists predicted a schism in the denomination. Such a sectional division had occurred in 1858 in the New School, the more liberal faction of Presbyterians in the United States, and some observers did not believe the Old School could avoid a similar fate. But the Rochester Assembly proved to be relatively free from divisive arguments. Carolinians were particularly pleased when John B. Adger received the second highest vote in the election of the new moderator and they joined once more in the renewed but unsuccessful effort to curtail the power of the administrative boards. This attempt, almost entirely a Southern move, closely followed Thornwell's repeated pleas for presbytery direction of all missions work, which would create a sort of state rights within the denomination.[12]

When the Assembly adjourned, to reconvene in Philadelphia in May, 1861, Southerners proudly noted the unity of the meeting and repeatedly praised the Rochester gathering. "It is this bringing of men, who really fancy themselves as in some sense hostile to each other, face to face, that corrects the mischievous conceit," one denominational editor declared, and Abner Porter asserted that the Old School was one of the "few remaining ligaments" which still bound the nation together.[13]

But the national presidential election strained these ties sorely. Almost in horror, churchmen watched the nation unfurl its political

[11] Fayetteville (N. C.) *North Carolina Presbyterian*, April 7, 1860.

[12] *Ibid.*, June 9, 1860; John B. Adger and John L. Girardeau (eds.), *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell, D. D.* (Richmond, 1873), IV, 145–295.

[13] Richmond (Va.) *Central Presbyterian*, June 9, 1860; Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian*, May 26, 1860.

hatred. Some of these citizens had hoped to remain aloof from political arguments. But as flesh and blood, they did join in the fray. For a few weeks, South Carolina Presbyterians apparently could not believe the Republican Party and Abraham Lincoln would win the canvass. Then the spectre of a victory for their sectional opponents seemed to jar these observers into action. They had remained strangely silent on public issues during the height of the campaign. Even the *Southern Presbyterian* attacked "political preachers" who discussed non-religious topics from the pulpit.[14] Finally, however, when the election returns confirmed Lincoln's election, these Southerners dropped all their reservations and joined the loud voices which proclaimed that the time had come for decisive action.

Once more, James Henley Thornwell was in the forefront of the public discussions. Earlier in the year, he had gone to Europe to recover from a series of stomach disorders. Returning in September, the frail minister threw the might of his prestige into the movement for Southern nationalism. He and a number of other ministers used the state fast day of November 21 as an occasion for sermons relating to political topics. Thornwell, Thomas Smyth, W. C. Dana of Charleston's Central Church, and Zelotes L. Holmes at the Rocky Springs Church, all delivered notable sermons which endorsed secession.[15] They showered condemnation upon the enemies of the South in general and the Republicans in particular as protagonists whose "higher law" would silence the Constitution, alter the nature of the Union, and terminate the Southern way of life.

The *Southern Presbyterian,* which in September had condemned such public statements by men of God, now unreservedly joined the disunionists and became the first denominational paper in Dixie to propose political separation from the Federal Union. Editor Porter soon claimed that Presbyterians of South Carolina disagreed only over

[14] *Ibid.*, September 29, 1860.

[15] James Henley Thornwell, *National Sins. A Fast-Day Sermon: preached in the Presbyterian Church, Columbia, S. C., Wednesday, November 21, 1860* (Columbia, 1860); Thomas Smyth, *The Sin and the Curse; or, The Union, and the true source of disunion, and our duty in the present crisis. A discourse preached on the occasion of the day of humiliation and prayer appointed by the Governor of South Carolina on Nov. 21st, 1860, in the Second Presbyterian Church, Charleston, S. C.* (Charleston, 1860); W. C. Dana, *A sermon delivered in the Central Presbyterian Church, Charleston, S. C., November 21st, 1860* (Charleston, 1860); Laurensville (S. C.) *Herald*, November 30, 1860.

the proper time their state should leave the Union, but he admitted these people did so with "emotions of grief." Yet he counselled against faltering: "The day of destiny comes on. Our watchword is—God and our rights." But even in his zeal for Southern rights, this clergyman turned journalist still remembered to be proud of the continued unity of his denomination.[16]

Meanwhile, others in the state shifted to a defense of sectionalism, but with varying degrees of enthusiasm. In Charleston, Smyth quietly mourned the end of national unity. He admitted his support for disunion, but he felt the South had no choice.[17] With opinions ranging from the immediate enthusiasm of Thornwell and Porter, to the hesitation of Smyth, most Carolina Presbyterians backed their political leaders' decision to lead the secession movement. Soon, one observer reported he thought every minister in the state favored secession, for he had been unable to find any men of the cloth who had spoken against disunion.[18]

But individual communicants waited for some official denominational body to discuss the religious implications of recent events in the political realm. This opportunity arrived when the Synod of South Carolina convened at the Glebe Street Church in Charleston on November 28. With almost one hundred ministers and elders in attendance and secession talk on every tongue, the delegates could not have avoided discussing the civil events around them, even if they had desired to do so. Soon after the deliberations began, a member of Charleston Presbytery introduced a series of resolutions which condemned "all of the ecclesiastical bodies of the North" as enemies of the South, attacked Yankee Presbyterians for their anti-slavery arguments, and recommended that all South Carolina Presbyteries "take steps to dissolve their connection with the General Assembly." An additional recommendation suggested the selection of a committee

[16] Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian*, November 9, 17, December 15, 1860.

