

THE DOCTRINE OF THE SPIRITUALITY OF THE CHURCH IN THE THEOLOGY OF CHARLES HODGE¹

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CHARLES HODGE crafted a doctrine of the spirituality of the church that allowed him properly to distinguish the church from the world while also integrating the church into the world.

One must understand both the distinction and the integration of things. If one fails to understand the distinction of the persons of the blessed holy undivided Trinity, modalism looms. If one fails to understand the integration of the persons of the Trinity, some form of tritheism threatens. Similarly, deny the distinction of the two natures of Christ and one ends in Eutychianism. Or if one denies the integration of the two natures, Nestorianism stalks. We must distinguish justification and sanctification or we reject the Reformation. And if we fail to integrate them, we risk making Christ our Savior only from the penalty of sin, not its power. We must always seek in all our theology properly to distinguish and to integrate.

Much of the burden of this conference is to integrate the role that Christ exercises as ruler of the world with his role as king and head of the church. We must properly integrate his dual reign lest we have a Nestorian Christ. We must also distinguish, however, Christ's universal kingship from his reign over the church: There is a distinction between the church, to which believers and their seed belong, and civil society (the state), to which all persons belong. Christ is especially, in other words, the head over that spiritual body, the church, that the Holy Spirit gathers and perfects throughout the world and that constitutes his mystical body. This reality—that there is a proper distinction between Christ's kingdom, which is not of this world, and the kingdoms of this world—is often expressed by what we call “the spirituality of the church.”

The phrase “the spirituality of the church” may strike many listeners or readers as curious. Contrariwise, the terms “Christian spirituality” or “spiritual theology” are likely familiar to many.² Such

1. This article was delivered as a speech at the Alumni Conference at Mid-America Reformed Seminary on April 9, 2014.

2. The body of what follows is taken in large part from the Preface to and Conclusion of my Ph.D. dissertation, “The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge,” submitted September 2013 (and approved in December 2013)

might have some idea what “spirituality” in broader terms means, but, never having heard the nomenclature “the spirituality of the church,” may be left scratching their heads. I hope to show that these concepts—“Christian spirituality” and “the spirituality of the church”—are not wholly unrelated; it is the case, however, that something rather distinctive is being addressed by what is herein referred to as “the spirituality of the church.”

The doctrine, specifically addressed in terms of “the spirituality of the church,” though of ancient origins, did not appear in that form until the 1850s in the Old School Presbyterian Church in America (which came into being in 1837 and reunited with the New School in 1869). Much of the focus of my dissertation on the subject is on that context (the 1840s through the late 1860s) in which I showed that the doctrine has to do with the question of the province of the church and the nature and limits of its power, specifically, the contention that, since the church is a spiritual institution, a kingdom “not of this world,” its concern and focus should be spiritual and not civil or political. Though Old School Presbyterians rather widely held convictions about the spirituality of the church, at least as to the principle that the church is a spiritual kingdom, the *application* of the principle engendered enormous controversy.

Perhaps just a short reflection on the nexus between “Christian spirituality” and “the spirituality of the church” might be helpful here. Many have employed the term “Christian spirituality,” especially in recent years, to distinguish the theology of the Christian church from the lived experience of the Christian faith. The “spirituality of the church” highlights that the church, as the mystical body of Christ filled with the Holy Spirit, is a spiritual not a civil entity. The broader notion of “Christian spirituality” has to do with the specific ways in which the Christian life is lived, particularly with respect to Christian devotional practices, the spiritual disciplines that mark the Christian life, whether public or private.³ Here one may think, for example, of the prayer life of the Christian. This would be a part of

to the University of Wales, Trinity St. David (Lampeter), Great Britain. There are some new and additional materials herein.

3. This is a vast field with sources ranging from the late Henri Nouwen (who wrote more than three dozen books on Christian spirituality), to books on Christian mysticism, histories of Christian spirituality (especially those of Bernard McGinn, whose four-volume *Foundations of Mysticism* and three-volume *Christian Spirituality*—both sets published New York: Crossroad, 1995 and 1987, respectively—cover the field), and books on the spiritual disciplines by popular authors like Richard Foster. Christians from the Far East have often contributed to this field, seen in a book like Simon Chan’s *Spiritual Theology: A Systematic Study of the Christian Life* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1998) in which he treats the question in two parts: The theological principles of spiritual theology and the practices of spiritual theology, in which, under the latter rubric, he addresses prayer, spiritual exercises focusing on God and self, the Word, and the world, as well as the rule of life, the discernment of spirits, and the art of spiritual direction.

what is called “Christian spirituality,” and could be set over against the devotional practices of a Muslim or a Buddhist (and thus we may speak of Islamic spirituality or Buddhist spirituality).⁴

