

# On the Spiritual and Non-Political Nature of the Church

By S. J. Hatch

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One of the most challenging works I ever read in seminary was an 1851 essay by the antebellum Southern Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell on the “Relation of the Church to Slavery.” The professor assigned it to be provocative and to that end it certainly was. Thornwell’s intent was to shut down any religious criticism of the institution of slavery, and it must be remembered that at the time he wrote, the issue was becoming politically hot. Congress had just passed the Compromise of 1850, which admitted California into the union as a free state in exchange for a stricter and more intrusive Fugitive Slave Act. Within a few a years, the nation would be in a bloody civil war over slavery. Thornwell’s argument was that the Church was never intended to be just another human vehicle for social reform but was constitutionally limited to the ends given to it by God in His Word. Its power was “ministerial and declarative” in propagating what the Bible teaches, but its authority extends only as far as what Scripture speaks to; where Scripture is silent, the Church too must also be silent. In Thornwell’s view, since Scripture did not specifically call for the abolition of slavery, the Church must also be silent on the political question as to whether slavery should be abolished.

This was my introduction to the Spirituality Doctrine of the Church, and to read such an articulate Reformed theologian make a case to such a reprehensible end gave me much to think about. Gradually, with much reading and reflection, I came to differentiate the good in the principles articulated from the bad in Thornwell’s misapplication of them to defend slavery. Was the Church simply just another institution for social reform? No, the Church was instituted by God to collect His people, to worship Him, and to be His witness to a dark and dying world. Could the Church say anything it wanted on any issue? No, its authority only went so far as what the Bible could say. On these points, Thornwell was right, and indeed, was reflective of a longer Reformed tradition. Where he was wrong, however, was in claiming that the Bible said nothing about abolition. The great salvific event of the Old Testament was God’s deliverance of His People from slavery in Egypt. That, in turn, pointed to the greater salvific event of the New Testament, Christ’s crucifixion at Calvary to deliver His people from the slavery to sin. Additional passages could be cited as well in opposition to slavery, but for Thornwell to miss that fundamental narrative can only be described as a willful misreading of Scripture. As part of its witness to God’s truth, the Church has a responsibility to speak to the moral issues of the day insofar as Scripture itself speaks. That said, how the Church exercises this responsibility is as valid a question today as it was prior to the Civil War, and I would posit that a recovery of the proper use of the Spirituality doctrine can help us navigate the shoals of our current political polarization.

## The Danger of Politicization

While I was in no way sympathetic to Thornwell's ends in reading his essay, the principles he articulated regarding the authority and limits the church needs to have in talking about public issues resonated with me because I had seen firsthand how churches operated wrongly without attention to such things. This is what caused me to actually wrestle with Thornwell's essay and not simply dismiss it outright, as many are wont to do.

I became a Christian in a non-denominational US Navy chapel when I was twelve, but within a year and a half my mother decided that we should attend a church off the Navy base. Since she grew up Methodist, we went to the local United Methodist Church. This was the early 1980s and the pastor of that church was a pacifist who was big on the "peace movement." I do not recall hearing any sermons on the Gospel regarding sin and salvation, but I heard a lot of sermons focused on social justice and condemning the Reagan Administration's defense build-up, with the insinuated subtext that if one was not a pacifist, then one was not truly following Christ. At one point my father was injured in a barracks accident while on a Navy detachment to South America and my mother asked the pastor if he would pray for my father. The pastor refused to do so, saying that because my father was in the military then he deserved what he got. The negative experience I had in that church while that pastor was there probably more than anything else pushed me in the direction of theological and political conservatism. When I went to college, I stopped going to church for two years, although thanks to the involvement of others in my life, I was open to campus ministry. Looking back, I attribute it to God's providential preservation that I stayed in the faith at all, since I could have easily walked away altogether given my church experience.

Lest I conclude that politicization was only a liberal problem, I saw it from the right as well after I got to college. I attended the University of New Hampshire in the mid-to-late 1980s and from the outset got involved in Republican politics in the run up to the 1988 presidential election. New Hampshire's role as the state with the first primary in the nation is a continual point of state pride and fairly quickly I became one of two co-chairs to UNH's Young Republicans (YR) club, which enabled me to connect with the different Republican campaigns testing the waters for a presidential run. This period of time was also when Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition was eclipsing Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority and Robertson too was positioning to run for president. Robertson campaign workers tried to recruit a friend of mine from InterVarsity to be their campaign leader on campus; he declined that offer, but as he was telling me about it he let me look through the prospectus they had given him detailing Robertson's positions. Looking through that I quickly concluded that Robertson's theological views were so provocative that if he ever became President then we would almost certainly be in a major international war in short order. Separately, my YR co-chair had made contact with people in the Robertson campaign who gave us a stack of purportedly conservative newspapers to distribute on campus. The newspapers contained articles claiming such things as God's displeasure on the United States for turning