[17] Thomas Smyth (Charleston, S. C.) to unknown person, undated, MSS, Letters of Thomas Smyth, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.; Louisa C. Stoney (ed.), *Autobiographical Notes, Letters and Reflections by Thomas Smyth, D. D.* (Charleston, 1914), 564–566.

[18] "One of the Presbyters" (Sumter District, S. C.) to Rev. Robert J. Breckinridge, January 29, 1861, MSS, Breckinridge Papers, Library of Congress.

"to correspond with Synods and Presbyteries, South, with the view of forming a Southern Assembly."[19]

After heated discussion of this question, Synod voted, seventy-seven to twenty-one, to table these resolutions. Then the Moderator appointed a special committee of nine members, including Adger and John L. Girardeau, to prepare a "minute expressing the views of this body as to the duty of our churches & people in the existing condition of our country." The report of this group carefully avoided the question of dividing the Old School, by declaring the Synod could not inaugurate such a move. "It can only begin in the Church-Sessions, where Presbyterian sovereignty lies, and must issue forth through the Presbyteries," insisted the report, which went on to charge that, in the North, "political intermeddling by professed Ministers of the Gospel . . . has contributed, perhaps more than any other cause, to bring the Country to its present condition." But the committee did proclaim that in the matter of disunion, "there is now a great and solemn question before the people of this State." To answer this question, these committeemen asserted that they felt "no hesitation . . . in expressing the belief that the people of South Carolina are now solemnly called on to imitate their revolutionary forefathers and . . . stand up for their rights."[20]

The Synod's public statement appeared on the eve of the opening of the South Carolina Secession Convention and, no doubt, reassured the political leaders, who voted unanimously to guide the state out of the Union. Soon Presbyterian clergymen joined in public acclaim for this decision. In a frequently quoted and reprinted work, *The State of the Country,* Thornwell described the act of secession as "one of the most grave and important events of modern times." Just as the Synod had centered on slavery in its condemnation of the Northern wing of the Old School, Thornwell demonstrated his belief that the "peculiar institution" was the primary issue in the sectional arguments. After discussing the matter at length, this theologian declared, "The real cause of the intense excitement of the South . . . is the profound conviction that the Constitution, in its relations to slavery, has been virtually repealed."[21]

[19] "South Carolina Synod Minutes, 1858–1881," 64–65 (November 28, 1860).

[20] *Ibid.*, 82–84 (December 1, 1860).

[21] James Henley Thornwell, *The State of the Country* (Columbia, 1861).

The outspoken pulpit orator closed his work with the ringing assurance, "Conquered we can never be," and other Presbyterians in the state echoed this attitude. Smyth dropped his hesitancy and now added his pen and voice to the defenders of the South and her institutions, while the *Southern Presbyterian* regularly applauded the secessionists. This paper not only supported disunion but began to point to religious bases of the events in Dixie, citing such factors as the "Trust of the South in God." Soon the *Southern Presbyterian* praised the meeting of the Provisional Government of the Confederate States, but warned readers not to put their trust in men alone. Then, as he asked for prayers on behalf of the success of the Confederate Congress, Abner Porter argued that "it appears . . . most evident that the hand of Providence has wrought manifestly and most successfully on behalf of the Southern cause." [22]

Such sentiments of divine interest were common throughout the spring, and President Jefferson Davis agreed when he proclaimed: "We feel that our cause is just and holy." [23] But Presbyterians could not give all of their attention to political events, for the meeting of the 1861 General Assembly was not far in the future. The widening rift between the sections sorely affected the prospects for this gathering, which were further complicated by the firing on Fort Sumter, barely a month previous to the date set for the Philadelphia Assembly. Since many presbyteries customarily selected Assembly commissioners in the fall, these bodies now began to reconsider their relation to the Old School and the wisdom of being represented in the Assembly. With the nation divided, observers wondered if the denomination could remain united.

Once more, the *Southern Presbyterian* reflected the attitudes of its many contributors. As early as mid-March, this paper looked forward "ultimately" to the creation of a Presbyterian Church in the Confederacy, but added, "when we separate from the North ecclesiastically, we shall wish to do it, as we wish to do so politically, in peace and kindness." Thomas Smyth followed this statement with a discussion of the question, "Shall Our Church Divide?" Although he granted the possibility of a future separation, Smyth

[22] Stoney (ed.), *Smyth*, 592–593; Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian*, February 2, 9, 1861.

