INTRODUCTION

An age which welcomed controversy, a literate age, an age of literate, controversy-loving Presbyterians; this was the age of Robert J. Breckinridge, Thomas Smyth, Benjamin Mosby Smith, Stuart Robinson, John Calkins Coit, John Leighton Wilson, Benjamin Gildersleeve, John Bailey Adger; and of Charles Hodge; and of James Henley Thornwell. These provide a rich heritage in records which may offer us some entrance into the thoughts and hopes of the men and women who took part in its battles, even though to search out their documents, the records of their Nineteenth Century, is in fact to pay the fare for a trip to another world.

Yet however different from us they were, these men and women wrestled with fundamental problems. This study singles out one which is still very much with us: What is the best way for Christians to work together to get the Lord's work done?[1]

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[1] That the major American denominations, the Presbyterian included, have been for some years progressively reducing the proportion of their giving earmarked for their central Board and Agency structures, out of their total giving to all causes, is seen from even a cursory review of their annual published statistics. For illustrations of other aspects of this continuing problem, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., *Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, pp. xxxvi – xxxvii. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

For them this became the subject of decades of debate. Able men, and practical, and dynamic with a push to get large things accomplished, they identified, faced, and struggled with nearly every major aspect of the problem of united Christian effort. From them we have much to learn. Yet in learning we should remember that the English of these Nineteenth Century Americans contains what to us are traps. It is peppered with words like *Presbyterian*, *Liberty*, and *Boards*. We are quickly astray if we too easily imagine that any of these words carried in their minds the same cargo that it carries in ours.

An example may be revealing.

Most of the men we meet in these pages owned other men. Yes, Hodge too,[2] not just Thornwell.[3] Yet as we try to

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[2] For a discussion of slave-owning by members of the Presbyterian Seminary faculty, see Leonard J. Trinterud, "Charles Hodge (1797-1878): Theology -- Didactic and Polemical," in Hugh T. Kerr, Editor, *Sons of the Prophets* [:] *Leaders in Protestantism from Princeton Seminary*, p 35. Compare Lefferts A. Loetscher, pp 32-33 in "New Vitality in Church and Nation," Chapter 2 in *The First Presbyterian Church of Princeton: Two Centuries of History*, edited by Arthur S. Link. For additional illustrative material in this connection, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., *Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, pp xxxvii - xxxviii. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[3] Benjamin Morgan Palmer remarks, on first hand observation, that Thornwell was not a very exacting taskmaster, and that it was doubtful if those who kept his small country farm going earned their keep (*Life of JHT*, pp 342-343).

Since to read Thornwell's defenses of slavery as a domestic institution it would be difficult to imagine

understand them, their language of ownership works against us because it survives with changed associations in the related language, also called English, which we ourselves use. *Servant* we are partly on guard against, because when we first found it in the King James Bible we were told that it meant *slave*; but *slave* itself is trickier, more elusive. Very few of us have anything in our direct experience to suggest automatically that slave might mean something like Professor.[4] or Wife, or Son; or Brother. Such a suggestion when we first meet it fills us with the kind of uneasiness which ranges down into disgust. But this masks from us the possibility that while a man must have something terrible in his

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that he had personal experience in the ownership and management of slaves other than household servants, the following letter to Thornwell from his cotton broker in Charleston establishes the fact that although the scale was small and it by no means made him rich, Thornwell was raising cotton as a cash crop. At least some of his slaves were field hands :

> Charleston October 23/52
>
> Revd J. H. Thornwell
> Columbia
>
> Dear Sir
>
> ...I think we may reasonably anticipate, a reaction in [Liverpool] prices before very long, but think it would still be advisable to you to get your Cotton on Market as early as you can to take advantage of any improvement, or even to realize present prices, which are remunerative to the planter.
>
> Very respectfully yours
> Paul T. Villipigne
>
> (Thornwell Collection, South Caroliniana Library)

[4] The reference is not to subsidiary and derivatory connotations as in "wage slave," but to literal realities, as in Greece and Rome.

heart when he makes his own brother his slave,[5] he may have the stirrings of something better in his heart when he makes his slave his wife.[6]

And then in their manuscripts what does *Master* mean? Master, that is, in its severest form, the master of a slave? The rock-ribbed Boston-built abolitionist-supported American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions spent two years wrestling with just that question, and its income was at stake; yet surprised and almost quizzical (like the Princeton Seminary professor who apologized publicly for discovering that there actually had been a case when failure to divide a Presbyterian Church nearly killed it, while the eventual division revived both it and its new daughter congregation),[7] the ABCFM concluded that Master in fact meant to

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[5] The account of how E. Montague Grimke against his father Henry's will attempted to enslave his brother Francis is given in *The Works of Francis James Grimke*, Vol I, p. viii, and retold by Clifton E. Olmstead in "Francis James Grimke- (1850-1937), Christian Moralist and Civil Rights," p. 162 in Hugh T[hompson] Kerr, *Sons of the Prophets: Leaders in Protestantism from Princeton Seminary*.

