

The background of the cover is a light cream color. It is decorated with several large, overlapping geometric shapes in red, blue, and black. These shapes are composed of various polygons, creating a complex, layered effect. In the upper right quadrant, there is a small black cross symbol. In the lower left quadrant, there is a black symbol resembling a stylized leaf or a four-pointed star with rounded ends. The title 'EMPOWERED WITNESS' is centered in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Below the title, the subtitle 'POLITICS, CULTURE, AND THE SPIRITUAL MISSION OF THE CHURCH' is written in a smaller, red, sans-serif font. The author's name 'ALAN D. STRANGE' is in a black, sans-serif font, and the foreword credit 'FOREWORD BY KEVIN DEYOUNG' is in a blue, sans-serif font.

EMPOWERED WITNESS

POLITICS, CULTURE, AND
THE SPIRITUAL MISSION OF THE
CHURCH

ALAN D. STRANGE

FOREWORD BY KEVIN DEYOUNG

“The psalmist’s question ‘How shall we sing the LORD’s song in a foreign land?’ (Ps. 137:4) continues to haunt many Christians today. But—both in content and emotional energy—the answers given vary widely. Where, then, is wisdom to be found? In *Empowered Witness*, Alan Strange offers us a much-needed combination of historical learning, biblical thinking, and deep love for the church. Rather than browbeat us into sharing prejudices, *Empowered Witness* serves us by helping us think. In expressing the ‘reasonableness’ Scripture enjoins (Phil. 4:5), Strange provides a model for us all.”

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“Excellent history schools us in wisdom and truth, and *Empowered Witness* is no exception to this rule. Alan Strange skillfully examines the oft-misunderstood but biblical, true doctrine of the spirituality of the church. This book is required reading for anyone who wants to engage the world and at the same time preserve the church’s gospel mission.”

J. V. Fesko, Harriet Barbour Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson

“The fruit of deep reflection over many years, this book by Alan Strange offers the wisdom we need now more than ever. Christ is building his church—his way—and *Empowered Witness* points us in the right direction.”

Michael Horton, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“The spirituality of the church is a doctrine that has fallen on hard times in recent years, and perhaps understandably so, given its very real historical association with a laissez-faire attitude to slavery in the antebellum American South. Nonetheless, at its heart, it expresses a vital truth: the church’s business is primarily heaven, not earth; yet Christians still live in the earthly city, and our faith is to make a difference in all areas of our lives. In this context, Alan Strange’s book is to be heartily welcomed as a guide for the perplexed who seek to honor the church’s task in dwelling on heavenly things while using this mindset as a motive for loving neighbors and being a good citizen. It is a tricky and controversial subject, but Strange’s thoughtful, clear, and kind book gently threads the needle. I hope it receives a wide readership and generates many constructive discussions.”

Carl R. Trueman, Professor of Biblical and Religious Studies, Grove City College; author, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self*

“If the church fails to clearly address the revolutionary cultural and social changes in today’s world, it will be a dereliction of duty, but if it identifies itself with any factions in that world, the piercing message of the gospel will be blunted. Alan Strange discusses these topics with great skill and insight, using his encyclopedic knowledge of Charles Hodge’s contribution to debates on slavery and the spirituality of the church. This is a book that should inform and shape our thinking; it is not to be missed.”

Robert Letham, Senior Research Fellow, Union School of Theology

“As indispensable as Charles Hodge is for the history of American Presbyterianism, Alan Strange contends that Hodge is crucial for its future as well. Hodge steadfastly upheld the church’s spiritual vocation in his day—despite criticism from the South and the North in times of both peace and war. Strange, with dispassionate sense and impassioned urgency, calls us to follow Hodge’s example in our day and remain steadfast to the church’s divine calling, lest we deprive the world of consolation that the church alone can provide.”

A. Craig Troxel, Robert G. den Dulk Professor of Practical Theology, Westminster Seminary California; author, *With All Your Heart*

“The spirituality of the church is a crucial doctrine and a rather simple idea, even if it is sometimes challenging to apply. Yet the church can so easily lose sight of this doctrine or simply reject it, especially in times of high political tension. Alan Strange’s clear and charitable appeal for the ‘mere spirituality of the church’ is thus timely and welcome. Contemporary readers would do well to ponder Charles Hodge’s wise reflections in the midst of his own politically charged context, and Strange is an excellent guide.”

David VanDrunen, Robert B. Strimple Professor of Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics, Westminster Seminary California

“The debate over American slavery and the ensuing Civil War may not seem the best context for revisiting the doctrine of the spirituality of the church, but Alan Strange looks carefully at the teaching of Charles Hodge that was refined and nuanced in his debates with Southern Presbyterians and other competing versions of the doctrine. Though Hodge did not win the day, he points to how the church can speak into the pervasive politicization of our age. Strange’s commendation of a ‘mere spirituality’ is indeed no diminution of the church’s voice but rather the more excellent way of an ‘empowered witness’ to a divided and confused culture.”

John R. Muether, Dean of Libraries and Professor of Church History, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando

“What should be the role of the church in the affairs of the state, particularly its political process? Alan Strange addresses this much-mooted question primarily through an in-depth treatment—largely sympathetic yet also critical—of Charles Hodge’s wrestling for the answer. Following Hodge, Strange offers his own balanced understanding of the spirituality of the church as an institution. His insights will be helpful for Christians today faced with the same difficult question. A valuable read.”

Richard B. Gaffin Jr., Professor Emeritus of Biblical and Systematic Theology, Westminster Theological Seminary

Empowered Witness

Empowered Witness

Politics, Culture, and the Spiritual Mission of the Church

Alan D. Strange

Foreword by Kevin DeYoung

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*To my grandchildren,
Petra, Leo, Gus, and Rosalind*

Contents

Foreword by Kevin DeYoung *xi*

Acknowledgments *xv*

Abbreviations *xvii*

Introduction *i*

- 1 The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church *15*
- 2 Slavery and the Spirituality of the Church *31*
- 3 The Spirituality of the Church Preceding the US Civil War *53*
- 4 The Spirituality of the Church and the General Assemblies of
1862–1865 *67*
- 5 The Southern Church and the Reunion of the Northern
Church *87*
- 6 The Spirituality of the Church and Politics Today *111*

Bibliography *129*

General Index *143*

Scripture Index *149*

Foreword

IN THE SUMMER OF 2023, at the General Assembly in Memphis, Tennessee, the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. As a part of the commemoration, commissioners were given a professionally produced replica of a document titled *A Message to All Churches of Jesus Christ throughout the World from the General Assembly of the National Presbyterian Church*. The document dates from 1973 and was issued at the founding of the PCA (then called the National Presbyterian Church). The *Message to All Churches* was named and written as a conscious echo of a previous document. In 1861, James Henley Thornwell issued his *Address to All Churches of Christ* at the founding of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America (PCCSA). In fact, the PCA deliberately began as a denomination (in Birmingham, Alabama) on December 4, 1973, because the PCCSA had its beginning (in Augusta, Georgia) on December 4, 1861.