[23] J. William Jones, *Christ in the Camp; or, Religion in Lee's Army* (Richmond, 1888), 43.

begged for "a masterly inactivity," to allow for patience and moderation. [24]

By mid-April, with Fort Sumter in Confederate control and the Philadelphia Assembly only a few weeks away, numerous churchmen began to consider the fate of Presbyterianism in the South if general conflict ensued. A series of articles in the *Southern Presbyterian* demanded that the Assembly officially recognize slavery as a social institution or the presbyteries in the Confederacy would have to go their own way. Then this paper published a notice of the local arrangements for the Philadelphia deliberations, and acknowledged receipt of predictions of physical harm to Southerners visiting the "City of Brotherly Love." Finally, late in April, Abner Porter made his private attitude public, when, in a lengthy editorial, he declared a division of the Old School would soon be "desirable and necessary," and predicted few Southerners would venture northward to the Assembly. [25]

Meanwhile, three South Carolina presbyteries met to consider the advisability of sending commissioners to Philadelphia. While the bombardment of Sumter reverberated across the Low Country, Charleston Presbytery convened in Orangeburg and quickly decided not to send any commissioners. South Carolina Presbytery adopted the same policy, charging that Lincoln was "inaugurating civil war," and thus commissioners could not be expected to travel "in the midst of the enemies of our peace and of our rights." Harmony Presbytery followed suit, and although Bethel Presbytery held no meeting to discuss the matter at this time, its representatives also stayed home. Later, when these presbyters justified their failure to be represented at Philadelphia, they referred to "the armed hostility" and "threats" of the hosts, and spoke for many Southerners when they mentioned "the conviction that our absence might contribute . . . to throw the responsibility wholly on the North of any political deliverance of the Assembly." [26]

[24] Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian*, March 16, 30, 1861.

[25] *Ibid.*, April 23, 1861.

[26] "Minutes of Presbytery of Charleston, 1853–1864," 387 (April 11, 1861), MS, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.; "Minutes of Presbytery of South Carolina, 1855–1867," 332–333 (April 19, 1861), MS, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.; Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian*, May 25, 1861; "Minutes of Presbytery of Bethel, 1850–1868," (July 16, 1861), MS, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.

As the Assembly convened on May 16 in Philadelphia's Seventh Presbyterian Church, only fourteen commissioners from the deep South were present. Two others joined this group later, but no one was present from any of the southeastern synods, and Southern representation included none of the acknowledged leaders from the section. Indeed, the total attendance was considerably below normal, with 264 men present compared to 336 a year earlier. Thornwell, still quite ill and unable to return either to his classroom or pulpit, sent a message to the Assembly which conveyed his greetings and explained his infirmities. The outspoken Carolinian also reminded his former colleagues that recent events rendered it "inexpedient, if not impossible" for him to be present, although he hoped all churchmen would strive for peace. Then, as Thornwell closed his message, he clearly identified his personal loyalties, then implored God's aid in restoring harmony "between your country and mine." [27]

Soon after the Assembly completed the routine business of the opening sessions, the venerable Dr. Spring, who had visited Charleston a year earlier, proposed the appointment of a committee "to inquire into the expediency of making some expression of . . . devotion to the Union of these States, and . . . loyalty to the Government." Although the Assembly tabled this proposal, Spring's remarks touched off intricate parliamentary maneuvers on this topic of loyalty and the public press began to discuss the Assembly's debates in detail.[28] Finally, during the sixth session of the deliberations, Spring rose again and read a lengthy statement to the commissioners, which he began with a brief preface, "Gratefully acknowledging the distinguished bounty and care of Almighty God toward this favored land, and also recognizing our obligations to submit to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake." Then he proposed two resolutions: the first to select July 1 as a national day of prayer for blessing on the nation, its rulers, and "the Congress of the United States about to assemble." Spring's second resolution specifically referred to the government in Washington: "That in the judgment of this Assembly, it is the duty of the ministry and churches under its care to do all in their power to promote and perpetuate the integrity of these

[27] Adger and Girardeau (eds.), *Works of Thornwell*, IV, 348–349.

[28] *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, 1861* (Philadelphia, 1861), 303.

United States, and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage the Federal Government." [29]

These "Spring Resolutions" produced a week of heated debate, in which politics and religion became more closely intertwined. Eventually proponents rephrased the second "Resolution" and added a clarifying paragraph to it: "And to avoid all misconception, the Assembly declare that by the terms 'Federal Government,' as here used, is not meant any particular administration, or the particular opinions of any particular party, but that central administration, which being at any time appointed and inaugurated according to the forms prescribed in the Constitution of the United States, is the visible representative of our national existence." [30]

Although the few Southerners in attendance protested against these "Spring Resolutions," they were unsuccessful, and passage of these proposals shattered any hope for continued unity of the Old School. News of the proceedings in Philadelphia reached the South slowly, but provoked angry reactions whenever churchmen read accounts of the Assembly's decisions.

