
Racism, the Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church, and American Presbyterianism in the 19th Century

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ABSTRACT It is commonly argued that mid-19th-century American Presbyterians could be easily divided into two distinct groups. The first group consisted of Presbyterians who were Southern, pro-slavery, and defended the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. The second group consisted of Presbyterians who were Northern, anti-slavery, and dismissed the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. However, many Presbyterians did not fall neatly into one of these two categories, and the issues involved were complex. I will take a closer look at the split between Northern and Southern Presbyterians and show that the split itself and how it was remembered are tied to the way Americans in general viewed the causes of the war. I will show parallels between the struggles of Presbyterians during the American Civil War and the struggles of Atlanta membership as we consider when, how, and even whether our organization should be involved with issues of social justice and politics.

Within American Presbyterianism, the “Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church” is often associated with racism (Tisby 2019, 85-86; Lucas 2016). This is generally due to two reasons. First, the most articulate defenders of the idea were Southern Presbyterians such as James Henley Thornwell and Robert Dabney. These two were ardent supporters of the Confederate States of America and defenders of the institution of chattel slavery as practiced in the United States; they used the Bible to defend the ideas of White supremacy and Black inferiority. Second, the doctrine was used by Southern Presbyterians during the Civil Rights Era to justify inaction and silence on Civil Rights. This paper will not address the Civil Rights Era, but will instead focus on

the relationship between racism and the doctrine of the spirituality of the church for American Presbyterians in the 19th century.

Over the years, Atla as an organization has struggled with whether and how to speak out on current events and social issues facing the United States. Often this is framed as a debate between conservative and progressive members, both institutional and individual. I will end this paper by drawing parallels between the Presbyterian experience of the 19th century and the Atla experience of the 21st century.

Before continuing it would be useful to address two important pieces of background information: the doctrine of the spirituality of the church and the causes of the American Civil War. What is the doctrine of “the spirituality of the church?” To put it simply, this doctrine says that the church should “stay in its lane.” That is the church should not try to transform culture, get involved with politics, or engage in activities that are not essential to its primary functions as described in the Bible. Defenders of the doctrine would say that the key activity of the church is corporate worship, especially the preaching of the word, prayer, and the administration of the sacraments. In addition, defenders of the doctrine say that the church should not go beyond the Bible by making moral pronouncements that other Christians are bound to follow. Those opposed to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church would say that the church should be involved in trying to transform culture and build a society that conforms to Biblical ideals. They say that biblical principles can and must be applied in a variety of specific ways to the modern context.¹

Before continuing we must also understand a little bit about what was going on in the nation during the American Civil War. We will do this by examining four quotes which capture the complex motives of both sides. This will allow for a better understanding of what happened at the Presbyterian General Assembly of 1861.

The first quote is from Abraham Lincoln. It is from a letter he wrote to the influential newspaper publisher of the *New York Tribune*

1 H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* is long considered the definitive evaluation of how Christian churches and cultures have interacted historically. However, some interpreters of Luther and Augustine believe he misunderstood their assessments. Niebuhr would likely place defenders of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church within the “Christ and Culture in Paradox” paradigm. However, most defenders of the doctrine would not describe their view the same way Niebuhr did.

Horace Greely in 1862.² Greely had published an open letter to Lincoln which he titled, “The Prayer of Twenty Millions.” In this letter, Greely, who was prone to doomsday hysterics, leveled three main criticisms against Lincoln. First, he thought Lincoln was too accommodating to the border slave states that had not seceded. Second, he thought Lincoln should enforce the “Second Compensation Act” recently passed by Congress, which allowed the federal government to free the slaves of Southern slaveholders who had taken part in the rebellion. Third, he thought Lincoln failed to recognize that ending slavery was key to prosecuting and winning the war. In his reply to Greely, Lincoln (1953, 5:388) said,

I would save the Union. I would save it the shortest way under the Constitution. The sooner the national authority can be restored; the nearer the Union will be “the Union as it was.” If there be those who would not save the Union, unless they could at the same time save slavery, I do not agree with them. If there be those who would not save the Union unless they could at the same time destroy slavery, I do not agree with them. My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or to destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that. What I do about slavery, and the colored race, I do because I believe it helps to save the Union; and what I forbear, I forbear because I do not believe it would help to save the Union. I shall do less whenever I shall believe what I am doing hurts the cause, and I shall do more whenever I shall believe doing more will help the cause. I shall try to correct errors when shown to be errors; and I shall adopt new views so fast as they shall appear to be true views.