How exactly, though, is the broader concept of “spirituality” connected with the narrower concept of the “spirituality of the church”? Spirituality broadly has to do, as noted above, with the spiritual aspects of the Christian life. These spiritual aspects, in Christian theology, are authored by the Holy Spirit, the third person of the blessed, holy undivided Trinity. Paul identifies the spiritual man as one in whom the Holy Spirit has worked (1 Cor. 2:1-16). The spiritual man is one who enjoys union with Christ, and has the mind of Christ, in and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit authors and fosters Christian spirituality.⁵ The spirituality of the church ties in with this because the church is a spiritual entity, a corporate body of those in whom the Spirit has worked. It is this spiritual aspect of the life of the church that determines the nature and limit of its power: a spiritual power exercised in a spiritual manner within a spiritual realm. Thus all sorts of organic connections exist between spirituality broadly conceived and the spirituality of the church properly.

The doctrine of the spirituality of the church, especially relevant in the 1860s in America, is something that has received revived attention in recent years. D. G. Hart and John Muether, for instance, historians in the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, have reintroduced the doctrine, writing, “Unlike some Reformed theologians who have posited a basic harmony between church and state in the execution of God’s sovereignty, American Presbyterianism has also nurtured an understanding of society that stresses fundamental differences between the aims and task of the church and the purpose of the state, [affirming a doctrine] [s]ometimes called the doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church.”⁶ This revival of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church has also played into the work of several Reformed scholars who are arguing that doctrines pertaining to natural law and “two kingdoms” need reviving among the Reformed, most notably, David VanDrunen, professor of systematic theology at Westminster Semi-

4. Spirituality in the world religions, including Christianity, receives due attention in the magisterial 18 vv. set, *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, Ewert Cousins, General Editor (New York: Crossroad, 1985—).

5. The word “spirituality” is often nowadays pitted against “religion,” so that one commonly reads that someone, while not being a practitioner of “organized religion,” is, nonetheless, “a very spiritual person.” Presumably, the inward is identified with spirituality and the outward with religion. Adhering to religion then is taken as merely outward and thus inherently hypocritical. Spirituality is perfectly acceptable in this schema because it’s an inward virtue that does not have or require outward observances.

6. *Ordained Servant*, 7.3 (July 1998): 64. See also Hart’s and Muether’s *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2007), 138-143.

nary California.⁷ As part of his commitment to argue for the use of natural law and the understanding that there is a “common kingdom” and a “redemptive kingdom” that are properly separate, VanDrunen has also claimed, over against neo-Calvinist transformationalism, that recapturing the doctrine of the spirituality of the church is an important part of this project.⁸ Hart, VanDrunen, and others claim that their invocation of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church is in keeping with its nineteenth-century usage, particularly that usage made by the Princeton theologian Charles Hodge’s fellow Old School Presbyterians, the Border State champion of spirituality, Stuart Robinson, and the dean of Southern Presbyterianism, James Henley Thornwell.⁹ My dissertation has sought, by examining the nineteenth-century doctrine of the spirituality of the church, among other things, to help shed light on the claims of Hart, VanDrunen, and others who are seeking to reprise the historical doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Some have argued that Hart and company are innovators, departing from the nineteenth-century spirituality of the church, though they claim to be reviving it.¹⁰ The aim of my dissertation was to seek to get that history right so that, among other things, we might arrive at sober assessments of such claims.

My work was specifically dedicated to explicating the doctrine of the spirituality of the church in the ecclesiology of Charles Hodge (1797-1878), whose doctrine of spirituality has received no sustained attention. Hodge was, arguably, the most influential Old School Presbyterian of the nineteenth century, laboring for more than fifty-five years at its flagship seminary, Princeton Theological Seminary

7. David VanDrunen. *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009) concerns itself with surveying natural law and two-kingdom theory before, during and after the Reformation, while his *Living in God's Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010) focuses on the biblical foundation for such. His initial work on natural law is also useful here—David VanDrunen, *A Biblical Case for Natural Law* (Grand Rapids: The Acton Institute, 2006).

8. VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, 266-267.

9. VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms*, 247-266; Darryl G. Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan Dee, 2006), 117-119; Craig Troxel, in his Foreword to a reprinting of Stuart Robinson’s 1858, *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel* (Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2009), 5-12, commends Robinson’s spirituality of the church and Brian Wingard commends Thornwell’s in “As the Lord Puts Words in Her Mouth’: The Supremacy of Scripture in the Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell and Its Influence Upon the Presbyterian Churches of the South.” Ph.D. dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992.

10. Sean Lucas, in his review of Hart’s *Secular Faith*, in his essay “God and Country American Style,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 69 (2007): 185-97, notes that while Hart intends to argue for the separation of church and state (a hardly controversial position in America), what he ends up arguing for is the separation of faith and politics, which is impossible, given the character of faith as properly basic and thus something that translates into action in all of life.