All over South Carolina, Presbyterians joined in condemning the Old School's actions. Abner Porter and the *Southern Presbyterian* declared no Southerner should have gone to Philadelphia in the first place, and should not have remained there after the introduction of the "Spring Resolutions." Also, members of the Synod of South Carolina were incensed over the fact that their minute book was not returned after it had been forwarded for the annual review by the Assembly. Meanwhile, in Charleston, Thomas Smyth reviewed the recent events for his congregation and thought he saw God's hand clearly at work in behalf of the South, especially in the struggle for Fort Sumter. To him the result of the battle was a "pledge and promise of God's continued providence and protection over us." Thus, Smyth prophesized that the Almighty was preparing the way for "final separation from the North, in Church and State." [31]

John B. Adger reviewed the Assembly in detail for the *Southern*

[29] Joseph M. Wilson (ed.), *Presbyterian Historical Almanac and Annual Remembrancer of the Church for 1861* (Philadelphia, 1861), 69.

[30] *Minutes, General Assembly, USA, 1861*, 329–330.

[31] Thomas Smyth, *The War of the South Vindicated and the War Against the South Condemned. A discourse preached on occasion of the appointment by the now sectionalized General Assembly of the O. S. Presbyterian Church, of the Fourth of July as a day of prayer for the Lincoln usurpation* (Charleston, 1861).

Presbyterian Review and angrily denounced the whole affair as "wicked" and "absurd." In his opinion, the commissioners had made their "chief business the passage of 'the loyalty resolutions.'" But even as he criticized the Old School Assembly, Adger looked forward to a new organization in the South, a body free from the powerful administrative boards, which Southerners had criticized for so long. "Take away your inventions of men—your Yankee notions in Church machinery, your rags and tatters of Congregationalism," he begged, "and give us the natural and simple operation of the ordinances of Christ." [32]

Even before the bombardment of Sumter and contrary to public protests over the "Spring Resolutions," some Presbyterian leaders in the South privately had considered the prospects of an independent denomination in the Confederacy. Adger described his desire for a separate Assembly to a friend, "because now that the country is divided I feel sure the church must divide also." Soon another minister agreed that "there must and ought to be" a division of the Old School.[33] But these men and their Southern colleagues did not attempt to implement their hopes until after the Philadelphia Assembly. Meanwhile, a new foreign missions agency was taking shape in Columbia. J. Leighton Wilson, a native of Sumter County, headed this work and brought to it unusual experience. A veteran of nineteen years as a missionary in West Africa and seven years as secretary of the Old School mission board in New York, he declined re-election to his post early in 1861 and came back to his native state. First Wilson enlisted the assistance of ministers in the vicinity of Columbia. Then, he circulated a public appeal for funds which would enable the new agency to assume support of Southern men and women ministering to the nations beyond the Mississippi and to the pagans overseas.[34]

[32] John B. Adger, "The General Assembly of 1861," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XIV (1861), 296–349.

[33] John B. Adger (Columbia, S. C.) to Thomas Smyth, February 23, 1861, and Abner A. Porter (Columbia, S. C.) to Thomas Smyth, March 21, 1861, MSS, Letters of Thomas Smyth.

[34] J. Leighton Wilson (New York, New York) to Abner A. Porter, May 6, 1861, MSS, Letters received by Rev. A. A. Porter, editor of the *Southern Presbyterian*, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.; Stoney (ed.), *Smyth*, 621; Hampden C. Dubose, *Memoirs of Rev. John Leighton Wilson, D. D., Missionary to Africa; and Secretary of Foreign Missions* (Richmond, 1895), 246–265.

Before any South Carolina presbytery formally considered the "Spring Resolutions," two other groups called on Southerners to leave the Old School. Orange Presbytery in North Carolina met on June 12 and, after three days of deliberation, resolved that Presbyterians in the Confederate States "should establish for themselves a separate kingdom." In order to do this, the men of Orange recommended that all presbyteries in the South join in a preliminary convention on December 4, 1861, in Augusta, Georgia.[35]

Meanwhile, Memphis Presbytery considered the same topics and voted to terminate ecclesiastical relations with the Old School Assembly. This body recommended that other groups follow their example, then elect commissioners to an organizational assembly to convene in Memphis in May, 1862. But in order to provide interim planning and coordination, these West Tennessee churchmen suggested a "Special Meeting" in Atlanta on August 15, "to consult upon various important matters, especially our benevolent operations." Elsewhere East Alabama Presbytery agreed and a group of Virginians suggested a meeting in Richmond prior to a call for an organizational assembly.[36]

Such suggestions soon received a general public hearing. The average communicant, however, waited for the oracles of the denomination to point the way. Thornwell then declared himself in favor of a convention, but did not believe it should meet in the Upper South, because of climate and proximity to the theater of military action. This young patriarch begged for an end to haggling in such an hour and pointed to the future. "It is a great work we have to do," he proclaimed. "The cloudy pillar is before us. Let us arise and go forward." [37]

No one dared question Thornwell's advice, but a number of churchmen wondered about the propriety of forming a new denomination. First of all, there was no provision for such action

[35] "Minutes of Presbytery of Orange, 1858–1868," 143–162 (June 12–15, 1861), MS, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.