The date of this letter is interesting. Lincoln wrote it in August of 1862, two days after Greely’s open letter appeared in the *New York Tribune*. In fact, Lincoln at this time had a preliminary draft of the emancipation proclamation sitting in his desk, but he was waiting to issue it for a better time militarily and politically. He did not want the American public and foreign governments to think that the Emancipation Proclamation was a desperate measure, and so he waited until after he could claim a battlefield victory at Antietam to issue it. In his reply to Greely, Lincoln ignored the criticisms about the border states and not enforcing the Second Compensation Act, but he clearly answered Greely’s assertion that settling the issue of slavery was a

2 The full text of Greely’s letter can be found here: <https://www.americananti-quarian.org/Manuscripts/greeley.html>.

key war aim or even should be a key war aim. According to Lincoln, changing the status quo of slavery was not an important objective for the federal government.

The second quote is from Alexander Stephens. Alexander Stephens was the vice president of the Confederate States of America, and he gave a speech a few weeks before the war began with the confederate attack on Fort Sumter. Stephens had only been vice president for just over a month when he gave his speech saying:

The prevailing ideas entertained by Thomas Jefferson and most of the leading statesmen at the time of the formation of the old constitution, were that the enslavement of the African was in violation of the laws of nature; that it was wrong in principle, socially, morally, and politically. It was an evil they knew not well how to deal with, but the general opinion of the men of that day was that, somehow or other in the order of Providence, the institution would be evanescent and pass away. Those ideas, however, were fundamentally wrong. They rested upon the assumption of the equality of races. This was an error. It was a sandy foundation, and the government built upon it fell when the "storm came and the wind blew." Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea; its foundations are laid, its corner-stone rests, upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man; that slavery subordination to the superior race is his natural and normal condition. This, our new government, is the first, in the history of the world, based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth. Many governments have been founded upon the principle of the subordination and serfdom of certain classes of the same race; such were and are in violation of the laws of nature. Our system commits no such violation of nature's laws. With us, all of the white race, however high or low, rich or poor, are equal in the eye of the law. Not so with the negro. Subordination is his place. He, by nature, or by the curse against Canaan, is fitted for that condition which he occupies in our system.³

Alexander Stephens was very clear in this speech which came to be known as the Cornerstone speech. He said that the Confederate States of America was a nation founded upon the ideas of slavery and white supremacy.

Contrast these quotes with two later statements from the same individuals. In his second inaugural address given in March of 1865, Lincoln (1953, 9:333) said, "One-eighth of the whole population were col-

3 Stephens would downplay the importance of the speech and claim that he was misquoted. The speech was delivered extemporaneously, so the only record is from transcriptions made by reporters covering the speech. Most historians believe the quote is authentic. A reliable transcript of the speech can be found here: <https://iowaculture.gov/sites/default/files/history-education-pss-civil-cornerstone-transcription.pdf>.

ored slaves, not distributed generally over the Union, but localized in the southern part of it. These slaves constituted a peculiar and powerful interest. All knew that this interest was somehow the cause of the war.”

The second quote again comes from Alexander Stephens; between 1868 and 1870 he wrote a two-volume apology of the Confederacy entitled *A Constitutional View of the Late War Between the States*, and in it he wrote:

It is a postulate, with many writers of this day, that the late War was the result of two opposing ideas, or principles upon the subject of slavery.... Those who assume this postulate, and so theorize upon it, are but superficial observers.... The conflict in principle arose from different and opposing ideas as to the nature of what is known as the General Government (Stephens 1868, 9-10).