control of the Panama Canal over to the Panamanians. I judged that these newspapers were so extreme that they would do more to discredit conservatism on campus than to help it and I ended up throwing them all into the dumpster outside my dorm. During the primary season proper, the YRs could not endorse any one Republican over another, but the Robertson campaign—with whom we had the least contact—plastered signs all around the campus proclaiming, “Young Republicans for Robertson,” as if we had endorsed him. They also put out a flyer called “The Biblical Scorecard,” ostensibly a voting guide comparison the different Republican candidates but one which dubiously declared Robertson to have a perfect alignment with “biblical principles.” When I asked some friends who I knew voted for Robertson in the primary why they did so, I remember getting the response at the time, “Oh, he’s the *Christian* candidate.” Tribalism was a thing back in the 1980s as well.

Both the political Left and the political Right have an interest in exploiting Christians and the Church for political gains and Christians are all too inclined to go along. In the last several decades, there has been no shortage of statements from religious leaders on both the Right and the Left to the effect that if the Church does not take a stand on one or another political issue then the continued relevance of the Christian faith to Americans will be seriously jeopardized. Even more emphatic are statements and press releases from parachurch ministries or Christian institutes warning about the dangers that will ensue from specific government policies or officials. **If the Church succumbs to pressures toward politicization—as it has at times in the past—then this will seriously harm the cause of the Gospel.**

Imagine a situation, for example, where after a divisive presidential election the evangelical leadership of a church successfully pushed through an all-church council a motion pledging unabated loyalty to the secular government headed by this new administration. Once the motion had been enacted, dissenters risked losing their ministries if they did not comply, and many would either feign allegiance or simply maintain silence to protect their livelihoods. Others, more open about their refusal to comply, are hounded out of the church, or even reported by their former colleagues to the secular authorities on suspicion of treasonous activities. To some partisans on either the Right or the Left, this sounds like the nightmare scenario that could result from any of our current presidential elections. To others, it might apply to Nazi Germany or any number of authoritarian states of recent memory. In fact, however, the situation described was what actually happened in the Old School Presbyterian Church during the American Civil War.

As is well-known, Abraham Lincoln’s election in November 1860 triggered the secession of several Southern states, and in April 1861 South Carolinians shelled and captured the Federal garrison at Fort Sumter. In the North, the fall of Fort Sumter galvanized a willingness to respond militarily to preserve the Union and this led to Lincoln’s call for 75,000 military volunteers to suppress the rebellion. It was in this heated political environment, just a few short weeks after the fall of Fort Sumter, that the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church USA (PCUSA) met in Philadelphia. At that meeting, Dr.

Gardner Spring, the long-time evangelical pastor of the Brick Church in New York City, put forth a series of resolutions for consideration by the General Assembly to support the Federal Government, and by implication, to support Federal efforts to suppress Southern secession. Spring's resolutions were not requested by the Lincoln Administration. In fact, there is some evidence to indicate that senior members of the Administration did **not** want such resolutions since they would provoke the division of the church and be yet another image of national disunity.<sup>1</sup> The resolutions, however, passed by a nearly 2 to 1 margin and the division of the church is what indeed resulted. Although the Southern presbyteries were already moving toward leaving—many, in fact, failed to show up to the Assembly in the first place because of the emerging military hostilities—Spring's resolutions provided the final insult. The Southern presbyteries formally left the church in protest and formed the Southern Presbyterian Church. The Northern and Southern Presbyterian Churches would not be reunited until 1983.

The Gardner Spring resolutions also put Presbyterian churches in border states like Missouri and Kentucky into a particularly difficult situation. The border states remained loyal to the Union but pastors in those states faced congregations that in many respects were as divided as the nation itself was. Congregants often had varying degrees of Southern sympathy for reasons of family, business, heritage, or concerns about the legitimacy of Federal actions. Tensions were magnified by neighbors who suspected neighbors of sympathies toward one side or the other and reported them to either local Union forces or Southern partisans. Over the course of the war, demand for loyalty oaths steadily increased.

Walking a balancing act was not easy. Stuart Robinson, a pastor in Louisville, Kentucky, ran a newspaper called the *True Presbyterian* which single-mindedly advocated for a nonpolitical church and became the voice for many border state Presbyterian ministers. Vocal as he was, it is not surprising that Robinson made enemies. At one point, when he was out of town on business, friends from back home told him he almost certainly would be arrested if he came back. For his family's protection and his own freedom, Robinson crossed into Canada, where he spent the rest of the war in exile.