These origins continue to be a source of celebration for some and a source of embarrassment for others. The fact is that the PCA saw itself at its founding—and still sees itself today, in some respects—as a continuing church, as the faithful and orthodox branch of the Southern Presbyterian denomination. And make

no mistake, the legacy of Southern Presbyterianism is complex. Take Thornwell, for example. Should he be remembered as a gifted educator, preacher, and writer, as the most influential theologian and churchman of his era? Or should he be remembered as a man who defended slavery and helped give birth to the Confederacy? Undoubtedly, he was all the above.

Because of Thornwell's complicated personal history, Christians in recent decades have been largely dismissive of one of his most strongly held convictions. The first point in Thornwell's inaugural address from 1861 was to explain and defend the spirituality of the church. For most hearers today—including Bible-believing Presbyterians and other conservative Christians—the spirituality of the church means one thing: a wrongheaded and shameful defense of slavery. And it's true, Thornwell and other Presbyterians used the doctrine to support the "peculiar institution" in the South. But it would be a mistake to think the doctrine of the spirituality of the church began in antebellum America as a convenient way to avoid taking a hard look at slavery. The explicit doctrine goes back at least to the Second Book of Discipline (1578) in Scotland, and in seed form it goes back further than that. Even in America, Thornwell was far from the only one to defend the spirituality of the church. Charles Hodge, to cite one important example, believed in a version of the spirituality of the church, even as he took issue with how Thornwell applied the doctrine.

When the PCA began in 1973, it announced its continuing allegiance to the spirituality of the church. Here is how the *Message to All Churches* puts it:

We believe the Church in its visible aspect is still essentially a spiritual organism. As such, its authority, motivation and power

come from Christ, the Head, who is seated at the right hand of God. He has given us His rulebook for the Church, namely, the Word of God written. We understand the task of the Church to be primarily declarative and ministerial, not legislative or magisterial. It is our duty to set forth what He has given us in His Word and not to devise our own message or legislate our own laws.¹

This is a good summary of the spirituality of the church. The nature of church power is ministerial and declarative. This means all church power—whether exercised by the whole body, pronounced from the pulpit, or bound up in representative officers—must be in service to Christ (ministerial) and involves stating and enforcing the Word of God (declarative). The church does not have the competence, nor the authority, to make pronouncements on every matter that might matter to men and women. The aims of the church are first and foremost spiritual and eternal. Through most of Reformed history, the spirituality of the church has not entailed a silence on all political matters but rather a commitment to the uniqueness of the church’s mission and a principled conviction that the eternal concerns of the church should not be swallowed up by the temporal concerns of the state.

For all these reasons—and many others you will read about in the pages ahead—I am thankful for this book. Alan Strange has marshaled his considerable expertise in this area to write an accessible introduction to the spirituality of the church. Several years ago, I began urging Alan and Crossway to get together and make this book a reality. Now it is finally here; I pray the book finds a wide

1 *Message to All Churches*, PCA Historical Center, December 7, 1973, <https://www.pcahistory.org/>.

FOREWORD

audience. With admirable skill, Alan shows how the spirituality of the church has been used (and abused) throughout history. But more than that, he also makes a compelling case for employing the doctrine in the church today. Don't let the size of the volume fool you. *Empowered Witness* is a learned and important book. While the spirituality of the church will not answer every question pertaining to politics or cultural engagement, it is a historic and biblical doctrine, and we neglect it to our peril.

KEVIN DEYOUNG

June 2023

Acknowledgments

I AM SO GRATEFUL to P&R Publishing for their kind permission to turn the dissertation that I published with them in 2017 (*The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge*) into this present volume. All who helped with that work are thanked again here.

I want to recognize as well the support of Mid-America Reformed Seminary, which granted me a sabbatical, part of which was used for researching and writing this volume. In addition to colleagues who took up responsibilities for me in the institution during that sabbatical, I am also grateful for the research support of Bart Voskuil and the technical assistance of Rachel Luttjeboer.

I would also like to thank the students, parishioners, and conference attendees (lay, ministerial, and academic) who heard some part of this material for their patience, kindness, and feedback. Many conversations with colleagues, in the academy and the church, also proved helpful. I am particularly grateful to Justin Taylor at Crossway for his encouragement to write this volume and for helping me along the way.

Thanks are due to a number of Justin's coworkers at Crossway, without whom this volume would not have come to pass. I am

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particularly grateful to and for David Barshinger and the invaluable editorial aid he rendered to me in working on this book. He helped in countless ways and should receive combat pay for all the time that he spent laboring on my manuscript and with the author. I also appreciate editorial help from Amy Kruis as well as the help of Matt Tully, Dan Bush, Kirsten Pott, and Dan Farrell, and those who work with them in Marketing, Sales, Typesetting, and Design, respectively. I'm grateful to work with this remarkable team. For my family, I always give thanks, especially to my ever-supportive wife, without whose assistance and love this book would have been most difficult—as would be all that I do. Even after a serious cancer diagnosis and months of devastating chemotherapy, she continues to encourage me in everything, above all by her unshakable faith in the goodness and love of her Savior.

Amid all this, our first grandchildren were born this year (Petra, Leo, Gus, and Rosalind). Everything that they say about grandkids is true. I don't have words to express my gratefulness for them, but I can dedicate this book to them and pray that, as my family grows in the Lord, the church will increasingly come to recover its spiritual calling.

ALAN D. STRANGE

December 2023

Abbreviations

<i>BRPR</i>	<i>Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review</i>
<i>BRTR</i>	<i>Biblical Repertory and Theological Review</i>
CHMC	Charles Hodge Manuscript Collection
CHP	Charles Hodge Papers
<i>JPH</i>	<i>Journal of Presbyterian History</i>
<i>JSH</i>	<i>Journal of Southern History</i>

Introduction

THE CALLING, OR MISSION, of the church as the church is to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth, not to be another merely (or even chiefly) political, social, or economic institution. The church, in its full-orbed existence, may have political, economic, or social concerns that develop out of its mission, but those aspects are not what primarily mark and define it. Our Lord Jesus Christ, who is head and King of the church, made it clear in his marching orders to the church—what we’ve come to call the Great Commission—that he intended the church to go to every people group (often translated “nations”) and to evangelize and disciple them (Matt. 28:18–20), enfolding them into his kingdom, which is “not of this world” (John 18:36), a kingdom that does not have the transitory but the eternal at its heart (2 Cor. 4:18). It is Christ himself, our heavenly King—since he is with us even now by his Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45)—who gathers and perfects his church (Westminster Confession of Faith 25.3) through the appointed means.