Lincoln in 1862 said that the war was not about ending slavery while in 1865 he said it was. Alexander Stephens in 1861 said secession—and by extension the war—was a fight to preserve slavery and white supremacy, while in 1868 he claimed slavery was not a factor. We can reconcile these inconsistencies by observing that in 1861, the North was primarily fighting to preserve the union and establish the priority of the federal government over the state governments. To be sure, some fought with other motivations including the abolition of slavery, but preserving the union was the paramount goal for the North early in the war. This attitude is encapsulated by Lincoln’s 1862 letter to Greely. In 1861, the South was also fighting for a variety of reasons, but paramount amongst those reasons was the preservation and expansion of slavery and the maintenance of white supremacy. This attitude is reflected in Alexander Stephens’s 1861 “Cornerstone speech.” Over the course of the war the reasons for fighting and the goals for each side evolved. Ending slavery became a war aim of the North, and preserving slavery became less important to South. Soon after the war, the North wanted to remember the war as a crusade fought to end slavery. The South wanted to remember the war as a struggle for local control and limited centralized power. Both sides wanted to be remembered as the defenders of freedom. These new attitudes are captured in Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address and Alexander Stephens’s book.

The “Lost Cause” myth, while rejected by most historians, is still the dominant interpretation of the Civil War in some parts of the country and assumed by a large portion of the population. While we don’t have time to thoroughly debunk it here, it inaccurately describes the motivations of those who fought for the South. They

fought to preserve and expand slavery at least at the beginning of the war and many through to the end of the war. Even those who did not own slaves often fought for the idea of slavery and white supremacy and out of a fear of what emancipation might bring. They continued this fight for White supremacy after the war with opposition to Reconstruction and the establishment of Jim Crow society. The South fought for White supremacy, and it could be argued that they won. The Lost Cause myth is just that—a myth. However, there is a similar myth common to Americans outside of the South. This myth says that the North fought to end slavery and establish equal rights for Black Americans. At least in the beginning of the war, the North did not care about the fate of the slaves, only the fate of the nation and its continued unity. Ending slavery became a war aim for some later in the conflict, and some white Northerners fought with freed slaves to establish racial equity and equality during Reconstruction. This project was quickly abandoned as the nation slid back into the familiarity and comfort of white supremacy. Neither the lost cause myth nor the myth of a moral crusade for racial equality are true and both ignore the complexity of shifting motives over the course of the war.

This context is important for us to understand as we consider the Presbyterian splits of the 19th century. The main split we will examine took place in 1861, when the goal for most Northerners was preserving the union and establishing the priority of the federal government, while in the South the primary concern was the protection and expansion of slavery and White supremacy.

The common interpretation of the 19th-century Presbyterian splits goes this way: Presbyterians in America were generally anti-slavery early in the nation's history. As the denomination grew in the South, its assessment of slavery became more and more ambivalent. Northern liberals believed that slavery was a moral wrong. Further they believed it was the duty of the church to try to transform the American culture so that the country would rid itself of this moral stain. In addition, they took up other progressive moral causes such as temperance and women's suffrage. They downplayed the importance of doctrine and believed the Bible to be a human book filled with errors. Southern Presbyterians, on the other hand, believed that slavery was a moral good for society and both races. They also believed that the church had no business trying to change the culture even if slavery were morally wrong. These Presbyterians were theologically conservative, requiring strict subscription to the doctrines set forth in

the Westminster Standards and having a fundamentalist view of the Bible. Once the Civil War broke out, the two sides could no longer get along, and when Northern Presbyterians passed a resolution in support of the Union, Southern Presbyterians left to form their own denomination (Tisby 2019, 78-80; Smylie 1996, 87; Longfield 2013, 94).⁴

This interpretation has at least three flaws. First, Presbyterians were not universally abolitionist prior to the growth of the denomination in the South. Second, the reasons behind the 19th-century Presbyterian splits were complex and did not revolve around the issue of slavery. Third, many Presbyterians did not neatly fit into one of the two categories that I alluded to above and will detail further below. The association between the doctrine of the spirituality of the church and racism, while understandable, is not necessarily a fair one based upon what happened with 19th-century Presbyterians. I shall address each of these misconceptions below.

The first misconception is that Presbyterians at the turn of the century were anti-slavery and only became ambivalent about it as the denomination grew in the South. This misconception comes from the fact that in 1818 the Presbyterian General Assembly adopted a resolution condemning slavery. I won't read the entire resolution, but it reads in part:

We consider the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature; as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ, which enjoin that "all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them. (General Assembly 1847, 692)

This seems like a clear and unambiguous condemnation of the institution of chattel slavery. However, this was actually a compromise position. The same statement goes on to warn against immediate emancipation as being harmful for both slave and master. It says that slaves were ignorant and vicious and likely to destroy themselves and those who enslaved them if they were to be freed. It called on Presbyterians to support colonization and the forcible removal of Blacks from the proximity of Whites, something that most freed slaves opposed (General Assembly 1847, 692-694). In addition, the same 1818

4 Tisby (2019,78-80) acknowledges that the Old School/New School split was primarily about worship and subscription, but he claims slavery also played an important role in the split.