Another case, highlighted in Robinson's newspaper, was even more illustrative of the tensions border state pastors faced. Dr. Samuel McPheeters was the popular pastor of the Pine Street Presbyterian Church in St. Louis, Missouri and he tried from the outset of the Civil War to keep his church neutral and nonpolitical. Nevertheless, a zealously pro-Union seminary professor denounced him as a traitor at the General Assembly in 1862 because his neutrality was construed as being insufficiently supportive of the Union. Pro-Union newspapers repeated the allegation against McPheeters, fueled by innuendo from a handful of disgruntled congregants. Although viewed favorably by the majority of his church, he struggled for the better part of two

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<sup>1</sup> D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, *Seeking a Better Country; 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2007), 148-149.

years to stay in the pulpit, first against officials of the Federal military government and then against the PCUSA General Assembly. He was ultimately vindicated, but the toll it took on his reputation and his health led to his early death a few years after the end of the Civil War.<sup>2</sup>

With the distance of more than 150 years, it is tempting to dismiss these examples as the products of an overheated earlier time, but to do so overlooks several facets of which we should be mindful, given that we, too, live in politically overheated times.

First, in an age dominated by how one feels, **it is all too easy for the churches to get caught up in the broader cultural passions of the moment. This is often driven by rhetoric of a national moral crisis which is used to justify political engagement.** It is encapsulated in the sentiment is that if “something” is not done, then the nation will face the equivalent of a moral apocalypse. Such crisis rhetoric is polarizing, forcing people to put others into the categories of either “with us or against us.” This is clearly evident in the cases of both Robinson and McPheeters, where the sense of crisis overshadowed everything else. It is evident that not only in these cases, but also in how the Spring resolutions were pushed through that there was little inclination among the General Assembly’s leadership toward forbearance or grace. Many voted in favor of the resolutions in part because they did not want to look disloyal to the U.S. Government in the eyes of their colleagues.

Second, there was an **overestimation by churchmen of how much weight the pronouncements of the church would carry in terms of political deliberations.** Gardner Spring, for example, when confronted by other members of the General Assembly with evidence that even the Lincoln Administration was not looking for affirmations of the kind embodied in his proposed resolutions, reportedly responded by saying that the resolutions were necessary because he did not think that Lincoln Administration officials adequately understood the situation at the time.<sup>3</sup> To say that these officials did not understand the seriousness of the secession crisis and would only become aware of that through resolutions by the Presbyterian Church was hubris. Lest we be too quick to condemn Dr. Spring, though, we should give careful thought as to how significant we tend to think our pronouncements on policy issues are. More often than not, they probably will be largely irrelevant to those in government.

**Lastly, the expediency of the moment meant that little forethought was given to the long-term implications of actions.** The impact of the Spring resolutions went beyond simply showing support for the United States Government. The precedent set by them in terms of political pronouncements was progressively built upon by subsequent General Assemblies. In the Reconstruction period, the PCUSA required its ministers to take loyalty oaths to the U.S. Government and this actually became the sticking point in the

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<sup>2</sup> Preston D. Graham, Jr. *A Kingdom Not of This World; Stuart Robinson's Struggle to Distinguish the Sacred from the Secular During the Civil War.* (Macon GA: Mercer University Press, 2002), 64-89.

<sup>3</sup> Hart and Muether, 148.

reunification of the Northern and Southern Presbyterian churches. The Southern Churches argued, not unreasonably, that such a loyalty oaths—which many had to take as part of readmission to the Union anyways—were properly civil matters and should not be a requirement for church membership. While we may refrain from demanding loyalty oaths today, political activism within the church often creates an environment in which church members feel ostracized from fellowship if they are disagree with the politics of the Republican or Democratic parties (depending on the politics of the church). This is not dissimilar to effect that loyalty oaths had.

**In the end, it needs to be asked exactly what such “engagement” really accomplishes?** The Spring Resolutions and the subsequent politicization of the Church found little, if any, resonance with the Lincoln Administration. In that regard they did not achieve even their intended purpose. Presbyterians in the North and South were divided for over a century. The jingoistic, “God-is-on-our-side” rhetoric that Presbyterians and other Christians on both sides engaged in fostered cynicism and unbelief as the war dragged on and claimed hundreds of thousands of lives. The politicization of the Presbyterian Church and other churches during the Civil War provided fertilizer for other moralistic crusades after the Civil War. At the same time, however, the general disillusionment caused by the war combined with subsequent material progress also fostered a steady growth in secularism in American society. We are reaping the consequences of that today. In retrospect, that was a high price to pay so that Christian of that day could appear relevant to the political issues of their day.