(founded 1812). Hodge was Princeton's leading professor during the middle part of the nineteenth century, especially enjoying broad influence as the editor of the *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review*, in which pages he annually gave a detailed analysis of the General Assembly of the Old School Presbyterian Church, an interpretive task that multiplied his influence in the Church. Hodge, along with his fellow Princetonians, was seen as the quintessential moderate, and it is no different when it comes to the doctrine of the spirituality of the church.

Robinson, Thornwell, and others were on one end of the spectrum, the radical spirituality of the church wing, we might call it. Others in the Old School Church, especially as the U.S. Civil War (1861-1865) intensified, were on the other end of the spectrum, not heedful of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, only too ready to have the church make political pronouncements, particularly as seen at the General Assemblies of 1861 and 1865. Hodge rejected both extremes and developed a doctrine of the spirituality of the church that was supple and nuanced. And for Hodge his doctrine developed out of his overall doctrine of the church, which he saw as a spiritual institution, a body gathered by the Spirit, and given expression in the visible institutional church. To Hodge, as for Protestants more broadly, the church was in its essence invisible, the visible church being the necessary outward expression of the inward reality of the work of the Spirit. For Hodge, that the church was a spiritual institution that carried out its tasks in spiritual, not political or civil, ways was a given that he contended for and developed throughout the whole of his theology. My dissertation, then, is given to an examination of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church in the theology of Charles Hodge in which I will seek to demonstrate that Hodge developed his doctrine of the spirituality of the church in a subtle and nuanced fashion that permitted him to distinguish the church from the state and its political concerns while permitting the church to retain a prophetic voice to society.

How successful Hodge was in developing his doctrine of the spirituality of the church and how well such an approach served in his day—and would serve in ours, for those seeking to reprimarize the doctrine of Hodge or others—remains a challenge, particularly in our pluralistic culture. Some might argue that the spirituality of the church is precisely what a pluralistic society needs: a church that minds its spiritual business and does not disturb a secularized culture that does not want the church to have a public theology. Others would see the spirituality of the church as failure on the part of a church that has privatized and refuses to call its society to repentance, as the Old School Presbyterian Church, arguably, failed to call America to repent of and for slavery. If this doctrine of the spirituality of the church kept the American Presbyterian Church from fully addressing what many would regard as the greatest evil of its day, what

good was it? Many other American Christians did not believe that something called the spirituality of the church constrained them from denouncing slavery and they denounced it in biblical terms. William Wilberforce, to cite a key non-American, condemned slavery on the basis of Christian principles and thus slavery in Britain suffered defeat in no small measure due to explicit Christian opposition.

On the other hand, one might argue, the spirituality of the church tends to keep the church from being overwhelmed by the world's concerns or its agenda. It helps the church maintain its identity as church, distinct from the culture around it. J. G. Machen, twentieth-century successor to Hodge at Princeton Seminary, lamented the loss of this distinction due to the loss of any sense of the spirituality of the church. He wrote,

Wearied with the conflicts of the world, one goes into the Church to seek refreshment for the soul. And what does one find? Alas, too often, one finds only the turmoil of the world. The preacher comes forward, not out of a secret place of meditation and power, not with the authority of God's Word permeating his message, not with human wisdom pushed far into the background by the glory of the Cross, but with human opinions about the social problems of the hour or easy solutions of the vast problem of sin. Such is the sermon. And then perhaps the service is closed by one of those hymns breathing out the angry passions of 1861, which are to be found in the back part of the hymnals. Thus the warfare of the world has entered even into the house of God, and sad indeed is the heart of the man who has come seeking peace.

Is there no refuge from strife? Is there no place of refreshing where a man can prepare for the battle of life? Is there no place where two or three can gather in Jesus' name, to forget for the moment all those things that divide nation from nation and race from race, to forget human pride, to forget the passions of war, to forget the puzzling problems of industrial strife, and to unite in overflowing gratitude at the foot of the Cross? If there be such a place, then that is the house of God and that the gate of heaven. And from under the threshold of that house will go forth a river that will revive the weary world.¹¹

Machen's plea is for a church that knows its spiritual calling and properly understands that it is not the world, and that it does the world the least good by seeking to be most like it.

11. J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; rpt., Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1994), 179-180.

The danger is always there that the church ceases to be the distinct spiritual institution that it is and becomes an adjunct to the society about it. But there is also another danger—that the church becomes a ghetto that shelters its members and renders ineffectual its gospel witness. Can the church concern itself with its own “spirituality” so much that it fails in its mission to the world? It is the contention of this thesis that Hodge strove to steer a course between the Scylla of the marginalization and irrelevance of the church, on the one hand, and the Charybdis of its politicization, on the other hand, as he developed his doctrine of the spirituality of the church. (How successful he was in this is left for discerning readers to decide.)