The gospel is not about worldly success in any proper sense, then, but is rather about deliverance from the penalty, power, and ultimately the presence of sin, a message that comes to permeate

the whole of the lives of those transformed by it. We can rightly say that the message of the church is a spiritual one, coming to people of every sort in every land to bring them here and hereafter into the spiritual reality of the kingdom of Christ. Therefore, Paul encourages the Christians in Corinth, “In whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God” (1 Cor. 7:24). Paul makes clear that the bondservant may and should avail himself of the opportunity of freedom (1 Cor. 7:21). He also makes clear, however, that whatever condition one finds himself in, even whether one is married or not, is not paramount: what is most important is not one’s vocation or life circumstance but being called by and coming to Christ, being a new man or woman in Christ. Paul’s concern is that his readers are Christians, whatever else may be true of their lives. His concern for them, to put it another way, is chiefly spiritual.

This is the spiritual message that the church is privileged to herald to the world (salvation by grace alone), the good news—the meaning of *gospel*—without which there is no good news. The story of the world after Adam’s fall is nothing but bad news since all is sin, darkness, and hopelessness without the good news of the gospel. The gospel of salvation in Christ, however, is the good news that transforms the worst into the best, seen particularly at the cross, where humanity at its worst not only fails to defeat God but where God uses humanity’s attempt to do so as the centerpiece of our salvation. Christ has overcome the world. This is the message that the church joyfully preaches to the world. It does not preach itself, nor does it promote some sort of political, social, economic, or cultural utopia to be achieved in this age.

The church preaches that we are to live in this age not for this age but for the coming age that has broken in on this age and

beckons us to a new heavens and a new earth that await all who trust in Christ alone. This is no “superspirituality” and certainly not any form of gnosticism but simply the recognition of what is central—the spiritual message of the gospel—out of which all else radiates and from which the full-orbed Christian life, with all its consequences, emerges. This is the great message given to the church to proclaim to the world (faith alone in Christ alone), not some lesser political, social, or economic message that addresses only the things that pertain to this world and not to the world to come.

The gospel is a spiritual message for a world whose greatest need is spiritual: redemption from sin and new life in Christ. This is not to say, however, that the effects of the gospel do not have consequences for the world in which we live. Indeed, the effects of the gospel, when the church obeys the Great Commission and the gospel is taken worldwide, is that the nations, in the comprehensive obedience taught to the faithful, come to have among them those who both trust (fundamentally) and obey (consequentially); thus the Christian faith and its fruits do, in fact, profoundly change the world because those touched by the gospel are new creations and because that spiritual rebirth affects them and those around them.

The task of the church as such is not to transform the world at large or any society in it. The task of the church is to transform lives: to proclaim the gospel as the person and work of Christ applied by the power of the Holy Spirit in the means of grace so that men and women come to Christ by faith and are justified, adopted, and sanctified—all a gift of God’s grace. Such changed lives typically affect the lives of others in the various societies in which the saints find themselves. We as God’s people, the church, must certainly be ready to give an answer for the hope that we have within (1 Pet. 3:15) to all those we encounter in their profound spiritual need—chiefly,

salvation in Jesus Christ. That we are concerned primarily for the spiritual vitality of those around us, however, does not mean that we as Christians are to be indifferent to the nonspiritual needs and sufferings of those around us, but we are to love and help them as we have opportunity, as did the good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37), a responsibility with implications reflected even in the final judgment (Matt. 25:31–46).

All that constitutes such obedience, however, does not play out in the life of the corporate, or institutional, church. The church can be variously conceived: as an institute, on the one hand, or as an organism, on the other.¹ While it is the mission of the church as institute to evangelize and disciple all her members among the nations of the world, it is not the mission of the church as institute to incarnate the Christian faith in all of life. It is the call of the members of the church as organism to live the whole of their lives from the standpoint of faith and obedience, taking the ethics taught them by the church, for instance, and employing Christian ethics in their businesses, politics, culture, and so on. The church as institute must remain the church, a spiritual entity, and does not become the state, a civil entity, or the family, a biological entity. It does not even seek to do as institute what its members may do, singly or collectively, in the ordinary living of their Christian lives; this latter imperative is the task of the church as organism.²

1 Abraham Kuyper, *Collected Works in Public Theology*, vol. 3, *Common Grace: God's Gifts for a Fallen World*, ed. Jordan J. Ballor and J. Daryl Charles, trans. Nelson D. Kloosterman and Ed M. van der Maas (1904; repr., Bellingham, WA: Lexham, 2020), 36–43.

2 In his book *Political Church: The Local Assembly as Embassy of Christ's Rule* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), Jonathan Leeman is critical of aspects of this distinction between the church as institute and organism (378–88) and finds more useful distinctions in church polity having to do with the nature of church power (380–82). Like others, Leeman believes that Kuyper ultimately developed his concept of church as organism at the expense of the church as institute. I think Kuyper did have this tendency, though Leeman himself appears

Throughout history, and again in our times, challenges have come from a variety of corners to the church as church—or, as just noted, the church as institute—pushing it to be something that it is not called to be. Some say that if the church is to have any value to society, it must be or become a political, social, or economic entity, as quarters of the church in the United States became in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when figures like Walter Rauschenbusch and Washington Gladden promoted the social gospel.³ This pressure that the church become like other earthly agencies or institutions stems from the conclusion that some agenda other than the one to which the church is called is really the most important thing in the world.

Marxism or other economic or social ideologies are seen by such who ill-regard the true calling of the church as most needful for the problems that currently beset us. These all-comprehensive ideologies demand that the church, along with the family, the university, the state, and any other institutions, if they are to be worth anything, join them in their conviction, as was Sigmund Freud's, that all reality is sexual/psychological—or, in Karl Marx's case, economic; in Charles Darwin's, biological; and so forth—especially manifested in the fluid genderism left in Freud's wake that outpaces our best attempts to keep up.⁴

to consider the “Christian” political position on given issues as more discernible than I do. I think a fair amount of legitimate political differences exists within Reformed confessional bounds.