General Assembly that passed this resolution also upheld the conviction and defrocking of George Bourne, a Presbyterian minister who wrote a pamphlet entitled “The Book and Slavery Irreconcilable.” Not only did Bourne write this anti-slavery book, but he also barred people who owned slaves from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper. The 1818 General Assembly sent mixed messages. On the one hand it condemned slavery, but on the other hand it also condemned those who condemned slavery (General Assembly 1847, 676).

The second misconception is that all of the 19th-century splits revolved around the issue of slavery. A closer examination of the splits reveals a more complex narrative. We don’t have time to describe in detail all the differences that led to the split between Old School and New School Presbyterians in 1838. However, two things need to be pointed out. First, Old School and New School Presbyterians disagreed on things other than slavery. In fact, the heart of the disagreement was really about subscription to the Westminster Standards. Other disagreements grew out of that fundamental disagreement. Old School and New School Presbyterians disagreed about the role of what we would now call parachurch organizations. They disagreed about whether and how to cooperate with other denominations. They disagreed about how to do evangelism. They disagreed about what doctrines should be taught from the pulpit. They disagreed about the role and importance of doctrine. They disagreed about who should be ordained as elders. They disagreed about the proper activities of the church.⁵ In short, they disagreed about nearly everything that nearly every Presbyterian found important. Moreover, there were Old School Presbyterians who were anti-slavery, and New School Presbyterians who were pro-slavery. There were New School Presbyterians in the South and Old School Presbyterians in the North (Muether and Hart 2007, 126-127).

This leads to the third misconception, which is that you could easily place Presbyterians into one of two categories. The first assumed category consisted of Presbyterians who were southern, Old School, pro-slavery, theologically and socially conservative, and believed in the spirituality of the church, while the second category consisted

5 Marsden (1970, 99) acknowledges that slavery was an important factor in the Old School/New School split, but not the primary cause of the division. Rather than a pro-slavery sentiment causing Old School convictions, it is more likely that Old School convictions happen to have been held more in the South than in the North.

of those who were northern, New School, anti-slavery, theologically and socially progressive and did not believe in the spirituality of the church (Fortson 2013, 158-159). To address this misconception, we shall consider the Old School Presbyterian Split of 1861.

As previously mentioned, the Old School and New School split took place in 1838. The New School split again in 1858 over the issue of slavery. It would make sense that those who believed the church should make moral judgments on social issues would split if they could not agree on the most pressing social issue of the day, which was slavery. You then had a very small New School denomination in the South that was pro-slavery and a larger New School denomination in the North that was anti-slavery.

The Old School split took place soon after the Civil War started, when Confederate forces fired on Fort Sumter. A minister from New York named Gardiner Spring and his brother Charles put before the 1861 General Assembly several resolutions about the crisis of Southern states seceding from the Union. After much back and forth that we can't detail here, the General Assembly adopted two resolutions.⁶ The first was a rather uncontroversial call to prayer and repentance.⁷ The second resolution was what really caused the issue; it reads:

Resolved, That this General Assembly, in the spirit of that Christian patriotism which the Scriptures enjoin, and which has always characterized this Church, do hereby acknowledge and declare our obligations to promote and perpetuate, so far as in us lies, the integrity of these United States, and to strengthen, uphold, and encourage the Federal Government in the exercise of all its functions under our noble Constitution; and to this Constitution in all its provisions, requirements, and principles, we profess our unabated loyalty.⁸

6 Vander Velde (1932, 42-107) provides a detailed and lucid account of the back and forth that occurred in the 1861 General Assembly.

7 The first resolution reads, *Resolved*, That in view of the present agitated and unhappy condition of this country, the first day of July next be hereby set apart as a day of prayer throughout our bounds; and that on that day ministers and people are called on humbly to confess and bewail our national sins; to offer our thanks to the Father of light for his abundant and undeserved goodness to us as a nation; to seek his guidance and blessing upon our rulers and their counsels, as well as on the Congress of the United States about to assemble; and to implore Him, in the name of Jesus Christ, the great High Priest of the Christian profession, to turn away his anger from us, and speedily restore to us the blessings of an honorable peace.