[6] As the phrase is used by Olmstead in his article on Grimke, based on Grimke's *Works*, Vol I, p. vii, the word may be a euphemism and the reflection on Henry Grimke no credit to the South Carolinian. For further illustrative material in this connection, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., *Continuing Problems of_ American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, p xxxix. TMS. In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[7] The circumstances leading up to the division and thereafter are given on pp 39-44 in Lefferts A. Loetscher, "The New Vitality in Church and Nation," Chapter 2 in *The First Presbyterian Church of Princeton: Two Centuries of History*, edited by Arthur S. Link.

one slave something approaching True Benefactor, Genuinely Worthy Idol, Best Companion, so much so that he had repeatedly refused freedom on any terms; and that to another slave, Master actually did mean True and Only Possible Protector.[8] Of course a master like that might be an unusual man; but then in every age there are unusual men. Coming from a different world from theirs, we do not automatically know how to recognize them.

These men, then, whose land and language were so like and so unlike ours, engaged for decades in a debate on how best to get God's work done. They called it a debate over Ecclesiastical Boards; by which they meant something akin to the Church Boards we do know about: they meant bodies of men

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[8] For a general account, see Hampden C. DuBose, *Memoirs of Rev. John Leighton Wilson, D. D., Missionary to Africa and Secretary of Foreign Missions*, Chapter XI, "The Manumission of his Slaves," pp 97-105.

The detailed official correspondence and findings of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions are carried in the *Annual Reports* of that body, 1840-1844. Original correspondence between Wilson and members of his family on this and other subjects is in the John Leighton Wilson Collection, The Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

Manumissions of two of Wilson's slaves, drawn in his handwriting, executed by him, and witnessed by his wife, Jane Bayard Wilson, on the Gaboon River, West Africa, are at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat North Carolina.

There is extensive coverage of this celebrated case in the New England church press of the period. The archives of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, and the holdings of other repositories, should make it possible to do extensive research into the relationship between the constituency of the ABCFM, its abolitionist wing, and the ABCFM's loyalty to Wilson under extreme pressure.

elected by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, with some form of administrative relationship to some benevolent enterprise of the Presbyterian Church.

A debate extending over so long a period, in such turbulent times, marked by two major disruptions to the life and work of the Presbyterian Church, is more easily followed if it can be divided into coherent periods.

Fortunately such periods do emerge. For convenience and clarity we may make the following analysis:

1. Twenty years of Old School and New School tensions, leading up to 1838, sorted Presbyterians into two main opinions on this issue of Boards:

a. The New School renounced Ecclesiastical Boards in favor of non-denominational Voluntary Societies.

b. The Old School renounced most non-denominational Voluntary Societies in favor of Ecclesiastical Boards.

2. The thirty years following 1838 sorted each school further:

a. Between 1838 and 1868 those holding the New School Presbyterian answer to the question divided into those who rejoined the Congregationalists while supporting only the Voluntary Societies, and those who returned to the Presbyterian Church and her Church Boards.

b. Between 1838 and 1862 those holding the Old School Presbyterian answer to the question debated their answer even further. They discovered that it went deeper than had been realized. They went on to make the clearest expositions yet recorded in Christian history of the theoretical and practical problems inherent in undertaking extensive Christian work; and having reached some compromises by 1860 were directed to more dramatic questions by the course and outcome of the Civil War.

Because he believes that the question of how best to conduct corporate Christian work was then and remains now important; because he finds the men of the period to be vigorous thinkers who were thorough and clear; and because he believes that we can learn something worth while from listening to what they said to each other, the writer has chosen the 19th-century Presbyterian debate on corporate Christian work as the general area of this study.

Then, because the continued debate in the Old School stem of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, from 1838 to the beginnings of the separate existence of its Southern wing as the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America in 1861-1862, offers in manageable form the most complete exposition of the issues, he has chosen that inner period of 1839-1861 as the central focus of this study. It offers a clear-cut integrated natural section of the debate as a whole, marked at its beginning by the great Presbyterian division of 1837-1838, and marked at its end by the great national disruption of 1861-1865.