[36] "Minutes of the Presbytery of Memphis, 1857–1862," 261–274 (June 13–14, 1861), MS, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.; "Minutes of the Presbytery of East Alabama, 1856–1866," 288 (June 15, 1861), MS, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.

[37] "J. H. T.," (Glenn Springs, N. C.) to Abner A. Porter, June 20, 1861, MSS, Porter Letters.

in Presbyterian polity, and also these Southerners always had claimed to be conservatives, not revolutionaries or rebels. The latter point was answered, however, when these Old School members declared that they were the true conservatives who must leave the old organization because their rivals planned to alter the traditional role and function of the church. Thus they thought they were participating in a conservative revolution, along with their political colleagues.

The debate over the propriety and place of a convention filled many columns of denominational papers. Meanwhile, clergymen and elders were writing countless letters on the subject. The influential New Orleans Presbytery particularly questioned the legality of a convention and many Virginians joined them in opposing suggestions of this nature.[38] Abner Porter and his *Southern Presbyterian* rallied supporters of the convention and carefully described Thornwell's plans for such a preliminary gathering, which would serve as a "consultative and preparatory" meeting.[39]

While leaders of the denomination discussed these matters, more Southern presbyteries considered the "Spring Resolutions" and the suggestions for forming a new Assembly in the South. By the end of July, fifteen presbyteries had voted their separation from the Old School and signified approval of an independent organization. Meanwhile, a few congregations had decided to withdraw from the Old School separately, such as the Camden Church and the Roberts congregation in the Anderson District, which acted early in July.[40]

On July 11 the South Carolina Presbytery voted unanimously to leave the old Assembly. When these church fathers attempted to justify their decision, they declared that the existence of a new nation in the South would make it "very difficult, if not impossible" for communicants to "discharge adequately and successfully their duty to Christ and to His church without a separate ecclesiastical organization." Although these ministers and elders also attacked the "Spring Resolutions," they now cited political events, particularly the creation of the Confederacy, as their primary justification for a new religious body. Before the end of July, Bethel and Charleston Presbyteries also left the Old School, but Harmony Presbytery did not act until October 3.[41]

[38] "Minutes of the Presbytery of New Orleans, 1854–1864," 241–251 (July 9, 1861), MS, Historical Foundation, Montreat, N. C.; Richmond (Va.) *Central Presbyterian*, July 6–27, 1861.

[39] Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian*, July 20, 1861.

[40] *Ibid.*

Soon at least one presbytery in each of the synods except Arkansas and Virginia had approved the plans for a convention and had applauded J. Leighton Wilson's work in behalf of missions. Meanwhile, South Carolinians had an opportunity to pause and reflect on the almost cataclysmic events swirling around them. Two pastors surveyed the scene and decided their flocks should look to heaven and offer praise and supplication to the Almighty. Charles S. Vedder, addressing his congregation in the Low Country town of Summerville, believed the Confederacy already had great cause for thanksgiving and joy, because of Jehovah's blessings. In fact, Vedder assured his hearers, when Union and Confederate forces clashed south of Washington in the first significant battle of the conflict, "God gave the victory at Manassas." Meanwhile, in Charleston, Thomas Smyth considered this encounter and agreed, "The hand of God is in this victory." Then he evaluated the importance of the struggle with the North. "The issue is conquest or enslavement," Smyth announced, and he went on to list the sacred principles which the South must defend at all costs: "Home and happiness, the purity of wives, and daughters, the sanctity of the fireside, the holiness and freedom of our altars, the security of peace, the prosperity of agriculture and commerce . . . above all, honor, principle, and the highest of all prerogatives—that of national sovereignty."[42]

Meanwhile, the preliminary convention apparently was scheduled to convene in Atlanta on August 15, and some churchmen still sought to explain their decision to leave the Old School. John B. Adger argued that the "Spring Resolutions" did not "constitute necessary or justifying ground of a separation." Instead, he insisted, the correct reason was the change in national boundaries, because "no external Church organization of a spiritual Church can properly perform its spiritual functions within the limits of two distinct nations." Thornwell refrained from such conjectures but asked for

[41] "South Carolina Presbytery, 1855–1867," 357–360 (July 10–11, 1861); "Bethel Presbytery, 1850–1868," 218–222 (July 16, 1861); Charleston *Mercury*, July 29, 1861.