Today, we too need to be mindful of the costs of political activism. Like our forebears at the outset of the Civil War, Christians on both the Right and the Left have argued that the Church will become irrelevant if it does not speak to the social issues of the day. Usually this is justified under the rubric that Christians must be “salt and light” in the world (Matt. 5:13-14). While Christians are legitimately called to be in government and to engage in being a witness to the surrounding the culture, claims that the Church or the Gospel will be irrelevant if they do not address contemporary political and social issues are without a doubt overblown. Historically, churches did not experience any lasting gain in members because they were on the “right” (read “most popular”) side of the slavery or temperance or civil rights movements. In fact, with most reform movements, once the key gains of the movement have been reached the coalition to which the churches were a part begins to dissipate. The memory of the churches’ contribution then tends to fade into twilight.

**Indeed, experience has shown that religious use of the bully pulpit in the political realm tends to *harden* opposition to religion.** This is because appeals to the authority of the Faith to justify a particular political view are, more often than not, *intended* to bind the conscience of Christians to support those policies. Thus, if one does not support the proposed policy agenda, then one is being unbiblical or unfaithful to Christ. That is a harsh indictment. On the other hand, those who disagree with the proposed policies typically are not going to make a fine, careful distinction between the Faith, properly understood, and the policies that are being justified. Rather, they simply lump their opposition

altogether and assume that if the church is wrong on certain political stances, then it is probably wrong in the spiritual claims that it is also making. Thus, the credibility and integrity of the Church are impugned. This is what I saw in my own experiences with the Left and the Right in the 1980s. Looking back over the last twenty years, I do not think it is a coincidence that the New Atheist writings of Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Richard Dawkins peaked around 2006-07, about the same time that the Iraq War reached its nadir. The Bush Administration—certainly the most openly evangelical administration since Jimmy Carter’s and arguably even more so—led and oversaw the Iraq War. As that war worsened and looked increasingly futile, it is not surprising that popular attitudes toward conservative evangelicals worsened as well.

### The Spirituality of the Church Defined

**T**he above discussion draws out the fact that the relevance of the Church does not come from speaking “prophetically” to the political issues of the day. Rather, the Church’s relevance comes from its core mission of being witnesses to Christ and in spreading His Gospel. To the extent that it fails to do this, it will cease to be relevant regardless of its political stances. We who bear the name of Christ need to be sensitive to what we are signing His name to, lest we detract from His agenda, that is, that we be worshipping witnesses to His Kingdom. **The key here is the recognition that the Church’s authority comes from the simple foundation of God’s Word, and as a result, it only has the authority to speak to those matters that are within its competence and sphere—and that sphere is primarily spiritual.** Historically in Reformed circles, this doctrine has been called the “Spirituality of the Church” and has been an important tenet of Old School Presbyterianism.

Calling this doctrine the “Spirituality of the Church” may be somewhat misleading. To some, it might suggest something along the lines of worship or personal devotion when it is actually referring to the Church’s role in public discourse. For others, who do recognize that this doctrine refers to the church’s posture toward politics, it also can be misunderstood in a different way, namely, to mean that the Church is to be completely apolitical rather than nonpolitical. The difference is subtle but important. To be **apolitical**, according to Merriam-Webster, *means that one has no interest or involvement in political affairs, even to include having an aversion to politics.* To be **nonpolitical**, however, *means that one is nonpartisan or not influenced by political considerations.* **The Church is not apolitical**, as it is certainly within the Church’s competence to speak to the moral dimension of the issues of the day insofar as Scripture itself speaks to those issues. The Spirituality Doctrine is not a call to quietism. **The Church must be nonpolitical**, however, in maintaining a nonpartisan stance and refraining from speaking to how those spiritual principles are to be implemented politically. Such implementation, generally speaking, will be outside the Church’s competence and authority, and prudence alone would suggest that the Church should refrain from speaking about matters outside its competence or authority, especially on politically contentious issues. To do otherwise would compromise its integrity and credibility as a witness in the ensuing counterattacks.

This distinction between nonpolitical and apolitical is important to keep in mind and brings clarity to how the doctrine has been misused and misconstrued. Thornwell, in the example that opened this essay, specifically tried to use the Spirituality Doctrine to drive the Church in an apolitical direction, so that it would not speak to the moral dimension of slavery. Thornwell's heirs, a hundred years later, tried to do the same thing with the doctrine with regard to the Civil Rights movement. Such misuses have fueled a dismissiveness toward the doctrine on the part of many because they see it as a quietist effort to silence the Church's voice on the issues of the day.