8 The text of both resolutions, as well as the minutes for the General Assembly's discussion of the resolutions, can be found here: <https://www.pcahistory.org/documents/gardinerspring.html>

It is important to note what is and what is not in this resolution. This is a resolution calling for the preservation of the union. It is a distinctively Northern statement reflecting Northern priorities and attitudes at the beginning of the war. It is not an abolitionist resolution. It is not a resolution to study the sins or merits of chattel slavery as it was practiced in the South. It was a resolution calling on Presbyterians to support the federal government in its efforts to maintain the union. It also enjoined Presbyterians to confess loyalty to the United States Constitution in a spirit of patriotism.

However, this was not just a nakedly political resolution. These were Old School Presbyterians who all ostensibly believed in the spirituality of the church. They agreed that the church is essentially a spiritual body and should not meddle in the civil government. The mission of the church was a spiritual one and not the transformation of society. Gardiner Spring and his supporters gave two justifications for the resolution. First, they cited Romans 13 as scriptural support. This is a passage of Scripture which calls on Christians to submit to the governing civic authorities. They saw this as a spiritual crisis because Scripture calls on Christians to obey the civil government. Second, supporters of the Gardiner Spring Resolutions pointed out that the Westminster Confession of Faith did allow for the church to speak out on civil matters in what the divines called “cases extraordinary” (Vander Velde 1932, 70-72).

The opposition to the amendment was not led by Southern stalwarts, Thornwell or Dabney, who are most closely associated with both the doctrine of the spirituality of the church as well as racist Presbyterianism. It was led by the pro-union, anti-slavery, confessionally and theologically conservative giant of Princeton, Charles Hodge.⁹ Hodge not only led the opposition to the Gardiner Spring resolutions; he also offered an alternative resolution calling for peace, reconciliation, and prayer, which was not adopted by the General Assembly.¹⁰

Hodge addressed both the issue of submission to authorities and the issue of petitioning the government in extraordinary cases. Hodge agreed that Presbyterians were called to submit to our civic

9 Hodge did not believe slavery itself to be a sin, but the way it was practiced in the United States to be a sin. He also argued for gradual emancipation. For more on the complexity of Hodge’s beliefs about slavery see Torbett (2006, 55-114).

10 For the full text of “Hodge’s Protest” see <https://www.pcahistory.org/documents/gardinerspring.html#8> For analysis of the protest see Vander Velde (1932, 66-68).

authorities, but Northerners and Southerners disagreed on what authority had primacy. Southerners said it was the state government, while Northerners said it was the federal government. As Presbyterian ministers, Hodge claimed, we are not qualified to decide issues such as the constitutionality of secession or whether the state or federal government represents the prime authority. What the Gardiner Spring Resolution does is decide the issue.

None of this is to suggest that Charles Hodge believed that slavery was not the cause of the war and that it was purely a question of states' rights versus federal rights. In other words, Hodge did not accept the Lost Cause interpretation of the Civil War (which didn't even really emerge until after the war). Rather, he was just commenting on the text of the resolution itself as it was proposed, a resolution that did say the war was about the nature of federalism, states' rights, and the extent of the power of the federal government—a resolution that did not even mention the word slavery.

The second issue Hodge addressed was the idea that the church could speak out on civil issues in “extraordinary cases.” This idea comes from chapter 31, section four¹¹ of the Westminster Confession of Faith, which 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 common wealth, unless by way of humble petition in cases extraordinary; or, by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.

Hodge argued that just as the church had declined to issue binding statements on the consumption of alcohol and the morality of slavery, it could not issue a binding statement on the issue of federalism.¹² Even if one were to grant that this was an “extraordinary case,” I would point out that the Gardner Spring resolution is hardly a humble petition or piece of advice required by the civil magistrate.¹³

11 This is section 5 of chapter 31 in the original WCF. American Presbyterians adopted a modified version of the Standards because of the different relationship between church and state in the American context.

12 Longfield (2013, 107) hypothesizes that Old School Presbyterians were pressured by New School editorials to take up the Gardiner Resolutions and were caught up in the fervor of patriotism sweeping the North. See also Vander Velde (1932, 50) for how the press may have pressured New School acceptance of the resolutions.