- 3 For a favorable view, see Christopher H. Evans, *The Social Gospel in American Religion: A History* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), esp. 107–34. Even when positively presented, the net effect of the social gospel's impact on the churches of the time was, in my view, subversive of the church's true calling.
- 4 One of the best recent books to illuminate the historical roots of the current sexual crises that confront the church, given the all-pervasive influence of figures like Jean-Jacques Rousseau, William Wordsworth, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and others who have shaped

Martin Luther's theology has been portrayed as teaching, "Let God be God!"⁵ It is the burden of this book to say, "Let the church be the church." A variety of competing claims threaten to overrun and overwhelm the institutional church in our times. The call of the Lord to the church, the mission that he has given to the church, is an essentially spiritual one. If the church loses that, she has nothing to offer the world, or as D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones reportedly said, "The church does the world the least good when she seeks to be most like it."⁶ The world does not need the church to echo all its utopian schemes for a better life. The world needs the church to preach the gospel to it. Yes, when that gospel is faithfully preached and received, men and women throughout the world not only come to Christ but also live in ways that better everything about them. If the church fails to do that, however, as she is called to do it, she suffers and the whole world with her. As attractive as it might seem at any given point for the church to cease to be the truly spiritual body that her Lord calls her to be, it is, in fact, for the church to retreat into futility.

This book, it should be here noted, does not seek to resolve all the difficult problems that surround this subject, such as the relation-

contemporary views on gender and various sexual aberrations, is Carl R. Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self: Cultural Amnesia, Expressive Individualism, and the Road to Sexual Revolution* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020).

5 Philip S. Watson, *Let God Be God! An Interpretation of the Theology of Martin Luther* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1949).

6 I heard this quote attributed to D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones many years ago, and though I have searched for the source, I have not been able to find it. This sentiment certainly rings true to what Lloyd-Jones says elsewhere; see D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *A First Book of Daily Readings* (Epworth, 1970), excerpted in "April 18 Daily Devotional: *A First Book of Daily Readings*, D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones," Orthodox Presbyterian Church (website), accessed March 22, 2023, <https://opc.org/>.

ship between church and state or between Christ and culture or the place of public or political theology.⁷ For example, two-kingdom advocates distinguish broadly between the redemptive and secular (common) realms, and neo-Calvinists seek to integrate the two.⁸ Both approaches arguably have insightful contributions and valid concerns about the other, and these two schools, and variants thereof, can continue to battle for their models and the help that they might bring at various points while agreeing with the central concerns of this book.

Beyond the ham-handed efforts of early twentieth-century social gospellers, who rendered the church another public aid society, albeit a religious one, those interested in political or public theology in more recent decades have generally been more subtle and sophisticated in their attempts to bring their convictions to bear on civil society broadly.⁹ Ultimately, however, some have often proved no

- 7 The classic statement of the relationship of Christ to culture—containing his view of five different stances between Christ and culture, with the Reformed view seen as “Christ the Transformer of Culture”—remains H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), 190–229. Many reassessments have occurred over time; two helpful ones include Craig A. Carter, *Rethinking Christ and Culture: A Post-Christendom Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2006); D. A. Carson, *Christ and Culture Revisited* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008).
- 8 David VanDrunen, as a leading two-kingdom proponent, should be consulted, particularly his *Living in God’s Two Kingdoms: A Biblical Vision for Christianity and Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010). For an integrationist attempt in a ministry context, see Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012). For his assessment of Niebuhr’s *Christ and Culture* and of a two-kingdom approach, see esp. 194–234.
- 9 Oliver O’Donovan’s books are part of the contemporary movement to engage political theology, especially *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Another moderating voice in this discussion is James Davison Hunter, *To Change the World: The Irony, Tragedy, and Possibility of Christianity in the Late Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). A recent multiauthor volume that celebrates and expands on Richard Mouw’s conviction that “the gospel in its fullness must be directed to all dimensions of human life,” from a centrist-left position,

less partisan than the social gospel promoters, who were politically quite liberal. Certainly, many contemporary advocates of political or public theology have tended in progressive directions not likely to garner evangelical support, though some who promote political theology do so from a more moderate position.¹⁰

We should not, on the one hand, adopt partisan political positions as the church over which those who affirm the same creeds and confessions may rightly differ; we should not, on the other hand, fail to affirm what God's word clearly teaches, even if our proclamation may be perceived to have political impact. Some within the Reformed and Presbyterian world hold to views about the civil reign of King Jesus that have deep historical roots, and various parties continue to vie for some version of Christendom even in an age that has largely been conceded as being post-Christian.¹¹ Nonetheless, I hope that the most zealous Covenanter can read this book and agree that the church must remain the

is Matthew Kaemingk, ed., *Reformed Public Theology: A Global Vision for Life in the World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), vii.

- 10 The more moderate position of a James Hunter might be contrasted with a more liberal one of someone like Miroslav Volf, who along with his mentor Jürgen Moltmann, takes things in a direction likely to be seen as partisan left from those on the right. See, for example, Volf's *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); and, more recently, *Flourishing: Why We Need Religion in a Globalized World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015).
- 11 Probably no Presbyterians are as ardent in all their theocratic convictions as are the Covenanters, a group whose detailed history is found in J. K. Hewison, *The Covenanters: A History of the Church in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution*, 2 vols. (1913; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2019). Their influence in America, particularly in opposing slavery and championing the civil kingship of Christ, can be gauged from Joseph S. Moore, *Founding Sins: How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to Put Christ into the Constitution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016). James Renwick Willson was a nineteenth-century American Covenanter whose collected articles in *Political Danger: Essays on the Mediatorial Kingship of Christ over Nations and Their Political Institutions, 1809–1838* (Pittsburgh: Crown and Covenant, 2009) provide a biblical and theological rationale for “the crown rights of King Jesus,” even in the American disestablishment context.

church and, as such, should not “intermeddle with civil affairs which concern the commonwealth.”¹² Some positions would wall off the Christian faith from any influence on the public square. Not this work. Other positions would gladly have the church be viewed as the Republican or Democratic Party at prayer; some progressives and reactionaries, rejecting the “old” politics, look to others now.¹³ Again, this work calls for the church to baptize no political party or movement.

I believe that what I propose and what I hope might be welcomed is in keeping with Augustine’s seminal insights in *The City of God* (412–426).¹⁴ In the century before Augustine, Constantine was converted (312), and Eusebius, the father of church history, became his court chronicler. Previously, many Christians, who were under persecution, had been chiliasts, expecting the coming of Christ to be followed by a thousand-year reign of Christ on the earth. With the conversion of the emperor, Eusebius identified

12 Westminster Confession of Faith 31.4. It should be noted that although chap. 31 has been amended in the American church—the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC) and Presbyterian Church in America (PCA), for instance—this quote (from 31.5 in the original 1647 edition) remains the same, both in the original version and in the amended American version.

13 Stephen Wolfe, *The Case for Christian Nationalism* (Moscow, ID: Canon, 2022), is a confused and disturbing politicizing work. Kevin DeYoung’s trenchant review addresses its primary problems: “The Rise of Right-Wing Wokeism—Review: *The Case for Christian Nationalism* by Stephen Wolfe,” The Gospel Coalition, November 28, 2022, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/>. DeYoung’s review is more balanced on the “nationalism” question than the book by Andrew L. Whitehead and Samuel L. Perry, *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), which rightly raises an alarm about Christian nationalism but in a way that reveals its own liberal biases and shortcomings.