When I was staying with friends in June 2012 doing research for my dissertation, I normally took a “safe route” to Princeton Seminary and University, one set forth by Google Maps as the proper way to get from Hamilton Township to Princeton. One morning, however, I decide to drive up Route 206, which takes one right through Trenton and its blighted neighborhoods. Staying on the route, dilapidated and impoverished neighborhoods give way to lush, beautiful homes and estates that mark the environs of Princeton.

As I passed the prestigious prep school in Lawrenceville, the contrast was astounding. Soon, Drumthwacket, the New Jersey governor’s mansion, loomed on my right and the difference between the educated privileged classes of Princeton and the underclasses of urban Trenton could not have been starker. An additional irony was that Hodge Street in Princeton—Hodge’s house is on Mercer not Hodge Street—showcases some of the town’s most opulent residences, while Hodge himself was frequently reliant on his brother, Hugh, to make ends meet (Hodge’s house was roomy but not regal).¹²

That ride brings to mind, once again, the responsibility that we bear for each other. None of us owns the world. God does. And we are stewards of his good gifts. Yet, we often act as if we do and that the difference between us is because I am smart, industrious, and so forth, and the homeless man is not. The spirituality of the church,

12. One further irony: I wrote this section of my dissertation in the Barth reading room (surrounded by Barth’s books and other *Barthania*) at Princeton Theological Seminary and am uncertain that either party would properly appreciate the other. Would, for instance, Barth’s opposition to the sort of Protestant scholasticism reflected by Hodge be appreciated by the great nineteenth-century Old School theologian? In the case before us, Barth’s insistence on the transcendence of God over against the overweening immanency of God proclaimed by old Liberalism, might be seen as a kind of spirituality doctrine, though certainly not one divorced from social concerns. Barth’s project generally is faulted by some as so stressing the unity of all things (God, the theological enterprise, etc.) that diversity disappears. Barth’s challenge would be maintaining proper distinctions in the face of strong unifying themes in his theology while the challenge to those who embrace the spirituality of the church would be to maintain unity and integrity in theology and witness and not give way to dichotomization and disintegration. The old problem of overemphasizing the one (monophysitism) or the many (Nestorianism) continues until a Chalcedon emerges rightly to relate the two in a proper unity that maintains diversity.

rightly constructed, would remind us that all that we have is from the ministry of the Spirit (including all that we have due to common grace): that is what is most important; thus we need not hoard but can share the material things of this world. However the doctrine may be construed, it should not be taken to mean, as in some hands it appears to, that one is indifferent to suffering all around.

The spirituality of the church, properly, does not mean, and must not mean, either that Christians or the institutional church fails to care for the world about it. In the great tsunami of 2007, Christians, Christian organizations, and Christian churches responded with overwhelming aid. Hindus and Muslims, because of their different theological convictions, tended not to, seeing the destruction as deserved karma or the wrath of Allah against bad Muslims. Christians must never respond in this way, but with the compassion and self-sacrifice that befits followers of Jesus.

The spirituality of the church ought not to prompt us to say “be warmed, be filled, and go away.” It frees us to serve God and each other. It does not make us those who flee the world, but those able to engage each other from the best vantage, as Princeton Professor B.B. Warfield noted in his masterful sermon, “Imitating the Incarnation”:

Self-sacrifice brought Christ into the world. And self-sacrifice will lead us, His followers, not away from but into the midst of men. Wherever men suffer, there will we be to comfort. Wherever men strive, there will we be to help. Wherever men fail, there will be we to uplift. Wherever men succeed, there will we be to rejoice. Self-sacrifice means not indifference to our times and our fellows: it means absorption in them. It means forgetfulness of self in others. It means entering into every man’s hopes and fears, longings and despairs: it means manysidedness of spirit, multiform activity, multiplicity of sympathies. It means richness of development. It means not that we should live one life, but a thousand lives,—binding ourselves to a thousand souls by the filaments of so loving a sympathy that their lives become ours. It means that all the experiences of men shall smite our souls and shall beat and batter these stubborn hearts of ours into fitness for their heavenly home.¹³

While it is right that the spirituality of the church prompts us to remember the task and calling of the church—to gather and perfect the saints by the means of grace empowered by the Holy Spirit—we must not forget that the mission of the church is always accompanied by and integrally involves good works, love for God and our fellow man. The church as an institution both preaches the gospel to all

13. B.B. Warfield, “Imitating the Incarnation,” in *The Person and Work of Christ* (1914; rpt., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1970), 574-575.

people and shows the manifold love of God to all people by offering a cup of cold water in Christ's name. The spiritual independence of the church—the doctrine of the spirituality of the church—should never be taken to mean that the church may attend to its religious duties and fail to love its neighbor. Like the Good Samaritan, we must seek to be a good neighbor even to those whom we would rather ignore and not help. We must seek both to preach the gospel and to do good to all men, especially those of the household of faith. Not only is such a holistic approach not at variance with the spirituality of the church but is part of a proper living out of the spirituality of the church.