Understanding the Spirituality Doctrine as reflecting the nonpolitical nature of the Church, however, rightly balances between the Church's need to speak to the culture, to protect its institutional integrity and to maintain the mission focus given to it by the Lord in His Word. This was how Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary in fact used it during the Civil War. Hodge was the preeminent Northern Presbyterian of his day and stood on the doctrine in strenuously arguing against the Spring resolutions in General Assembly in 1861 precisely on the grounds that the issue embodied in those resolutions—determining to which secular government, state or Federal, loyalty was due—was not properly in the church's jurisdiction. This was not out of any Southern sympathy on his part. Hodge was strongly pro-Union, pro-Lincoln, and anti-slavery, but nevertheless recognized the ephemeral gains and the certain costs to be incurred were those resolutions passed. Given the subsequent history discussed earlier, he proved to be sadly prophetic.

Hodge understood the Spirituality of the Church to be a key principle flowing from the Reformed understanding of the nature of the Church. The doctrine flowed out of the Protestant Reformation, especially the struggles to define the nature of the Church and is rooted in a Scriptural understanding of the relationship of Church and state. This was codified in the chapter of the Westminster Confession of Faith dealing with synods and councils (WCF 31.5):

*Synods and councils are to handle, or conclude nothing, but that which is ecclesiastical: and are not to intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth; unless by way of humble petition, in cases extraordinary; or by way of advice, for satisfaction of conscience, if they be thereunto required by the civil magistrate.*

Even though the Westminster Assembly was a religious assembly commissioned by a political body (Parliament) for the purpose developing common confessional standards for the state churches of England and Scotland, the Westminster divines knew from history, experience, and observation that when the Church involves itself in the affairs of state, it does little to help the state and much to harm the cause of Christ. Meeting during the English Civil War, they knew full well that one of the leading causes of that war was how the politicized Anglican Church under Archbishop William Laud enlisted the power of the state to try and enforce his vision of religious uniformity among England, Scotland, and Ireland. His efforts succeeded only in antagonizing everyone.

It is interesting to note that in writing this section of the Confession the Westminster divines did not succumb to the temptation to think that if they got near power then they would be better in wielding it than the Anglicans and Roman Catholics had been. This temptation, the temptation to think that “our guys” will institute justice once they seize the reins of power, is one that is all too present today for evangelicals. Rather, by inserting this paragraph into the Confession the Westminster divines circumscribed their *own* influence with the state. In this, they rightly recognized that even ministers are sinful, that power corrupts and that for the church to have access to the corridors of influence in the long run will inevitably compromise the Church and open the door to the state trying to influence the Church. In short, they put this paragraph in because they wanted to allow freedom of conscience for Christians, safeguard the integrity of the Church, and keep the Church’s focus on its core mission, that is, witnessing to the Gospel of Christ Jesus.

Within the Confession, two proof texts are annotated to this paragraph: Luke 12:13-14 and John 18:36. In the first passage, a man asks Jesus to tell the man’s brother that they should share their inheritance. The man is trying to enlist Jesus as a civil judge. Our Lord brushes this off by responding, “*Man, who made Me a judge or a divider over you?*” In the second passage, Jesus is standing in trial before the Roman Procurator, Pontius Pilate and Pilate asks whether Jesus is indeed King of the Jews. Here, our Lord responds, “*My kingdom is not of this world: if My kingdom were of this world, then would My servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now My kingdom is not from hence.*” In both of these cases, Christ resists the idea that His power and authority is of a temporal nature. He was focused on a spiritual mission, and His Church by extension needs to be focused on that as well.

While the Confession proof texts only these two passages, it is important to note that Scripture more broadly reinforces this point. The Bible evidences a curiously ambivalent attitude toward the state in both the Old and New Testaments. The most positive attitudes toward government or depictions of God’s people serving in government ironically occur under pagan rulers. Joseph, Daniel, and Esther, for example, all served under polytheistic pagan rulers in Egypt, Babylon, and Persia. Jesus, Paul, and Peter also lived and worked under a polytheistic pagan administration, that of the Romans. Moreover, it is not even the case that the pagan rulers were necessarily righteous even by pagan standards. Paul’s statements about respecting authorities in Romans 13:1-7, 1 Tim. 2:1-4, and Titus 3:1 and Peter’s in 1 Peter 2:13-14, for example, come at a time when Nero was emperor of Rome. This same Nero would later initiate a sadistic persecution against Christians to deflect attention away from the fire which consumed Rome, which even some Roman writers believe that he himself set. Nero would also execute both Peter and Paul. Conversely, the most negative views of government in Scripture come from those passages of the Old Testament—particularly in 1 and 2 Kings and the prophetic books—illustrating the idolatry of the Israelite theocracy. God certainly is not commending the pagans, but He is highlighting that His people need to be focused first and foremost on honoring Him. To that end, God’s

people are more acutely aware of their dependence on Him and their anticipation of His Kingdom when they are in circumstances in which they do not have political influence. Conversely, in circumstances where God's people have a free hand to shape culture as they see fit, they all too often tend to accommodate themselves to the customs of the nations around them, to God's displeasure and their own harm. If this was the pattern in the Old Testament, then the Church under the New Covenant needs to be mindful of this precedent. The Spirituality Doctrine is thus a safeguard to the Church's integrity.