14 For a discussion of Augustinian insight in properly distinguishing the church from the Roman Empire, see Alan D. Strange, *The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church in the Ecclesiology of Charles Hodge*, Reformed Academic Dissertations (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2017), 8–15. This is my published dissertation and will hereafter be referred to as *Spirituality of the Church*. Much of this current work relies on my work in my dissertation.

the church with the state and saw a future golden age in which the Roman state and church would triumph and together dominate the whole world.

When Rome was sacked by Alaric and the Visigoths in 410 and other evidence of the empire's dissolution accrued, Augustine addressed the theological crisis by writing *The City of God*. In response to the charge that the church waxed at the expense of the waning state, he pointed out the failures of paganism and made clear that the church was its own entity, not to be simply identified with the Roman Empire—or any other empire, for that matter. Augustine wrote to assure Christians that though Rome may fall, the church will never fall but will continue to carry out its task until that great day of the Lord. The book in your hands is in the spirit of such Augustinian reasoning.

Consonant with that Augustinian conviction, I do not seek to muzzle the prophetic voice of the church against such injustices as abortion, racism, abuse of power, and denial of due process in the course of the church's proclamation of the whole counsel of God. The church must, in all its ministries, declare God's word and minister to the spiritual welfare of those in and out of the church. We do not need less of a Christian witness in the public square; we need more of one. This is evidenced not only in the writings of those on the political left or right, who would bring biblical insight into play more explicitly in the public square, but also in the writings of some two-kingdom thinkers like David VanDrunen, who, in his book on politics, brings Christian wisdom and insight to bear (under a natural-law rubric) on the public square in a variety of ways.¹⁵

15 David VanDrunen, *Politics after Christendom: Political Theology in a Fractured World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020).

We do not need more of the secularism of the French Revolution sort, marked as it was by viciousness. Nor do we need the visible institutional church to be swamped with and give way to political concerns. We need the church to remain and be the church, both for its own welfare and that of the world. All Reformed and Presbyterian churches affirm Calvin's second use of the law—as a guide for society broadly—and when civil government refuses to recognize God's law explicitly, we pray that it will do so in spite of such unbelief because the works of the law are written on the rulers' hearts (Rom. 2:14–15).¹⁶

This book, then, seeks to refocus the church on its proper calling and mission, encouraging it to be what Christ has called it to be and not to give way to political concerns, as is so tempting and so common. This work seeks to foster a kind of “mere spirituality,” with apologies to C. S. Lewis, that would obtain in the face of competing models for understanding state and church, Christ and culture, faith and politics, and the like. In other words, I call on all Reformed and Presbyterians—indeed, all Protestants—however they conceive the relations of church and state, faith and politics, and so on, to embrace the “mere spirituality of the church.” At the same time, this approach will clash with that of those determined, on either left or right (however they may self-identify), to organize the church according to their own political convictions.

All persons have political convictions, and those of the Christian must be consonant with Scripture, as all his beliefs must be. This does not mean, however, that those views should be preached as gospel truth in the pulpit. Yes, one may properly preach, as warranted by the text, that abortion is sin (or that greedy business

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 2.7.10.

practices, racism, same-sex marriage, oppressive exploitation, and so on are wrong) but not what precise political moves should be made to address it. To preach against sin is one thing; to preach the detailed solution to complex political questions, especially about which people of the same confession differ, is another.

This book examines, first, the doctrine of *the spirituality of the church*—that is, the call, task, or mission of the institutional church. It then surveys that doctrine particularly as it developed stateside in the nineteenth century, especially as it relates to the nation's enthrallment to slavery. We will see that Charles Hodge of Princeton Theological Seminary opposed the doctrine of the spirituality of the church as he initially saw it brought forth by James Henley Thornwell and others, particularly at the 1859 and 1860 General Assemblies of the Presbyterian Church, but modified it for his own purposes in opposition to the Gardiner Spring Resolutions at the 1861 General Assembly. The Presbyterian Church, turning away from the spirituality of the church, ultimately came to embrace an approach to political and civil matters that overwhelmed the spiritual: Northern Presbyterianism took actions during and following the US Civil War (1861–1865), including the reunion of the Old and New Schools on an unsound doctrinal and polity basis, that compromised the church and led her into theological liberalism.

The Presbyterian Church, as a great cautionary tale, lost its spiritual way in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; since then, mainline Presbyterianism has suffered the loss of the spirituality of the church, pervasive politicization, and arguably, because of that, precipitous decline.¹⁷ In the face of the widespread

¹⁷ Even after unions with other significant bodies in 1958 and 1983, membership in the Presbyterian Church (USA) plummeted from a high of 4.25 million in 1965 to a low of

decline of this doctrine, recent years have witnessed a welcome awareness of the historical abuse of the spirituality of the church among confessionally sound Reformed and Presbyterian churches that once imbibed this doctrine.¹⁸ While it is true that it was abused in some measure, such abuse does not mean that the doctrine has no proper use.¹⁹ It is the aim of this book to warn against dismissing the spirituality of the church altogether just because it has been historically abused and to observe that if it is shelved, the church will suffer from losing a proper doctrine of the church's spiritual mission. This book seeks to address both the abuse and the neglect of the spirituality of the church and to call for a healthy return to a mere spirituality, one that does not dodge painful responsibilities but remains alert and sensitive to the temptation of politicizing the institutional church.

1.19 million at the end of 2021. During all this hemorrhaging, the mainline Presbyterian Church became more politically progressive, and politics became paramount. Rick Jones, "PC(USA) 2021 Statistics Continue to Show Declining Membership," Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church (USA), April 25, 2022, <https://www.pcusa.org/>.

- 18 Sean Michael Lucas deals with the use and abuse of the spirituality of the church in the Southern Presbyterian Church, both in its earlier and later forms. *For a Continuing Church: The Roots of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2015), 39–65, 101–34. Jemar Tisby understandably finds this doctrine problematic and rightly points out how selectively it was used. *The Color of Compromise: The Truth about the American Church's Complicity in Racism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 85–87. Tisby also, writing after the death of George Floyd and the protests that followed, finds attempts, historical and still ongoing, to justify racism in Presbyterian and other churches. *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey toward Racial Justice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Reflective, 2021), 97–103 passim. I agree that the spirituality of the church, lamentably, has and can be used for excusing racism and other sins. This work calls for a better way, one that fully embraces what the Scripture teaches on every subject, including its condemnation of racism, without inviting or allowing the church to give way to pervasive politicization.
- 19 The principle of *abusus non tollit usum* (the abuse of a thing does not preclude its [proper] use) is fundamental in ecclesiology and church polity. In our current atmosphere of rejecting any practice that has ever been abused, the principle that "abuse does not mean no proper use" must be retained, or much will be lost.