When Hodge encountered the doctrine of the spirituality of the church as set forth by James Henley Thornwell at the 1859 General Assembly, he initially rejected it as a “muzzle” on the prophetic voice of the church. Hodge had his own doctrine of spirituality, however—though he did not tend to refer to it using that nomenclature, given the usage made of it by Thornwell, Stuart Robinson, and others—which he developed particularly during and after the U.S. Civil War. Hodge's use of the doctrine of the spirituality of the church recalled the original idea of the spiritual independency of the church as expressed among the Scots, where it was developed to keep the state from dominating the church (in an establishmentarian context), not to render the church mute with respect to civil matters that the Scriptures clearly addressed, as was the case with something like slavery.

Hodge's doctrine of the spirituality of the church, then, served to distinguish the church as an institution from other institutions, particularly the state, and to highlight that the mission of the church is a spiritual one. Since the church as a formal organization has nothing to do with politics as such—those specific matters of public policy that might divide persons who are otherwise in doctrinal accord—it does not address matters that are purely political. It is part of its proper spirituality, and calling, as a spiritual body having spiritual concerns, however, to address all that the Bible addresses, even if such issues have political ramifications as a consequence of the underlying spiritual concerns.

Here's the rub: what is moral or ethical, and thus properly spiritual, cannot always readily be separated from what is “purely political.” So many moral issues—slavery being the primary example aduced in this thesis—have so many political ramifications that what is “properly spiritual” and what may be “purely political” is not easily distinguished. One might wonder, then, if the doctrine of the spirituality of the church is essentially useless, dying the death of a thousand qualifications. I believe that it need not: the principle that the church is a spiritual entity bearing spiritual concerns remains a valid concern and consideration. Every decision that the church as church takes needs to be justified in the light of the spirituality of the church, answering positively a question like—does this advance the

true spiritual mission of the church? Endorsing a political candidate and taking a position on a tax bill arguably does not pertain to or advance the cause of the gospel. Opposing American slavery, as did the 1818 General Assembly in its famous statement calling for the demise of such—without dictating precisely how slavery should end—was arguably a proper concomitant of the gospel and the spirituality of the church.

Having said all this, though, does not remove the difficulty of defining what is spiritual vis-à-vis what is more purely political. One man's "purely political" may be another man's "civil consequences of a proper spirituality." Nothing will save us from the debate over whether a matter pertains to the proper spirituality of the church or falls under the more purely political that should not concern the church. And there are those on both the left and right, particularly hard-liners, who see everything as political, so that all political issues are moral and all moral issues are political, *simpliciter*. Such partisans will argue that every political issue is fraught with clear moral implications. One can think of those on the hard right who would even argue that the totality of the laws that regulated Israel should regulate all nations and on the hard left who are Marxists or the like who would argue that all religion is merely the rationalization of the ruling bourgeoisie. Whereas modernism crowned science, postmodernism has crowned politics and everything has been politicized. In the wake of such pervasive politicization, Hodge's claim that one can distinguish the spiritual from the purely political itself becomes suspect. To one who regards everything as politics, Hodge's conviction that the church ought not to pursue purely political ends simply reflects a naïve failure on his part to recognize how political all his convictions were. This writer would argue that where the line ought to be drawn between the spiritual and the political remains a challenge but to deny that a distinction can be made at all is to give way to a politicized cynicism.¹⁴

Hodge distinguished the spiritual from the political as he did in a rather thoughtful way, even if one would disagree, as I do, with all the decisions that he made respecting slavery. Hodge refused to engage in some sort of pre-commitment that would box him in and not allow him to comment on something that some might deem more purely political, but that he perceived as having clear spiritual rami-

14. James Davidson Hunter has recognized the problem confronting "Christian transformation" both on the left and the right and has suggested a third way, "faithful presence," that works itself out personally and institutionally in his challenging and provocative work, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). While the book has some significant weaknesses, its critique of an overly-politicized church seems to hit the mark. An approach along these lines, though differing from Hunter in certain aspects, might be consonant with a revival of a useful doctrine of the spirituality of the church.