### **Some Practical Considerations in Application**

**W**hat does this mean for us today? The current level of political polarization within American society is at least as high as it was in the late 1960s and early 1970s when the Vietnam War and Watergate dominated the scene, and it is by no means a stretch to assert that polarization may be at levels comparable to the period just before the Civil War. Trust in both institutions and leaders, political or otherwise, is at an all-time low and there is a general presumption of distrust about what anyone says on anything. Both the Right and the Left describe everything as a Manichean conflict between Good and Evil with the consequences for losing to be nothing less than apocalyptic. The temptation beckons for the Church to speak into this time of crisis, with promises of "having influence" as an inducement. By contrast, something like the Spirituality Doctrine seems like a relic guaranteed to seal the irrelevance of the Church for years to come. Yet, I dare say, it is precisely because of the crisis of our times that we need to recover the Spirituality Doctrine of the Church.

**The question needs to be asked, first of all, whether the Church's voice really needs to be added to the cacophony of the public square?** Christians may well underappreciate the importance of having a nonpolitical "safe space" in a world where just about everything is completely politicized. For the Church to focus on the mission given to it by the Lord – to gather the faithful, to worship Him, to teach them His ways, to share the Gospel with others and to love one's neighbors – is a radical contrast to the world. People cynically conclude that everyone has an agenda, but this agenda is so different from the agendas of the Right and the Left as to be striking. For people within the Church and even those outside, for the Church to be the Church actually has the potential of being a pressure release valve. It would focus people on something other than politics and will help to them rediscover what is good in small ways that will begin defusing the Constant Outrage. Within the Church they are likely to see small but noticeable changes in their lives and the lives of others that will be more tangible and more real than the totalistic claims of the political agendas of the Right and the Left. The importance of this should not be underestimated.

**That said, this is not an argument for quietism, since quietism is not an option given the nature of the key cultural issues that divide us as a nation.** There is a moral angle to many of these issues and the Church will need to speak to those things, at least guide to its own people. With the Spirituality Doctrine as a guide, we need to think concretely and practically about *who speaks to whom* and *in what way*.

**The Spirituality Doctrine of the Church applies, most obviously, to the Church as an institution.** A good example of the Church speaking as an institution can be seen in my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church in America, in the resolution it passed at the 49<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in June 2022 petitioning the United States Government to end abortion. The early May 2022 leak of the draft US Supreme Court decision in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* raised the prospect that abortion politics might be opened up in a new way, which it has been since the formal decision was handed down on the day that the General Assembly ended. The petition was self-consciously a "humble petition in a case extraordinary," to use the Westminster Confession's language. This overture was a textbook case of the Spirituality Doctrine, in that the PCA spoke to the moral nature of the issue, but did not prescribe a specific legal, judicial, or political remedy save for expressing the goal of the abolition of abortion. That said, the Church speaking as a full institution is the most limited in what it can say and do with regard to political engagement, if only because of the practical complexities involved bringing the whole institution together on any given issue.

**The more likely application of the Spirituality Doctrine will be when pastors, elders, and teachers speak to political issues in their church or in a local setting.** Historically, articulations of the Spirituality Doctrine have drawn a distinction between Christian leaders speaking in their corporate official capacity and speaking as a private citizen ("joint" and "several" to use the old-fashioned terminology). Theoretically, what he could not say from the pulpit or the Sunday School class he could say as a citizen in the public square. That said, even if he is speaking in a private capacity others may well be inclined to take his personal opinions as spiritually binding. This is even more true given the prevalence of social media use. People simply will not differentiate between a church leader speaking in his institutional capacity and speaking privately; the institutional authority will *de facto* attach to what he says online, even if he means it to be private. This does not mean that he should suppress all personal views on political matters, but it does mean that his need to be conscious of what he says, how he says it, where and to whom. In some cases, such leaders may well share their personal political views; in other cases, it would be better to refrain from doing so. Nothing on the Internet is private. Related to this, pastors, elders, and teachers also need to avoid the legalistic temptation of refraining from advocating political remedies, only to then point their congregants to particular political advocates or advocacy groups they favor. Not only is this not in keeping with the spirit of the nonpolitical nature of the Church, but some of the worst offenders among religious leaders in inflaming the political rhetoric comes from parachurch advocacy groups.