This book presses for a mere spirituality that encourages the church as church to mind its spiritual business and not to seek to proclaim anything but “Thus says the Lord” and what may be rightly implied from Scripture. The church as church lacks the competency and the authority to address political situations in detail because it lacks the scriptural word to opine about specific proposed remedies such as higher minimum wages, better tax schemes, term limits for public office, and many other matters that should be decided in the political forum and not in the ecclesiastical one. This is what this book means when it speaks of the spiritual call that pertains to the church, a call that challenges the church neither simply to become the world by echoing its highest humanism nor to flee from the world and retreat into a holy huddle. Rather, the church must be what Christ has called her to be, both for her own good and for the world’s, all to the glory and eternal praise of our triune God.²⁰

20 Alan D. Strange, “The Spirituality of the Church and Her ‘Painful Responsibilities,’” in *New Perspectives on Old Princeton*, ed. Kevin DeYoung, Paul Kjoss Helseth, and David P. Smith (London: Routledge, forthcoming).

The Doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church

THE CHURCH'S SPIRITUAL MISSION, or *the spirituality of the church*, is a doctrine that the church has forgotten as a concept or remembered only for its abuses in protecting American slavery and thus, understandably, rejected. I think that the spirituality of the church, however, is something we need to recapture in our dialogue about the church and its mission. Rightly defined, the spirituality of the church applies not only to those who have a particular view of the church and culture but to any conception of the church that understands it as an institution with a distinct spiritual calling that it and only it can perform: this I call *mere spirituality*. If the church fails to see that and tries to be something else—merely another social, political, or economic actor—then what the church is meant to be and to give away is lost, and we are all the poorer for it.

The phrase *the spirituality of the church* may strike many readers as curious. At the same time, the terms *Christian spirituality* and *spiritual theology* are likely familiar to many. Readers might have

some idea of what *spirituality* in broader terms means, but having never heard the nomenclature *the spirituality of the church*, they may be left scratching their heads about this term. I hope to show that these concepts—Christian spirituality and the spirituality of the church—are not wholly unrelated, even as I demonstrate that what is referred to as *the spirituality of the church* is addressing something rather distinctive.

The doctrine, though of ancient origins,¹ did not appear in the form of the phrase *the spirituality of the church* 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). I address some of this later in the book, especially focusing on that context (1840s–late 1860s), in which we see that the doctrine concerns the province of the church and the nature and limits of its power, specifically the contention that since the church is a spiritual institution, its focus should be spiritual, not civil or political. Though Old School Presbyterians rather widely held convictions about the spirituality of the church, at least the principle that the church is a spiritual kingdom, how to *apply* the principle engendered enormous controversy among them.

Christian Spirituality and the Church

Before plunging into the internecine battles among Old School Presbyterians in applying this doctrine, a short reflection on the nexus between *Christian spirituality* and *the spirituality of the church* might be helpful. 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.

1 For an extensive treatment of church, state, and their relationships in the biblical, ancient, medieval, and Reformational worlds, see especially Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*, chap. 1.

The spirituality of the church highlights that the church, as the mystical body of Christ filled with the Holy Spirit, is a spiritual rather than 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.² Here one may think of, for example, the prayer life of the Christian. This would be a part of 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).³

How exactly, though, is the broader concept of spirituality connected with the narrower concept of the spirituality of the church? As noted above, spirituality broadly has to do 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 person as one in whom the Holy Spirit has worked (1 Cor. 2:1–16). The spiritual person is one who enjoys union with Christ and has the

- 2 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 three-volume *Christian Spirituality* [New York: Crossroad, 1987] and four-volume *Foundations of Mysticism* [New York: Crossroad, 1995] cover the field), and books on the spiritual disciplines by popular authors such as 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: InterVarsity Press, 1998), in which he treats the question in two parts: the theological principles of spiritual theology and the practices of spiritual theology, addressing under the latter rubric prayer, spiritual exercises focusing on God and self, the word of God, and the world, as well as the rule of life, the discernment of spirits, and the art of spiritual direction.
- 3 Spirituality in the world religions, including Christianity, receives due attention in the magisterial eighteen-volume set *World Spirituality: An Encyclopedic History of the Religious Quest*, ed. Ewert Cousins (New York: Crossroad, 1985–).

mind of Christ in and by the power of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit authors and fosters Christian spirituality.⁴ The spirituality of the church ties in with this thinking 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, exercise, and extent of its power: a spiritual power exercised in a spiritual manner within a spiritual realm.⁵ Thus, all sorts of organic connections exist between spirituality broadly conceived and the spirituality of the church properly.

Recent Studies and Historical Perspective

The doctrine of the spirituality of the church is something that has received revived attention in recent years. For instance, D. G. Hart and John Muether, 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

- 4 The word *spirituality* is often nowadays pitted against *religion*, so that one commonly reads that someone who is no 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. In this schema, spirituality is perfectly acceptable because it's an inward virtue that does not have or require outward observances.
- 5 This is widely recognized in Presbyterian books of church order. For example, see *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in America* (Lawrenceville, GA: Office of the Stated Clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America, 2022), preface (esp. sec. 2, "Preliminary Principles"); part 1, chap. 3 ("The Nature and Extent of Church Power"); and also *The Book of Church Order of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church*, "Form of Government" (Willow Grove, PA: Committee on Christian Education of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church, 2020), chap. 3 ("The Nature and Exercise of Church Power").

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

In a more recent book, Bryan Estelle addresses many of the themes of this volume from a two-kingdom perspective, and he develops a comprehensive argument calling for a new or renewed commitment to the “primary” mission of the church, which he sees as decidedly spiritual.⁷

This present volume, being more of a survey of American Presbyterian history, relies on the scriptural exegesis of other works, such as Estelle’s work or Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert’s similar volume on the mission of the church.⁸ Additionally, as noted earlier, this book does not generally address the models developed to deal with Christianity and culture and the like except in passing; one of the best-balanced treatments of the two-kingdom question is Jonathon Beeke’s *Duplex Regnum Christi*.⁹ Relatedly, a good general examination of a Christian approach to politics and its proper nature and limits is David Innes’s work.¹⁰ I happily admit,

6 D. G. Hart and John R. Muether, “The Spirituality of the Church,” *Ordained Servant* 7, no. 3 (1998): 64. See also Hart and Muether, *Seeking a Better Country: 300 Years of American Presbyterianism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2007), 138–43.

7 Bryan D. Estelle, *The Primary Mission of the Church: Engaging or Transforming the World?* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Mentor, 2022). It should be noted that because of the liability tied to the nomenclature *spirituality of the church*, Estelle tends to use other language to describe this doctrine. Other writers have understandably done the same in recent years.