[42] Charles S. Vedder, *"Offer unto God Thanksgiving": a sermon delivered in the Summerville Presbyterian Church on Sunday, July 28, 1861* (Charleston, 1861); Thomas Smyth, "The Victory of Manassas Plains," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XIV (1861–1862), 593–617.

haste in erecting some denominational machinery "while the Presbyteries are all harmonious." The *Southern Presbyterian* printed his request, endorsed it, and happily announced the call for the Atlanta Convention in mid-August.[43]

On the opening day of the Convention, only twenty-one men were present, representing but four Synods: Alabama, Georgia, Nashville, and South Carolina. With none of the guiding patriarchs in attendance, perhaps Abner Porter and Adger were the best known ministers among the delegates. South Carolinians soon dominated the meeting, however, both in numbers and influence.

The delegates quickly approved selection of a committee to "consider and report upon the various subjects legitimately belonging to the Convention." When the moderator appointed this group, half of its twelve members were South Carolinians. The discussions of these churchmen, like the deliberations of the entire Convention, indicated a deep concern for the absent presbyteries, and the delegates carefully demonstrated their belief in the purely advisory nature of their decisions.

When the special committee reported to the Convention, it first attacked the "Spring Resolutions" and then specified that the delegates did not presume to act for the presbyteries, but wanted to recommend a course of action in order to "expedite" the creation of a new Assembly. This report praised Wilson's preliminary work in foreign missions, called for renewed attention to the religious welfare of the slaves, and presented the presbyteries with specific proposals concerning an Assembly in December. According to this plan, presbyteries should declare their continued belief in the traditional articles of doctrine and faith, appoint commissioners to an Assembly to convene in Augusta, Georgia, on December 4, and emphasize that on leaving the Northern Assembly they had not divided the synods.

The committee report concluded with a discussion of "The War." This section emphasized the charge that the Union had attacked the South and conceded that the Convention had no right to determine political matters. There was now, however, the report argued, a nation which the Convention "calls its own . . . and to it this Convention holds to be due our strongest affections and our greatest

[43] John B. Adger, "The General Assembly of 1861," *Southern Presbyterian Review*, XIV (1861–1862), 341–343; Palmer, *Thornwell*, 493–494; Columbia (S. C.) *Southern Presbyterian*, August 3, 1861.

energies." The report terminated the recommendations of the meeting in Atlanta with phrases full of Old Testament fervor: "Pour your treasures into the lap of your Country: throw your stout arms around her; let her feel the tendrils of enduring affection winding around her heart, and if need be, let your blood flow like water. . . . Put your trust in God, and pray your Country through this dreadful war."[44]

With the advice of the Atlanta Convention before the congregations and presbyteries, Presbyterians in the Confederacy awaited the gathering of the formative Assembly in Augusta on December 4. Individuals and judicatories on every hand offered suggestions and advice concerning the organizational structure of the new body. Thornwell was particularly active in this time, writing many letters filled with plans for the meeting, but his health still was poor. Still, physical weakness could not deter him from striving to realize his dreams.

In November, when the Synod of South Carolina gathered to reflect upon the events of the year, Thornwell dominated the proceedings. Here, as in many other fall meetings of presbyteries and synods, churchmen once more considered their departure from the Old School. When these Carolinians finished their discussion, they approved a statement, drafted by Thornwell, which cited two justifications for their actions. The first was an allegation that the "old Assembly . . . transcended its jurisdiction by authoritatively settling a political question. . . . It has not only directed us to render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's, but it has assumed the right to adjudicate betwixt the claims of rival Caesars." But the Synod assigned primary significance to another factor. "We hold that it is wise and proper that church organizations should be determined by national lines," they argued. "The advantages are so obvious in having a complete and independent Church in every Christian nation, that the plan has been universally adopted in the States of Christendom." These churchmen continued, in a statement which clearly stated their basic argument, which now emphasized the propriety of an independent denomination for an independent nation:

[44] *Proceedings of a Convention of Delegates from various Presbyteries in the Confederate States of America, held in the First Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, Georgia, on the 15th, 16th, and 17th of August, 1861* (Atlanta, 1861); Atlanta (Ga.) *Southern Confederacy*, August 15, 17–18, 1861.

"On these grounds, we think that it would have been our duty, independently of any divisive measures of the old Assembly, to set up for ourselves." [45]

Soon after the Synod approved this lengthy statement, it gathered, at Thornwell's urging, in an "informal meeting." Here, despite their previous condemnation of the politically motivated decisions of the Philadelphia Assembly, these churchmen pledged their support to the Confederacy and criticized the war upon their new nation as "unjust, cruel, and tyrannical." They affirmed their hope for a Southern victory and added: "We pledge ourselves and, we think we can safely say, the Presbyterian people of these states to uphold and support the [Confederate] Government in every lawful measure to maintain our rights and our honour." [46]

By the time the members of the Synod of South Carolina had reached their homes, less than one month remained before the date of the meeting in Augusta, Georgia. But the plans for this gathering already were being shaped. For instance, many commissioners arranged to pass through Columbia as they journeyed to the Assembly. Most of this group paused in the Carolina city to visit with Thornwell. These conversations naturally involved consideration of the forthcoming deliberations. Apparently Thornwell conversed, either in person or by exchange of correspondence, with the vast majority of the important Old School leaders in the South on the eve of the meeting in Augusta. These communications revolved around plans for the new denomination and, by the time the commissioners reached Augusta, many potential points of disagreement had been resolved.