fications. This can be seen in the way that Hodge responded to the evocation of the spirituality of the church on the part of Thornwell at the 1859 and 1860 General Assemblies. At those General Assemblies, Thornwell sought to shut down debate that he deemed a violation of the spirituality of the church and Hodge responded vigorously at the 1859 General Assembly, asserting, "There is a great temptation to adopt theories which free us from painful responsibilities." Hodge characterized Thornwell's adducing of spirituality of the church as such an attempt: "To adopt any theory which would stop the mouth of the church, and prevent her bearing her testimony to the kings and rulers, magistrates and people, in behalf of the truth and law of God, is like one who administers chloroform to a man to prevent his doing mischief. We pray God that this poison may be dashed away, before it has reduced the church to a state of inanition, and delivered her bound hand and foot into the power of the world."¹⁵ Hodge likewise opposed Thornwell's citation of the spirituality of the church at the 1860 General Assembly (when Thornwell argued against church boards), as well as those at the 1862 and 1865 General Assemblies who argued a narrow spirituality of the church that constructed as "political" what Hodge thought to be "spiritual."

Hodge's doctrine of the spirituality of the church was broader and more carefully constructed than that of Thornwell and his partisans, as seen in Hodge's support of the Gardiner Spring Resolution at the 1861 General Assembly and his opposition to the pervasive politicization of the church reflected in the General Assemblies of the Civil War Years and thereafter. Hodge, then, while critical of a narrowly-constructed "super" spiritual view of the church, that considered the expression of any concern on the part of the church as church that might have civil consequences as inappropriate, also had and developed his own doctrine of the spirituality of the church. At bottom, though, Hodge and even his fiercest strict constructionist Old School Presbyterian opponents had more in common than dividing them, namely, they both taught, incautiously, that the Bible only regulated and never condemned slavery *ipso facto*, and that the union of the American nation must continue. Hodge moderated his own misgivings about slavery because he was convinced that to vent such might threaten the bonds that held the Presbyterian Church together, which would in turn threaten the bonds that held the American nation together.¹⁶

It is arguable that Hodge pulled his punches on slavery, unlike the Covenanters, not only because of his own complicity with the institution, but because for him, nothing was as important as the con-

15. This material is contained in Appendix A to Chapter 6 of my dissertation on Hodge.

16. Material supporting these contentions may be found in Chapter 5 of my dissertation on Hodge.

tinuation of the American union.¹⁷ Even Thornwell upon returning from Europe in 1860 proposed emancipation of the slaves to save the union.¹⁸ Why was such a premium placed on saving the American union by so many of the parties in these debates? Because Hodge, Thornwell, and almost all those in nineteenth-century America shared certain convictions about American exceptionalism, namely, that God had brought America into existence to bring to the whole world both spiritual and political freedom.¹⁹ All the parties to this dispute saw the American venture as divinely ordained and worth saving at all costs, even if that meant bearing with the continuation of slavery that Hodge and the 1818 Assembly said should end.

This commitment to the American experiment, though cast in spiritual terms, was a political commitment and abolitionism in particular threatened the continuation of the holy “errand into the wilderness” that Hodge and others saw the American nation to be. Hence, even if slavery was undesirable, as Hodge thought it was, and thus he advocated gradual emancipation, slavery was not horrible enough to warrant its abolition, certainly not at the price of the dissolution of the nation. Thus for Hodge, Thornwell, and most Presbyterians, Old and New School, the survival of the nation transcended all other concerns, and was itself conceived as not merely a political conviction but rose to the level of a spiritual truism, since the continued existence of the nation was precondition of the continued existence and thriving of the American Presbyterian Church, at least Hodge and company assumed at the time. All of the parties to this were so enmeshed in their political commitments to the U.S. Constitution and the American nation that such was sacrosanct and beyond question. For Hodge and his fellows, nothing rose to the moral

17. Recent work on this question continues to highlight that, claims to the contrary notwithstanding, there was an important group—the British and American Covenanters—who both were confessionally orthodox and abolitionist, over against the common misconception that ardent opponents of slavery were either secularists or heterodox; see Daniel Ritchie, “Radical Orthodoxy: Irish Covenanters and American Slavery, circa 1830-1865,” *Church History* 82:4 (December 2013), 812-847.

18. And when it became clear that the union could not be saved, Thornwell held that “the church is a spiritual institution *and* that the [Southern] confederacy ought to be explicitly Christian,” as he had held for the union earlier. What made such possible, i.e., his ability “to hold these two seemingly contradictory positions together coherently,” as Christopher C. Cooper has argued, was his continuing to distinguish between “the church as an institution with a spiritual mission and Christianity as a religion that encompasses both institutions of church and state,” page 37 in his “Binding Bodies and Liberating Souls: James Henley Thornwell’s Vision for a Spiritual Church and a Christian Confederacy,” *The Confessional Presbyterian*, vol. 9 (2013): 35-47.

19. This widespread conviction about American exceptionalism, particularly with respect to Hodge and his fellow Old School Presbyterians, is intimated in Chapters 5-7 of my dissertation on Hodge, but much more explicitly documented and explicated in Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), especially at 227-364 in which section Noll develops how “American ideologies exerted a profound impact on religion.”

level of supporting the survival of the nation. The continuation of the union became paramount to every other consideration.