8 Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What Is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011).

9 Jonathon D. Beeke, *Duplex Regnum Christi: Christ’s Twofold Kingdom in Reformed Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2021). A few volumes are also quite critical of a two-kingdom approach, perhaps one of the more severe being Willem J. Ouweneel, *The World Is Christ: A Critique of Two Kingdoms Theology* (Toronto: Ezra Press, 2017).

10 David C. Innes, *Christ and the Kingdoms of Men: Foundations of Political Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2019).

as a convinced Protestant of the Reformed stripe, that Scripture, not tradition, and thus not the history of the church, is normative. We ultimately go to God's word to develop our doctrine of the mission of the church and to understand what its spirituality should look like.¹¹

I would argue, however, that surveying history is quite important in a matter like this: while recognizing that the Bible alone is prescriptive for our doctrine, we nonetheless appreciate the significance that the descriptive living out of our doctrine provides us, which is what we witness in history. Since the spirituality of the church has much to do with church polity—the integrity of the church as an institution vis-à-vis other institutions like the state—and since polity in Reformed and Presbyterian theological studies has developed as a discipline in the field of church history, it is especially fitting to examine church history as we study the spirituality of the church.¹² This book, then, looks at the doctrine of the spirituality of the church in American church history, particularly in the lead-up to and aftermath of the US Civil War, especially as worked out in the ecclesiology of Old School American Presbyterianism.

Though the doctrine of the spirituality of the church has its roots in the seventeenth-century Scottish doctrine of the “spiritual independency of the church” and in the Scottish Second Book of

11 Another clear and helpful book that has implications for the spiritual mission of the church is Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2011).

12 For a detailed outworking of the relationship between the history of the church and its polity, see the ongoing serialization of my “Commentary on the Form of Government of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church” and “Commentary on the Book of Discipline of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church,” begun in April 2020, in the online office bearers’ journal of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church (OPC), *Ordained Servant Online*, at <https://www.opc.org/os.html>.

Discipline (1578),¹³ it was in the American context preceding and during the US Civil War that this doctrine took on a special role in the church's understanding of itself, allowing the church to retain its God-ordained witness to the world without being overwhelmed by the world's concerns and agenda. How some of those difficult waters were navigated, both successfully and not, might suggest to us in our own times how we in the institutional church might make sure that we properly engage the world without being swamped with its concerns and politicized along with so many other institutions.

This present volume, then, while not engaging in extensive biblical exegesis or treating certain important questions connected to the topic under consideration, takes another look at the doctrine of the spirituality of the church especially by considering how the great nineteenth-century Princeton Theological Seminary theologian Charles Hodge used and modified the doctrine. Some who seek to recover the doctrine of the spirituality of the church do so more in keeping with how it was used by some of Hodge's fellow Old School Presbyterians: the border state champion of spirituality, Stuart Robinson, and the dean of Southern Presbyterianism, James Henley Thornwell.¹⁴ Part of the aim of this book is to assess whether Robinson and Thornwell are sound exemplars of the spirituality

13 Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*, 23–31.

14 Two good examples of conventional reliance on Thornwell (and Robinson, more recently) include David VanDrunen, *Natural Law and the Two Kingdoms: A Study in the Development of Reformed Social Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 247–66; Darryl Hart, *A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 117–19. Craig Troxel commends Robinson's spirituality of the church in his foreword to a reprinting of 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. And Brian T. 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" (PhD diss., Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992).

of the church. It is my contention that Hodge's moderate view of the doctrine expresses it better and is more suitable for recovery and use in our times.

Charles Hodge on the Spirituality of the Church

Hodge's doctrine of the spirituality of the church received no sustained attention until recently, in my dissertation.¹⁵ 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 (founded in 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 US Civil War 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 at the General Assemblies of 1861 and 1865, as we will see below. Hodge rejected both extremes and developed a doctrine of the spirituality of the church that was supple and practical. And for Hodge, his doctrine developed out of his overall doctrine of the church, which

¹⁵ Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*.

he saw as a spiritual institution, a body gathered by the Spirit and given expression in the visible institutional church.

For 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. Hodge viewed the church as a spiritual institution that carried out its tasks in spiritual, not political or civil, ways: this was a given that he contended for and developed throughout the whole of his theology. This work, then, examines the doctrine of the spiritual calling of the church especially as it plays out in the doctrine of the spirituality of the church in Charles Hodge's theology. By looking at Hodge particularly, I seek to demonstrate that he developed his doctrine of the church's spirituality in a subtle and nuanced fashion that permitted him to distinguish the church from the state and its political concerns while also allowing the church to retain a prophetic voice in 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 a 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 slavery.

If this doctrine kept the American Presbyterian Church from fully addressing what many would regard as the greatest evil of

its day, what good was it? Other American Christians did not believe that something called the spirituality of the church restrained 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. It should be noted, however, that Wilberforce did so not as a preacher in the pulpit but as a parliamentarian working for abolitionist legislation. In any case, slavery in Britain suffered defeat in no small measure because of the explicitly Christian opposition of Wilberforce and his allies.

At the same time, one might argue that 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. Gresham Machen, twentieth-century successor to Hodge at Princeton Seminary, lamented the loss of this distinction, which stemmed from the loss of any sense of the church's spiritual mission. He wrote,

Weary 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.

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.¹⁶

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 no good by aping it.

The danger always exists 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 book that as Hodge did when he developed his doctrine of the spirituality of the church, but hopefully better, we can steer a course between the Scylla of the marginalization and irrelevance of the church and the Charybdis of its politicization.

Since mention of the spirituality of the church is largely absent until Hodge's time, one might think that the doctrine is an invention of nineteenth-century American Presbyterianism. After all, the specific term first appears shortly before the US Civil War.¹⁷

¹⁶ J. Gresham Machen, *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923; repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 179–80.

¹⁷ It shows up in the debates between Charles Hodge and James Henley Thornwell and in Stuart Robinson's work, as noted above, regarding the nature of church power, extraecclesiastical Christian societies, and the boards of the Presbyterian Church, particularly at the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA) General Assemblies of 1859 and 1860, reflected in Hodge, *Discussions in Church Polity* (1878; repr., New York: Westminster, 2001),

The idea, particularly as used by Charles Hodge, has to do with what might be called the “province of the church”—the nature and limits of its power—especially its role as an institution over against that of the state. And that concept has roots dating back to the early centuries of the church. This book intends to show that for Hodge these broader uses link up with his particular usage of the spirituality of the church: Hodge saw the church as a spiritual institution, a kingdom “not of this world,” gathered and perfected by the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ Hence the spirituality of the church for Hodge came particularly to reflect this reality: the church is a body gathered by the Holy Spirit, over against other societal institutions that are biological (the family) or civil (the state).