13 The United States Government sent mixed messages to the assembly about what would be actions Lincoln's cabinet wanted Presbyterians to take. Attor-

It was a demand of Presbyterians that they adhere to a certain political view on the issue of federalism.

Neatly dividing Presbyterians into one of two camps does not fit the historical record. First, the 1861 General Assembly was held in Philadelphia. The fact of geography and the difficulty of travel during war meant that the General Assembly was dominated by Northern commissioners. But even though Southerners were largely absent, there was still substantial opposition to the Gardiner Spring resolutions from commissioners that came from both border states and Northern states. Second, this was a split of the Old School Presbyterian Church. Both sides held to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Third, the opposition to the Gardiner Spring resolutions was led by Charles Hodge, who was a Northerner, pro-union, anti-slavery, and theologically conservative. Hodge, however, did not have the support of most of the attending presbyters. The General Assembly passed The Gardiner Spring Resolutions on a vote of 156–66.

After learning of the passage of the Gardiner Spring Resolutions, the Old School Southerners left and formed a new denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States. Thornwell gave two reasons for forming a new denomination when they held their first General Assembly in Georgia in December of 1861. First, he accused the Northern Old School Presbyterian Church of abandoning the doctrine of the spirituality of the church with its adoption of the Gardiner Spring Resolutions. Second, he argued that Presbyterian churches were best organized along national lines, and he believed the Confederate States had formed a new nation with secession. Regarding slavery, Thornwell said that the issue was a matter for the government not the church to decide and advised the church to remain silent on the issue. He immediately ignored his own advice, however, and went on to affirm what he saw as the benefits of slavery for both slave and master (Thornwell 1974, 4:439-445). This inconsistency was consistent with his earlier writings on slavery where he would say that the church should remain silent on the issue before going on to defend chattel slavery as it was practiced in the South (Balmer and Fitzmier 1933, 70-71). The Old School and New School

ney General Edwin Bates said that it would be best for the Union cause if the Presbyterian Church stayed united and abstained from making any statement about the crisis, while Treasury Secretary Salmon P. Chase said that he saw no problem with an unequivocal statement in favor of the North (Vander Velde 1932, 61).

Presbyterians in the South would merge in 1864 before the close of the war and the old and new schools in the North merged in 1869. It would take until 1983 for the Northern and Southern denominations to reunite.

Most Old School Presbyterians in both North and South, while ostensibly holding to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, in practice did not adhere to it very well either before or after the war. Robert Lewis Dabney, a Southern Presbyterian who was not at the 1861 General Assembly, argued at the presbytery level in 1867 that black men should not be ordained as elders in Presbyterian Churches. He further argued that racial intermarriage was sinful and that freed slaves should not be allowed to vote. He did not make these arguments as a common citizen. Rather he made them as a presbyter. His arguments relied not on Scripture or the Westminster Standards, but on 19th-century pseudo-scientific racial theory (Dabney 1967, 2: 199-217). When Dabney and Thornwell before him were at their racist worst, they were not actually upholding the doctrine of the spirituality of the church; rather they were abandoning it. They attempted cultural transformation (or preservation) at the expense of what they said should be the mission of the church. They tried to impose on Christians a moral system not found in the Bible, something that is a clear violation of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Old School Northerners also abandoned this doctrine. As the war developed into a moral crusade against slavery, Presbyterians finally adopted an anti-slavery resolution in 1864. They passed further resolutions calling for loyalty to the Union government, respect for the flag, and support for the war. After the war, the tradition of social activism continued with crusades against alcohol and for women's suffrage.¹⁴ New School opposition to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church triumphed in both the South and the North, which provides an explanation for how the Old and New Schools in both regions of the country reunited shortly after the 1861 split...while the Northern and Southern denominations did not merge until 100 years later. New School and Old School Presbyterians in the North were no longer divided on the issue of the spirituality of the church because neither denomination practiced it. Moreover, they found themselves united around moral issues. In the same way, New School and Old

14 For a summary of some of the resolutions adopted by Northern Old School Presbyterians, see Vander Velde (1932 183-279).

School Presbyterians in the South were no longer divided on the issue of the spirituality of the church because neither denomination really practiced it (although Old School Southern Presbyterians continued to defend the doctrine and brought it out when convenient, as seen during the Civil Rights era). Like their Northern counterparts, Southern Presbyterians were united on the moral and social issues of the day, and that was enough to achieve a reunion. Politics trumped doctrinal consistency in both the North and the South.