**In discussions regarding the Spirituality Doctrine, little attention has typically been given regarding considerations as to the audience to whom Christian leaders are speaking.** I do not mean by this identifying whether one should speak to a church congregation or a political body or some other audience; circumstances will dictate those specifics. Rather, I think little attention has been given to what an audience needs to know when a church

leader is speaking on a political topic. Too often I have seen church leaders eager to “make a statement” or “speak prophetically,” having given little or no thought as to whom they are speaking or what kind of information they might need. Such actions effectively amount to editorializing to the self-aggrandizement of the speaker himself. Some questions that church leaders need to take into consideration speaking on a political issue include:

- *Does the audience only want their political opinions reinforced or are they open to hearing an opinion they might not agree with?*
- *Where might they be coming from spiritually, morally, or personally on the issue? What sorts of things affect where they are coming from?*
- *What are the roles and responsibilities of people in the audience? What actions would they need to take on this this topic?*
- *What are the dynamics of the political context you are speaking into? What are the choices, challenges, and opportunities they face?*
- *What capabilities do they have to work with? At the same time, what constraints do they have to act under? What is doable for them?*

None of these questions can be answered with perfect precision, but the more effort that a Christian leader spends in thinking these through, the more likely he will be to earn a hearing from his audience. The importance of this should not be underestimated. Politics is inherently divisive, our current political environment is extremely polarized, and we live in a day and an age where Christianity is increasingly viewed with open hostility. If church leaders are to speak at all on public topics, they need to earn a hearing; it will not be granted to them automatically unless they are simply playing to the audience, and that motive, more likely than not, will not be aimed at speaking God’s truth.

Understanding the audience will shape but should not dictate the message, which should fundamentally be to explicate the Word of God on the issue at hand. For the pastor, elder, or teacher speaking to the moral dimensions of a political issue, **there are some questions about the message itself that need to be asked when a Christian leader is speaking on a political issue.**

- *Is the message derived from Scripture or by good and necessary consequence deduced from it?* The minister’s authority comes from the fact that he is charged with handling the Word of God. If his argument does not come from Scripture, then he is merely expressing his opinion, which is as valid or invalid as any other opinion.
- *Is the message consistent with the overarching thrust of Scripture and our confessional summaries?* Remember, as noted at the beginning of this essay, one of reasons why Thornwell’s argument about the church

and slavery was demonstrably false was because it was inconsistent with the freedom from bondage message of Scripture more broadly.

- *Are the principles articulated being applied equally to people regardless of where they stand on the issue?* We live in a day when people have no qualms picking the mote out of their brother's eye, while the beam is still in their own (Matt. 7:3). If a church leader is speaking the truth, then blatant hypocrisy dishonors him, and by extension, God.
- *Is message factually true in its particulars?* People can and do get facts wrong on occasion so no one is expecting perfection, but if the message draws on things that are notably false, then that will harm the credibility of both the message and the messenger. Christian leaders are to model a commitment to the truth, per the Ninth Commandment.
- *Is the message presented in a way that is clear to the audience and honoring to the Lord?* This is more important than currently vaunted notions of winsomeness. "Winsomeness" is in the ear of the listener, not the fluidity of the speaker. Moreover, a message may not be "winsome" because of the content, rather than the delivery.

Although the Spirituality Doctrine of the Church is focused on the Church institutionally and its pastors, elders, and teachers as ministers of the Church, prudential considerations about how we speak in the public arena is not limited to just them. **Christians who are not in positions of church leadership also have a responsibility for safeguarding the nonpolitical nature of the Church as well.** Ordinary Christians are called to be "salt and light" and because they are not in positions of church leadership, they are freer than pastors, elders, and teachers to advocate for specific policies in the public sphere and outside of the church setting. At the same time, they can no more compartmentalize their public life from their witness for Christ than can ordained leaders—and this is especially true if they are leaders in explicitly Christian parachurch organizations engaged in policy advocacy. What they say and how they say it will be seen by all, Christian and non-Christian alike, as reflecting upon Christ and His Church. For that reason, it is especially important that they too exercise prudence. In the public sphere, Christians need to hold their policy views tentatively and should refrain from presuming that their preferred method for addressing an issue is the one-and-only "biblical" way. It almost certainly is not, given the inherent complexity of both political issues and Scriptural theology. Experience has shown that Christians who are agreed on the moral dimensions of a political issue may well and legitimately disagree on the best practical way to resolve that issue.

All Christians—pastors, elders, teachers, and lay people—need to critically examine themselves to see if they are articulating their views in a way that brings honor to Christ. In many cases, Christian views are going to be intrinsically offensive to our neighbors in society. Even in such cases, how we

present such disagreements may reflect more positively or negatively on Christ than the actual substance of the disagreements. In this regard, even in the public square, we are making an apology for Christ. As the Apostle Peter advised, *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and always be ready to give a defense to everyone who asks you a reason for the hope that is in you, with meekness and fear; having a good conscience, that when defame you as evildoers, those who revile your good conduct in Christ may be ashamed”* (1 Peter 3:15-16, NKJV).