Although a summary of developments before 1837-1838 will be necessary for placing the period of our concentration into perspective, that earlier period is excluded from our main focus for three reasons.

First, the spectrum of debates between Old School and New School was enormously more complicated. They were not limited to the one topic of method in Christian benevolent work, and the various topics were so entertwined and inter-related that the issues involved in our topic do not emerge so clearly then as they do in the period following the

division.[9]

Second, previous studies have largely emphasized the earlier period, or have emphasized other issues, leaving our period of 1839-1861 and our issue relatively untouched.[10]

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[9] This was a controversial age. Its Presbyterian children still felt psychologically close to the Reformation, in which controversy on behalf of truth was a sacred duty. It should not be imagined that the controversy on the administration of missions was the only or even the most important controversy of these decades in the eyes of its participants. With the exception of the Elder question, however, there was little interaction with the Board question, and none on the scale of the interlocked issues leading up to the disruption between New and Old Schools.

[10] Kenneth Paul Berg in his dissertation *Charles A. Hodge, Controversialist*, State University of Iowa, 1952, finds the Boards controversy too minimal in Hodge's over-all coverage to go into.

Donald Nelson Bowdle in his dissertation *Evangelism and Ecumenism in Nineteenth Century America: A Study in the Life and Literature of Samuel Irenaeus Prime^ 1812^* 1885, UTS Va., 1970, gets into aspects of the Old School-New School disagreements but is not primarily concerned with Old School developments in our area.

Thomas Erskine Clark in his dissertation *Thomas Smyth: Moderate of the Old South*, UTS Va., 1970, deals with Smyth's opposition to Thornwell on Boards in the Synod of South Carolina, and in the pages of the Baltimore church press, but Smyth's fascinating personality and great career as a controversialist over much wider areas properly deter Clarke from going into our area of inquiry except as it involves Smyth directly.

John Jey Deifell, Jr., in his dissertation *The Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge*, Edinburgh, 1969, misses (as Hodge missed) the crucial connection between the Board question and the question of the shape of the church which embraces Boards, and in general is limited by an outlook which has been summarized by the statement that the Deifell thesis is that it is too bad Hodge was not smart enough to be neo-orthodox.

Professor Paul Leslie Garber's dissertation, *The*

Third, the parties, personalities, issues, and institutions involved in the Old School - New School conflict were so many, so complex, so prolific, as to call for a number of

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Religious Thought of James Henley Thornwell, Duke University, 1939, is Helpful but is concerned with wider sweeps and philosophical backgrounds. It touches our topic only incidentally.

Cooper C. Kirk's dissertation, A *History of the Southern Presbyterian Church in Florida: 1821-1891*, Florida State University, 1966, traces some of Thornwell's Florida influences and legacy but naturally moves quickly on to the main body of Florida history.

Earl Ronald MacCormac's dissertation, *The Transition from Voluntary Missionary Society to the Church as Missionary Organization Among the American Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists*, Yale University, 1960, traces the involvement of those bodies in non-denominational cooperative volunteer benevolent societies, and their transition to a pattern of denominational work conducted by ecclesiastical Boards. His work is especially helpful in sorting out the complex relationships between the voluntary societies and the Presbyterian structures of the undivided church and, after the disruption, to the Old and New School Presbyterian structures alike. MacCormac also offers needed perspective by showing a more general background.

Edgar Caldwell Mayse, in his dissertation, *Robert Jefferson Breckinridge: American Presbyterian Controversialist*, UTS Va., 1974, shows Breckinridge's involvement with Thornwell, Smyth, and the Board Controversy in the perspective of the shifting attentions of the most colorful figure of the day. Mayse like Clarke is particularly acute in analysis of the effect of the march of history on his protagonist. Where Clarke shows Smyth as a moderate in an age of extremes, Mayse shows Breckinridge as an extremist who, having won his supreme victory, lives on to find that the world he has made is not for him a very happy place.

Edmund Arthur Moore in his dissertation, *The Earlier Life of Robert J. Breckinridge, 1800-1845*, University of Chicago, 1932, barely reaches our period within the limits he chooses, and is focused on other matters.

John Oliver Nelson in his dissertation, *The Rise*

dissertation-level studies for their adequate treatment.[11]

For rather different reasons we exclude the period after 1862 from our main focus.