Spirituality in the Nineteenth Century Briefly Defined

Recent scholars have been skeptical about when the doctrine of the spirituality of the church developed. Historian Jack Maddex, for instance, notes that “all writers have agreed . . . that Southern Presbyterians embraced ‘the spirituality of the church’ before 1861.”¹⁹ Maddex insists on a different time line:

100–106, 118–33, and in Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, vol. 4 (1875; repr., Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 145–295.

- 18 The reference here—that Christ has a “kingdom not of this world”—is from John 18:36, and the Greek is instructive. It reads *ek tou kosmou toutou* (“out of this world” or “from this world”), and the implication is not so much that there are two kingdoms as such (a civil and a spiritual kingdom)—at least that is not the implication of this passage (I make no pretense to address the question of “two kingdoms” such as we would find in Martin Luther or John Calvin, for example)—but that Christ’s kingdom does not come out of, emerge from, or rely on the kind of kingdom that Pilate bears rule in, one that bears a sword. Rather, the quality of this kingdom is of a different sort than that of the world from which it does not come. One may translate (as does the RSV) *basileia* as “kingship,” so that Jesus is proclaiming that the authority of his kingship is not derived from or reliant on any earthly kingdom but, by contrast, has origins not in or from this world, transcending this present cosmos.
- 19 Jack P. Maddex, “From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State,” *JPH* 54, no. 4 (1976): 438. One of Thornwell’s leading biographers,

It is time to challenge that generally-accepted premise. Antebellum Southern Presbyterians did not teach absolute separation of religion from politics, or even church from state. Most of them were proslavery social activists who worked through the church to defend slavery and reform its practice. Their Confederate militance did not violate any antebellum tradition of pietism. Only during Reconstruction, in drastically altered circumstances, did they take up the cause of a non-secular church—borrowing it from conservative Presbyterians in the border states.²⁰

Maddex, I contend, is both right and wrong. He is right that Presbyterians in the South (and in the North, for that matter) before the US Civil War did not teach an absolute separation of religion from politics²¹ and also that Reconstruction Southerners were particularly influenced by certain border state Presbyterians (like Stuart Robinson in Kentucky).²² He is wrong, however, to assert that the doctrine of the spirituality of the church is not only terminologically but conceptually a novel idea invented by Southerners in Reconstruction. The notion of the spirituality of the church in some sense extends back through the entire history of the church,

James O. Farmer Jr., is in essential concord with Maddex; see Farmer, *The Metaphysical Confederacy: James Henley Thornwell and the Synthesis of Southern Values* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986), 258–61.

20 Maddex, “From Theocracy to Spirituality,” 438–39.

21 A point made forcefully in the excellent collection of sermons preached before and during the Civil War, *“God Ordained This War”: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830–1865*, ed. David B. Chesebrough (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991).

22 Robinson, as noted above, published before the Civil War his great work arguing for his version of the spirituality of the church: *The Church of God as an Essential Element of the Gospel, and the Idea, Structure, and Functions Thereof* (Philadelphia: Joseph M. Wilson, 1858). This work became greatly influential in the South after the war when Robinson joined and served as an early moderator of the Southern Presbyterian Church.

even to biblical times.²³ It is the contention of this work that not only did the concept of the spirituality of the church precede the nineteenth century but also that it was used for something other than supporting slavery, as seen in the case of Charles Hodge.²⁴

While some who adduced the spirituality of the church did intend thereby to silence the church from criticizing slavery, this was not Hodge's approach. Hodge's more careful and modest use of the doctrine restricted the church from purely political involvement, while permitting some civil engagement. He asserted that the church has a proper interest in addressing issues that may have civil implications, like Sabbath observance, the place of religion in public education, and slavery.²⁵ In fine, Hodge maintained that though the church ought not to concern itself with the purely political, at the same time it ought not to restrict itself in addressing matters treated by the Bible simply because such issues may have certain civil or political ramifications. Where to draw the lines—between spiritual and civil, between church and state—is, Hodge acknowledged, “an exceedingly complicated and difficult subject.”²⁶

23 A recent work by a leading Reformed Old Testament professor well establishes the biblical basis of, inter alia, the spirituality of the church: Estelle, *Primary Mission of the Church*, esp. 47–145. See also Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*, chap. 1.

24 Ernest Trice Thompson also argues that the doctrine of the spirituality of the church was a novelty invented by the Southern church to evade the issue of slavery and to separate faith and politics. See both his magisterial (and still indispensable) three-volume set *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1963–1973) and his smaller work *The Spirituality of the Church: A Distinctive Doctrine of the Presbyterian Church in the United States* (Richmond, VA: John Knox, 1961). E. Brooks Holifield also takes the position that the spirituality of the church served as a cover during the slavery controversy and that the Presbyterian Church in the South otherwise “never truly abstained from social comment.” *The Gentlemen Theologians: American Theology in Southern Culture, 1795–1860* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1978), 154.

25 Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*, chaps. 4–5.

26 Charles Hodge, “Relation of the Church and State,” *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* (hereafter cited as *BRPR*) 35, no. 4 (1863): 679.

Given the brevity of this book, much that is helpful to a full consideration of the subject at hand must be treated lightly or passed over altogether. Thus, for the fuller treatment of matters like the biblical and historical development of both church and state, considered separately and in their mutual relations, I refer the interested reader to my underlying dissertation.²⁷ Additionally, matters pertaining to Hodge's life and the development of his theology²⁸—particularly his doctrine of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) and his doctrine of the church (ecclesiology), which combine and find a special focus in his doctrine of the spirituality of the church—enjoy due and greater treatment in the larger volume.²⁹ Especially important in a fuller treatment of these matters is to show how the doctrine of the work of the Holy Spirit (following the long-established understanding of the person of the Holy Spirit) developed in the corpus of John Calvin, “the theologian of the Holy Spirit.”³⁰

Hodge and his fellows at Princeton rightly lay claim to being theologians of the Holy Spirit as well, seeing the Spirit's application of Christ's purchased redemption to his people as key in understanding the nature of the church and why the church is a spiritual institution, over against the family as a biological one and the state as a civil one. We are going to proceed from this point in our narrative to the question of slavery and how the doctrine of the spirituality of the church interfaced with that, frankly, horrific institution. It should not be assumed, however, that the sort of things briefly described in these last paragraphs may simply be

27 Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*, chap. 1.

28 Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*, chap. 2.

29 Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*, chaps. 3–4.

30 Strange, *Spirituality of the Church*, 132–36.

taken for granted. Interested readers should consult chapters 1–4 of my published dissertation for the deeper questions of church, state, the Holy Spirit, ecclesiology, polity, and the like that go into making up the question of the church’s spirituality and its consequent spiritual mission and calling.