The care with which these plans were devised became partially apparent on the morning of December 4, when Francis McFarland, an aged and respected Virginia clergyman, received a delegation of unexpected guests. These visitors quickly explained "a plan . . . agreed upon by some," that McFarland would be temporary presiding officer for the Assembly.[47] Later, these visitors asked him to

[45] "South Carolina Synod, 1858–1881," 114–122 (November 9, 1861).

[46] *Ibid.*, 118–119 (November 9, 1861). Ironically, the Moderator of the General Assembly later disapproved that portion of the Synod minutes which contained the proceedings of the "informal meeting." According to the official, the members of the Synod had delved in the realm of politics, a charge which that same group had leveled at the Philadelphia Assembly.

[47] Francis McFarland Diary, December 4, 1861, MS, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Va.

nominate Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a native South Carolinian ministering to the First Presbyterian congregation of New Orleans, as the permanent moderator.

The plan worked smoothly and Palmer, by a unanimous vote, became the first moderator of the new organization, and the commissioners proceeded to create the denominational machinery with deliberate speed. One of the Assembly's first important decisions followed Thornwell's initial remarks to the commissioners. Soon after Palmer became moderator, the little Carolinian proposed that his colleagues "formally adopt" the traditional Presbyterian articles of faith, changing only the word "United" to "Confederate" in the title of the organization. Thus, the commissioners named their new denomination, "The General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America," and perpetuated their reverence for and loyalty to the beliefs of Calvinism and the Reformed tradition.[48]

On the second day of the Assembly Thornwell asked for creation of a committee "to prepare an Address to all the Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the earth, setting forth the causes of our separation from the Churches in the United States." Thornwell's remarks in behalf of his proposal indicated that he and his fellow churchmen were intent on clarifying the reasons for the division of the Old School, particularly the justification for rending the unity of the faith once more. He envisioned a religious Declaration of Independence, which would answer the questions of all critics.

Throughout the Assembly, Thornwell and the other Carolinians wielded a powerful force in shaping the structure of the denomination. The basic pattern of organization for the various agencies and divisions of the new denomination followed the traditional system of Presbyterianism. But the South Carolinians, along with the overwhelming majority of the other commissioners, replaced the powerful boards, familiar in the Old School, with Executive Committees of Domestic Missions, Foreign Missions, Education, and Publications, all under the direct control of the Assembly. Thus the Southerners finally achieved a goal they had sought for many years.

When the Assembly considered the location of the Executive Committees, a sort of state rights arrangement provided for placing these

[48] *Minutes General Assembly CSA, 1861*, 3–7; Augusta (Ga.) *Chronicle and Sentinel* (daily), December 5, 1861.

agencies in various cities across the South: Education at Memphis, Domestic Missions at New Orleans, Publications at Richmond, and Foreign Missions at Columbia. The last group, guided by South Carolinians and headed by J. Leighton Wilson, received high praise from the commissioners for its achievements in creating a means of caring for the Indians of the West and the pagans overseas, without waiting for Assembly action.

During the entire proceedings of almost two weeks, the influence of Carolinians in general and Thornwell in particular was evident to many observers. He seemed to be the power to be reckoned with and the voice to be heard on every point. On only two matters did he fail to carry the commissioners with him. Early in the Assembly's proceedings, he suggested sending a "Valedictory Letter" to the Old School announcing formation of the new denomination and "setting forth the reason for this action." After a lively debate indicated strong opposition, he withdrew the resolution, although he still wanted to explain that Confederate Presbyterians had "not been influenced by low passions of undue anger." [49]

Thornwell also proposed that the commissioners send "a memorial to Congress on the subject of recognizing Christianity in the Constitution" of the Confederate States. According to the little Carolinian's motion, the Constitution of the southern nation would declare: "We, the people of the Confederate States, distinctly acknowledge our responsibility to God, and the supremacy of His Son, Jesus Christ, as the King of kings and Lord of lords; and hereby ordain that no law shall be passed by the Congress . . . inconsistent with the will of God, as revealed in the Holy Scriptures." [50] A committee studied the proposal, but could not agree upon a recommendation to the commissioners. A number of ministers and elders questioned the wisdom of the Assembly acting on this point, for they suggested this might be a venture into political matters. Their statements revealed the depth of their opposition and Thornwell soon withdrew his proposal, the second point in which he failed to carry his fellow commissioners with him.

Still another indication of the role of South Carolinians in forming

[49] Augusta (Ga.) *Weekly Chronicle and Sentinel*, December 17, 1861; Adger and Girardeau (eds.), *Writings of Thornwell*, IV, 465–466.