First, the great climax of the debate on Ecclesiastical Boards at the Presbyterian General Assembly held in Rochester, New York, in 1860, effectively settled the matter permanently in the Northern wing of the Old School.[12]

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of the Princeton Theology: A Genetic Study of American Presbyterianism Until 1850, Yale University, 1936, delights all his readers as he carries out his own dictum, that there is no reason for a dissertation to make dull reading; his study is as fresh and engaging as it was in 1936. For our purposes its interests are more theological than ecclesiastical.

Penrose St. Amant's dissertation, *The Rise and Early Development of the Princeton School of Theology* Edinburgh, 1952, approaches the same general area from a later perspective but with acute limitations from the standpoint of a study of the Board controversy.

While scattered articles enlarge on points made in one or another of these dissertations, or deal in other aspects of the figures who take part in our debate, none has been addressed to this period or to this subject.

[11] For the best compact discussion of the complexities and crosscurrrents of that conflict, see pages 25-36 of Leonard J. Trinterud in "Charles Hodge (1797-1878)[:] *Theology -- Didactic and Polemical,"* in Hugh T[hompson] Kerr, *Sons of the Prophets: Leaders in Protestantism from Princeton Seminary.*

Professor Trinterud has remarked in conversation that until much more work has been done in the abundant manuscript sources, starting with such collections as the 6,000 carefully preserved papers, mostly letters to and from Hodge, at the Princeton University Library, it is treacherous to rely on the much more limited (though numerous) printed materials of the times.

[12] From the time of the vote on the previous question at the General Assembly of 1860 until the present, there has been intermittent dissatisfaction with the *perfor-*

Second, the organizing General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America, held in Augusta, Georgia, in 1861, effectively settled the matter for the Southern wing of the Old School.[13]

Third, with the onset, conduct and aftermath of the Civil War, the minds of Presbyterians were drawn to pungent new questions: in the north to reunion between Old and New School;[14] in the south to the survival of the church in the wreck of a civilization;[15] in the border areas of Kentucky and Missouri to the question of the Civil Magistrate, which had been postponed for those Synods during the war itself.[16]

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mance of the Boards of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, but no radical criticism of the *concept* underlying them. For illustrative material, see Kenneth J. Foreman, Jr., *Continuing Problems of American Presbyterian Board and Agency Administration in the ^Nineteenth and" Twentieth Centuries*, p xxvii. TMS In the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.

[13] The statement in the text may not be entirely complete. The form of Southern Presbyterian mission administration was fixed in 1861, but the dislocations of war and the long-term pull of administrative logic in turn had major effects on its content.

[14] Compare the involvement of Hodge in attempts to block reunion.

[15] Compare here the absorption of John Leighton Wilson in sustentation work at the close of the war, and the change of the actual name of the Board of Domestic Missions to the Board of Sustentation.

[16] As we shall see, the pugnacious energies of Stuart Robinson were available to oppose ecclesiastical boards for several years before 1860.

At the close of the war he devoted himself body and soul to the issues arising out of the position of the PCUSA General Assembly on the civil magistrate and the sin of treason, and to a concept of the doctrine of the

And fourth, the central figure in these debates of 1840-1860, the great persistent public protagonist of the proposition that Ecclesiastical Boards are both theoretically and practically a serious mistake, the man who kept the issue alive and incisive, James Henley Thornwell, died in 1862 at the age of 49. With his death the debate fell silent.

As we follow the trail through the sources, it becomes clear that one of the men who joined forces with Thornwell, John Calkins Coit, emerges from the record as more profound, more radical, perhaps more realistic and certainly more challenging than any of those, Thornwell and Hodge included, whose names are today attached to the scholarly conceptions and popular memory of the debate.

The recovery of Coit's experience in the debate, and of the ideas he contributed to it, has been one of many pleasures in this project.

Yet in the received image of the debate, it was *Jacobus Contra Mundum*.[17] Would this be to overdo it?

It is true that few would be tempted to say that Thornwell 's chosen ground was so crucial or so high as the ground Athanasius defended. The Nature of the Church is high ground

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spirituality of the church that is coming to be suspected as the real source of that doctrine in the form popular in the Presbyterian Church in the United States in later decades.

[17] As professor, and later president, it was Thornwell's duty to sign each South Carolina College diploma in Latin. He chose the form Jacobus H. Thornwell. (See Thornwell Signature Practice MSS in the Thornwell Collection at the Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches, Montreat, North Carolina.)

indeed, but surely never so high as the Nature of Jesus Christ. Yet Athanasius and Thornwell are alike in this : They both were given commanding gifts of character and intellect. They both worked out their positions with clarity. They both chose issues which were important and whose importance looms larger with the passage of time.

And against overpowering opposition they both held their ground with courage, resourcefulness and tenacity.