It was not adherence to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church that allowed for white supremacy to flourish within American Presbyterianism. Rather, it was the abandonment of the doctrine that allowed for racism to fester. The Southern church certainly used the doctrine to prevent the church from speaking out against slavery and other social policies, but they then ignored it when making their own defense of slavery and White supremacy (Noll 1998, 52). The problem for Presbyterians was not the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, but racism. Racist attitudes and actions were a problem both for those who held to the doctrine and those who did not. The doctrine of the spirituality of the church was used to support racism, but racism is not a necessary consequence of the doctrine. Moreover, the abandonment of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church was used to bolster racist attitudes and systems.

If the doctrine of the spirituality of the church is not necessarily to be associated with white supremacy and the defense of slavery, is it then a good thing? Critics have pointed out that it leads to other problems, such as political inaction and silence on important moral issues, and it results in churches being on the wrong side of history. However, these fears are overblown. Members of a church that holds to this doctrine are free to engage in political activities as citizens of the kingdom of man. While the church as an institution does not engage in politics, its individual members are free to do so without fear of condemnation by the church. Further, such freedom leads to political diversity within the church as a multitude of political beliefs are freed to focus on its main mission and avoid mission creep while its members are free to be represented, including libertarians, conservative republicans, and liberal democrats. The church engage in political activity or not. This neutrality allows members to take political actions that they believe are effective and consistent with their values. For instance, members may agree that poverty is a problem but disagree about how to address this problem. These

members would then be free to vote for policies consistent with their different approaches to poverty alleviation without fear of condemnation by the institutional church. Critics also argue that the church which holds to the spirituality of the church loses political clout, because as an organization it carries more weight politically than its individual members do. However, I don't believe we saw this in the Presbyterian experience of the 19th century. The organizational political activity of the church was reactive rather than proactive. It is difficult to see how political engagement on the part of the church as an institution had any impact on the course of the war or on advancing the freedom of slaves (Marsden 1970, 101). It seems the only tangible result was the split of the church and the dilution of its ability to carry out its mission as a united body. Finally, the doctrine of the spirituality of the church protects the church from engaging in well-meaning but ultimately foolish political entanglements. Presbyterian support for Prohibition is just one of many such examples. Dabney's defense of racist social systems would be another example.

From time to time, Atla members have expressed a desire for Atla to become more politically outspoken, much like its larger counterpart, the American Library Association. However, the mission of Atla as expressed by the Board of Directors in 2020 is rather simple. It states, "The mission of Atla is to foster the study of theology and religion by enhancing the development of theological and religious studies libraries and librarianship." The mission is clarified with a series of statements telling why Atla exists. Atla exists so that:

Librarians and information providers in theology and religion are connected in a sustainable and diverse global community at a cost that demonstrates good stewardship of resources.

This is further defined to include but not limited to the following:

1. Users have access to quality academic and professional resources.
 - 1.1 Open access resources and special collections are available and discoverable by librarians and information professionals.
2. Institutional leaders have an awareness of the trends impacting the religion and theology library ecosystem.
3. Librarians and information providers are growing in their competencies and skills.

- 3.1 Librarians and information providers demonstrate competencies in diversity, inclusion, equity, and antiracism.
- 3.2 Information professionals are able to successfully navigate the changing landscape.
- 3.3 Librarians and information providers have access to professional development in technical and digital skills.
- 3.4 Information professionals have opportunities to innovate. (Atla Board 2020)

Nowhere in the mission statement is Atla as an institution called upon to transform society or address issues not related to theological librarianship. This is the only reason that Atla can exist with its current membership that includes ideologically diverse institutions and individuals. It is essential that Atla remain neutral on certain things such as politics and doctrine, allowing individual members to make their own statements about current events, politics, and the moral concerns of the day. Instead of a battle between conservatives and liberals within Atla, neutrality would allow for unified efforts in those areas we hold in common and are described in the Atla mission. Atla does not have a spiritual mission like the church. Rather it has a library mission, but the principle is the same. If adherence to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church could have preserved the unity of Presbyterians in the 19th century, then perhaps adherence to the “Libraryness of Atla” can preserve the unity of our institution even while our members and the entire nation become more polarized.

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