Here I think it is useful to unpack the metaphor of an ambassador, which Paul uses in 2 Corinthians 5:20 and Ephesians 6:20. In the former passage, Paul says Christians are *“ambassadors for Christ”* and he ties it to the ministry of reconciliation Christ has entrusted to them, specifically that they may plead with others to be reconciled to God. In the latter passage, Paul describes himself as an *“ambassador in bonds,”* referring to his own imprisonment. An ambassador is one charged with the authority to speak on behalf of his state’s leader and to represent his state’s interests in the country to which he or she has been assigned. In the U.S. diplomatic service, an ambassador is the president’s personal representative. Protocol-wise, this means that when the ambassador is in the country of assignment, that person technically outranks even the Secretary of State, since the ambassador is responsible directly to the President, not the Secretary. This is a position of significant authority and with that comes significant responsibility. When the ambassador speaks to foreign official, he or she is speaking on behalf of the President and is able to commit the honor and prestige of the United States. An ambassador who oversteps or even disregards the instructions of the President or engages in personal misbehavior will not be tolerated for long, since that person is disobeying the President and undermining the prestige and honor of the United States, as well as embarrassing himself or herself. This is no trifling matter.

This understanding of what an ambassador is and does should help in thinking through how to apply the Spirituality Doctrine. There are two fundamental questions that need to be asked: **first, is what we are doing with regard to politics in accordance with the instructions we have been given from our Lord or are we speaking on our own?** And, **second, how will what we do and say reflect back on Him, His Kingdom, and His particular focus of making disciples of all the nations?** The first question is aimed at examining whether we are rightly aligned with God’s Word. The temptation is all too strong (and frankly, all too prevalent) to assume biblical warrant for ideas that we already passionately believe in, rather than examining our views according to Scripture. The second question is aimed at helping us to think through our motives—are we really glorifying Him or simply aggrandizing ourselves? Along with that, we need to maintain consistency and integrity between what we say and what we do. This is vital. The Church is tasked with speaking the Truth of Him who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life (John 14:6). For the Church to speak on any political issue in our contemporary context, it will need to stand for the truth with clarity and consistency, show integrity between what it is saying and doing, and aim to build trust, both within its own circles as well as with the surrounding society.

## Conclusion

I recognize that for many evangelicals, what I am advocating here in terms of safeguarding the credibility and integrity of the church may not seem intuitive. No doubt some are concerned that the Spirituality Doctrine may result in compartmentalizing one's faith between the spiritual and the secular. Some may believe that such an approach even is tantamount to acquiescing in the evils of society, just as Southern slaveholders used the doctrine to try and mute religious opposition to slavery before the Civil War. These are serious concerns, but in the final analysis I think they are overstated. In closing this essay, let me make a couple remarks to address these concerns.

First, the Spirituality Doctrine, properly understood, does not prohibit Christians from being active in civil society or government. It does, however, order our loyalties and put boundaries on our behavior in the public sphere appropriate to individual roles and responsibilities. The existence of boundaries to these ends are, in fact, are commonplace in both the public and private sectors even apart from any religious aspect. Both private companies and the government put some limits on employees in terms of their private behavior if that behavior has the potential to create the appearance of unfairness, undermine outside confidence in the organization, or misrepresent the organization's purposes or policies. While there may be discussion as to where those exact boundaries ought to be, there is no debate whatsoever that such boundaries should exist. In light of this, for Christians to argue the contrary—that they should be able to do or say anything in the public sphere regardless of how it reflects back on the church, that is, the Body of Christ—is absurd on the face of it.

Second, while I am very much in sympathy with concerns about the increase in the evils of our age, how we address those evils is as important as the fact that we are addressing those evils. Americans are particularly prone to the pragmatic mentality that whatever means are necessary can be employed if the ends justify them. Yet the historical examples of American Christians succumbing to such pressures are not encouraging, either in terms of the difference they make to society or to the impact on the Church's core mission. Accepting the limits suggested by the Spirituality Doctrine is uncomfortable because it means that we have less confidence that we can shape the outcome. Limits on how we act may mean that we need to trust God even more and trusting God means accepting that His agenda may not necessarily be ours. Indeed, His agenda is different from ours—this side of our Lord's second coming His agenda as summarized in the Great Commission is focused on making "*disciples of all the nations, baptizing them*" in the name of the Triune God. In this, our Lord's kingdom is truly a kingdom not of this world. In our membership vows, we pledge to uphold the peace and the purity of the Church. While it is important for us as citizens to engage on politics, we also need to remember that we are ultimately citizens of another kingdom. As such, we need to preserve the credibility and integrity of the church, the seedling of that kingdom and the Bride of our Lord.