There was then a kind of “spiritualized” manifest destiny that arguably ran quite counter to any vigorous notion of the spirituality of the church. Hodge, Thornwell, and all the rest, New or Old School, looked for the blessings that had come to the American nation to come to the world through America and thus the American nation had to spread and be preserved at all costs for the good of the propagation of the Christian faith everywhere. They were in effect identifying America with the church as the means of worldwide blessing. Perhaps this pervasive spiritual imperialism means that the spirituality of the church is a chimera and that time-and-space located parishioners will always be more influenced by political concerns than they realize or would ever wish to acknowledge. Some might argue that since politics is inescapable and cannot in any case be easily distinguished from matters spiritual (the political simply being an expression of the moral or spiritual) that one ought not even to try to distinguish them and that we would best be done with all this talk about the spirituality of the church.

But the politicization of everything, including the church, and a denial of the spirituality of the church in either Hodgean or Thornwellian terms, renders the church just one more voice among the many pushing a political agenda. The church, particularly as set forth on the pages of the New Testament, does not appear to be anything of the sort. The church is not presented in the Bible as simply another voice in the competing cacophony of shouted slogans, but rather that still small voice that testifies to what God has done for us in Christ, that He so loved the world that He gave Christ to die for it, so that all who believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. This is the message of the church and to reduce it to a mere political agenda is to sell short the glory of the gospel. The Christian faith is not, at its heart, a political message, but a spiritual one. A doctrine of the spirituality of the church, properly conceived, holds fast to this and permits the church to maintain fidelity to the Christian message while keeping in check any address that it might consider necessary of matters in the civil and political sphere.

Part of the problem in the American Presbyterian Church with respect to the slavery question had to do with the fact that the Scripture did not appear to be opposed to slavery but only sought to regulate it. Hodge had difficulty getting beyond the contention that the Scriptures did not forbid slavery and neither therefore should the church. I think that he simply missed that the Scriptures did forbid Hebrews from enslaving each other and allowed it only for strangers as a mercy to some whom the Israelites were otherwise commanded to kill. The church was not given such a commission (to extirpate certain nations) but to preach the gospel to the whole world. While it is true that Christ and the apostles did not abolish slavery, it is also the

case that the consequences of the gospel would tend to ameliorate if not eliminate such (seen in Paul's letter to Philemon).²⁰

Had Christ or Paul ordered the end of all slavery, it would have rendered the gospel revolutionary and made its central concern social, political and economic equity. If Paul, for instance, had simply commanded Philemon to free Onesimus and not suggested that he be emancipated as a consequence of the new relationship that they sustained in the gospel, Christians would have viewed such an apostolic command as binding, necessitating the abolition of slavery immediately everywhere. This would have obscured the true spiritual message of the gospel—salvation in Christ to all that believe on Him—and have rendered the Christian faith another competing, indeed radical political agenda, especially in the Greco-Roman world, with so much of the population in slavery. The New Testament contains no explicit commands to abolish slavery—though it prohibits man-stealing (I Tim. 1:10) and thus proscribes American slavery—leaving it to the outworking of the gospel to address such in the Greco-Roman world of its day.²¹

In the American context, developments during and after the U.S. Civil War arguably justified Hodge's contention that there was a proper spiritual/political distinction to be made with respect to matters ecclesiastical. Not only was the Old School Presbyterian church unduly politicized during the War, so that civil concerns routinely eclipsed theological ones, but also after the reunion of the Old and New School in the North, the Presbyterian Church, along with other mainstream Protestant churches, seemed more committed and motivated by political than religious concerns. Civil religion, in other words, became more and more the order of the day in the twentieth century for the American Protestant Church and the engine of social concerns drove the Presbyterian Church more than did the Bible or the Westminster Standards.²²

20. As seen in the practices of Christians in the early church, in A. J. Harrill *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr/Siebeck, 1995). Though opposition to slavery itself, as opposed merely to slavery's abuses, was long in coming, as seen in Trevor Dennis, "Man Beyond Price: Gregory of Nyssa and Slavery," in *Heaven and Earth: Essex Essays in Theology and Ethics*, ed. Andrew Linzey and Peter J. Wexler (Worthing, West Sussex: Churchman Publishing Limited, 1986), it was Christianity, or Christendom, at least in part, that brought slavery to an effective end between the fourth and tenth centuries, with serfdom developing in seigniorialism and feudalism subsequent to slavery's diminution.