[50] "Relation of the State to Christ," in *ibid.*, 549–556; Richmond (Va.) *Christian Observer*, January 2–9, 1862; *Minutes General Assembly CSA, 1861*, 21.

the policies of the new denomination was apparent in the argument over the handling of the Domestic Missions program of the denomination. This matter of administering home missions and evangelism had been long argued. The older, wealthier, more firmly established presbyteries argued that they should be able to spend their missions' funds as they desired, without having to contribute to a central administration, which would apportion the funds. This matter often had been debated in the Old School Assembly, and now threatened to produce factionalism even at the birth of the new denomination. Finally, after exhaustive debates among the commissioners, the eastern presbyteries, including the Carolinians, won a vote to allow the richer presbyteries to administer their own missions' contributions in their bounds.[51] The compromise provided, however, that these bodies were to report their local expenditures to the Executive Committee of Domestic Missions, and likewise help to support the home missions program in the poorer areas, which the Executive Committee would direct.

Just as he had led the proponents for local supervision of missions endeavors, Thornwell also sought to chart the course of the theological direction of the denomination. A number of commissioners, especially those from Virginia and Tennessee, hoped to merge their new Assembly with the more liberal United Synod of the Presbyterian Church, which had broken away from the New School on the eve of sectional conflict. But most South Carolinians thought the United Synod harbored too many persons of doubtful theological views. Thornwell was particularly outspoken on this matter. But these same Carolinians looked with favor on any consultations and possible union with the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Synod of the South, an organization marked by pronounced doctrinal conservatism. Although the new Assembly took no action concerning either group, it was clear by the end of the deliberation that Thornwell and his followers were intent on following a conservative theological policy, which they thought would be consistent with Southern Presbyterian traditions.

Perhaps the most vivid demonstration of the South Carolina influence on the new denomination was the "Address to all the churches

[51] Atlanta (Ga.) *Gate City Guardian*, December 14, 1861; Richmond (Va.) *Christian Observer*, January 9, 1862; *Minutes General Assembly CSA, 1861*, 21, 24–26.

of Jesus Christ." The fact that Thornwell read this pronouncement to the commissioners was indicative of his importance in drafting its policies. The reading of the "Address" was the high point of the Assembly. Commissioners and spectators waited in hushed expectation as Thornwell prepared to summarize the attitudes of the new organization with a formal statement. First, he carefully asserted the Assembly's determination to maintain denominational loyalty to the traditional beliefs of the church. These churchmen, according to the "Address," had no desire to rend the faith and did not believe the "mere unconstitutionality" of the Philadelphia Assembly's actions justified dividing the Old School. "Our aim had been to promote the unity of the Spirit in bonds of peace," Thornwell insisted. But, he declared, a denomination covering two nations would drag political questions into religious matters. Thus there was a need for "homogeneous and compact" churches along national boundaries.

On the subject of slavery, the "Address" argued that religion should not tamper with the "peculiar institution." This topic was a matter for the politicians, and churchmen should concern themselves only with clarification of the mutual duties of masters and slaves. As he neared the conclusion of an hour before the Assembly, Thornwell proclaimed the mission of the new church—a body which was to be formed very much as he and his colleagues from the Gamecock State desired—as it sought to follow the path charted by the Heavenly Father and His Son. The purpose of the denomination was "To proclaim God's truth as a witness to the nations," he declared, "to gather His elect from the four corners of the earth." [52]

Finally, after almost two weeks of deliberation, the Augusta Assembly adjourned on December 16. No observer mentioned that any South Carolinian addressed the commissioners during the final session. Thornwell's voice was significantly quiet. Perhaps the Carolinians were confident they had achieved their goals and now could remain silent. As Moderator Palmer summarized the gathering, he praised the "undisturbed harmony" which had distinguished the

[52] *Address of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, to all the Churches of Jesus Christ Throughout the Earth. Adopted unanimously at the organization of General Assembly in Augusta, Ga., December, 1861. Published by order of the Assembly* [Augusta, 1861].

Assembly's proceedings.[53] No doubt the South Carolinians must have been satisfied with the record of the Assembly. They had shaped its policies almost entirely according to their own attitudes. They had guided the creation of the infant denomination from the first conversations concerning its birth. The new Zion was fully formed and ready for service.

Perhaps as these men stood with their fellow commissioners and closed the Assembly by singing "Blest be the tie that binds," they failed to realize how this hymn constituted an ironic commentary on their role in creating the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. Certainly, however, they could agree with the summary of the Assembly given by a native South Carolina minister then preaching in Alabama: "What a noble body and what model proceedings; I have never read the proceedings of any deliberative assembly with such approbation and delight." [54]

[53] Robert Q. Mallard, "Recollections of the First Assembly," *Presbyterian Quarterly*, XVII (1903–1904), 262–263; Augusta (Ga.) *Daily Constitutionalist*, December 18, 1861.

[54] C. A. Stillman (Gainesville, Ala.) to Abner A. Porter, December 24, 1861, MSS, Porter Letters.