21. Though Kyle Harper, in *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275-425* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), showed that slavery lasted deep into the Christian era, in his most recent book, *From Shame to Sin: The Christian Transformation of Sexual Morality in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), he shows that Christianity's strict moral code was particularly sympathetic to the sexual exploitation of the slave. So Christianity played an important role in reforming and ultimately ending ancient slavery.

22. This is why Ernest Trice Thompson so vigorously opposed the doctrine of the spirituality of the church. He did indeed oppose the spirituality of the church because

The first Presbyterian and Southerner to become President of the United States after the Civil War was Woodrow Wilson, coming from a rich heritage of the spirituality of the church (his father, Joseph Ruggles Wilson, became the stated clerk of the Presbyterian Church of the United States, the Old School Southern Presbyterian Church, at its formation in 1861). Wilson, however, completely rejected the spirituality of the church, thoroughly identifying the religious and the political, particularly baptizing his own political ideals and investing them with the authority of divine sanction.²³ Wilson scarcely distinguished his own programs from sacred writ, true also of Theodore Roosevelt, and many politicians of the time.²⁴ In this way, these men and many others who followed them compromised the spiritual independence of the church and put it in the service of their political programs.

The purpose of the church, however, is not to serve such lesser ends. Ultimately, to evoke Calvin's thought, the church is a spiritual hospital dispensing medicine for needy, sin-sick souls. The church's essential spiritual character was, for Hodge, central to his doctrine of the spirituality of the church. Yes, spirituality meant that the church had a certain province and certain boundaries that distinguished it from other institutions, particularly the state. It meant that the church was to be the church and not seek merely to imitate the world. What marked the church off from every other institution was that it was the body created and possessed by the Holy Spirit. Hodge's doctrine of the spirituality of the church, then, was not merely a concomitant of his polity but coming out of the heart of his theology. Hodge, like Calvin, was a theologian of the Holy Spirit and this, above all, informed his doctrine of the spirituality of the church.

Was it a proper application of this doctrine, however, for Hodge and others of the Old School Presbyterian Church to fail to condemn American slavery consistently, in both theory and practice? Or is the doctrine of the spirituality of the church fatally flawed, containing the seeds of its own destruction by limiting and marginalizing the church? However one answers these questions, it is certainly true that the American Presbyterian Church, particularly in its Old School

it had been used in support of slavery and was afterwards used to justify repressive racial policies; but he also opposed it because he supported the church playing a larger and more direct political role in civil society. See his *Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1961).

23. A. Scott Berg, *Wilson* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2013). In this remarkable work, Berg shows the almost complete identification in Woodrow Wilson of his politics with his religion, with every chapter title reflecting Wilson's near-messianic sensibilities (e.g., "Advent," "Baptism," "Gethsemane," "Passion," and so forth).

24. Made abundantly clear in Edmund Morris's three-volume work on Roosevelt as well as the recent title by Doris Kearns Goodwin, *The Bully Pulpit: Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and the Golden Age of Journalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2013). While Roosevelt was not Presbyterian, he was "Dutch" Reformed, a close cousin.

form, never lived up to the vigorous denunciation of slavery issued by the 1818 General Assembly. That Assembly called American chattel slavery a failure to love one's neighbor and a scourge on a society composed largely of Christians. It argued for the extirpation of slavery and the emancipation of slaves.

But the swirling events of following years seemed to wipe away that clarion call and slavery became more entrenched than ever and practically untouchable. The 1845 General Assembly, and Hodge agreed with it, saw slavery as an issue so divisive that it would destroy the union of the church and the nation. Doubtless many had personal reasons for not condemning slavery, but that anyone ever used the spirituality of the church in any of its forms to refrain from such moral rejection of slavery is lamentable.²⁵

We must understand the spirituality of the church in its nineteenth-century America context, since this is the time when such a concept was fully developed. We must judge as to both its strengths and weaknesses in this context before we can talk about a "usable" doctrine of the spirituality of the church in our time. We need to assess how the church has abused this doctrine in the past, as well as how it has beneficially used it, if we are to have any helpful employment of it now and for the future.

I think that the re-introduction of this doctrine into present theological conversations can have a salubrious effect, but only if we embrace what is at its heart, true spirituality, and reject its bad by-products, apathy to our world and its needs. We must not allow a simple claim that something violates the spirituality of the church to settle a matter. We must not imagine that a mere citation of "the spirituality of the church" disposes of problems, reifying the doctrine so that we can conveniently dismiss difficult matters, dispensing with the hard work of looking carefully at all that comes before us; rather, we should look at every proposal on its own terms and thoughtfully apply the principle of the spirituality of the church. The spirituality of the church then could be recovered for the ongoing dialog of how the church is to relate to the world in which it finds itself, both in how it distinguishes itself from the world and how it gives itself to the world.

25. Materials supporting these contentions, including personal reasons on Hodge's part, may be found in Chapter 2 of my dissertation on Hodge.