

Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

**Direct and Immediate?  
The 19<sup>th</sup> Century Southern Presbyterian Controversy  
Regarding God's Call to Ministry**

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty  
in Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Theology

by

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April 2018

## **Abstract**

The 19<sup>th</sup> century intramural debate within the American Presbyterian Church in the South over the call to the ministry is generally unknown and unexamined. This thesis studies the two sides and two stages of this controversy, as well as its historical context, focusing primarily on the articles written in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* by leading proponents of the respective positions. The controversy centered on how the Holy Spirit calls a man to the gospel ministry, whether directly and immediately, or only indirectly and mediately. This disagreement flowed from a more fundamental divergence in the participants' views of the nature of the Holy Spirit's work in general, and in the differing weight they gave to existing threats to the church and pulpit in their day. Though the call controversy has faded from memory, the issues it raised continue to be significant for the church and her ministers to consider, particularly in regard to how the church should seek more ministers, and who should consider the ministry.

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## **Preface**

The following thesis is the capstone on a Master of Theology degree that would not have been possible apart from the help and support of so many. I give all glory to my Father, who has called me by His Spirit into the ministry of the gospel of Jesus Christ, for anything insightful or helpful in this work. I am thankful to my faithful bride Elizabeth, who encouraged me to begin and to finish this degree, and who was most affected by my time in the study. I am also thankful for my children, Daniel, Laura, Beth Ann, Caroline, and Ezra, who are glad that Daddy is more available to play on Fridays now. Dale Cangelosi and Melanie Levy, my parents, and Ken and Mary Frances Smith, my in-laws, have been wonderful cheerleaders throughout this six-year process. The two churches I have served while completing this degree, Grace Presbyterian Church in Cookeville, Tennessee, and Pear Orchard Presbyterian Church in Ridgeland, Mississippi, have generously allowed me the time off to study, and have funded it substantially. Without the ruling and teaching elders at both churches, this degree would not have been possible. It has been my privilege to feed the sheep of those two flocks with some of what I learned throughout this course of study. I'm thankful for my first flock, Columbia Presbyterian Church in Columbia, MS, who loved this green pastor so well and humbly received my ministry.

My interest in 19<sup>th</sup> century Presbyterianism is due in large part to Mr. James "Bebo" Elkin, Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III, Dr. Duncan Rankin, Dr. Andrew Hoffercker, and Dr. Nick Willborn. The professors and staff at Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary have been tremendously helpful during my ThM studies. I am particularly appreciative of the Library staff, Laura Ladwig and Kim Dykema, who were always quick to respond to and fulfill requests for help. The Library at Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, MS, provided a quiet place for writing on many occasions. Louis and Esther Kamps and Scottie and Karol Tiermersma graciously extended hospitality to me when I came to Grand Rapids for classes.

My fathers and brothers in the Grace, Nashville and Mississippi Valley Presbyteries have supplied me with intellectual and spiritual stimulation throughout my time as a minister of the gospel. Finally, I am thankful for the seminary students whom I have the privilege of knowing and mentoring in Mississippi, especially those who worship at Pear Orchard.

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

The history of the church of the Lord Jesus Christ and Christian theology is largely a history of heresies, and thus a history of the controversies surrounding those heresies.<sup>1</sup> Even in those periods when the church has not directly confronted heresy per se, its history has progressed by and through disagreements over doctrine, polity, principles and practices.<sup>2</sup> Such a phenomenon is not unique to the church, of course. Secular history is also primarily the record of wars, political gridlock, the clash of civilizations, and struggles among competing worldviews for supremacy, and even domination. Since the fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden, the story of humanity has been a story of alienation, dissension and disintegration. What we read in history books is Adam's blaming and covering himself from Eve, as well as Cain's murderous conflict with Abel, writ large. For the historian, therefore, flying sparks as a result of clashing ideas is the surest sign of fertile ground for investigatory efforts. "Follow the controversies" is a safe rule for the historical task, and makes for a fascinating, fun, and often sorrowful endeavor.

Not all controversies are created equal, however – particularly when we examine ecclesiastical history. Some fights are more fundamental and movement-creating in nature, pertaining to foundational doctrines (i.e., the early church's Christological controversies or the Protestant Reformation) or to essential tenets of denominational faith or practice (i.e., who should receive baptism, how the church should be governed, what is the nature of election, etc.). Other differences are less significant, more intramural family squabbles rather than church-splitting discord. These smaller controversies tend to be a mere blip on the annals of time,

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1. Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), xxiii.

2. For an example of this dynamic in recent Presbyterian church history, see John Frame, "Machen's Warrior Children," June 6, 2012, accessed October 8, 2015, <http://www.frame-poythress.org/machens-warrior-children>.

forgotten within a generation, yet they are often noteworthy nonetheless. The debate within the Presbyterian Church in the 19<sup>th</sup> century American South over God's call to the gospel ministry was one such minor controversy. It is unknown to most today, but it has the potential to shift our paradigms regarding both the issues over which the participants argued, and the participants themselves. Indeed, though occurring in a small corner of God's kingdom, this debate has implications for every place and every generation of the church of King Jesus.

What we will identify as "the call controversy" was undoubtedly a live debate throughout the entire Presbyterian Church in the middle decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, especially as it flowed out of an earlier controversy over the ruling elder, but we will limit our focus to the Southern Presbyterian pastors whose articles appeared in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, the foremost theological journal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century South.<sup>3</sup> The intramural controversy occurred through two primary phases: the mid-1840s and the early 1870s. In the first round Robert Jefferson Breckinridge and James Henley Thornwell stood in one corner, and Thomas Smyth and Robert Lewis Dabney occupied the other. In 1845, Breckinridge, then pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Baltimore, launched the opening salvo of what would turn into a nearly forty-year firefight, with the publication of an installation sermon he had preached before the Presbytery of Baltimore the previous October, entitled *The Christian Pastor, One of the Ascension Gifts of Christ*.<sup>4</sup> His sermon was part of a larger battle in which he and Thornwell engaged within the Old

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3. We will not examine the journal articles that appeared elsewhere, or the newspaper articles, sermons, or letters that were written on this topic. We are interested in how Southern Presbyterians engaged in the arguments, in one of the most scholarly venues available in their day.

4. The minister was Robert W. Dunlap, installed on October 9, 1844, at the Aisquith Street Presbyterian Church in Baltimore. Robert J. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor, One of the Ascension Gifts of Christ* (Baltimore, MD: D. Owen & Son, 1845), 3. Breckinridge's sermon was republished some forty years later in the *Southern Presbyterian Review* 35, no. 3 (July 1884): 449-500.

School Presbyterian Church concerning the nature of the ruling elder.<sup>5</sup> Thornwell favorably reviewed Breckinridge's oration in an 1847 article in the first volume of the *Southern Presbyterian Review* entitled "The Call of the Minister."<sup>6</sup> Thornwell declared (following Breckinridge) that God's call of a man to gospel ministry was immediate and direct: "That a supernatural conviction of duty, wrought by the immediate agency of the Holy Ghost, is an essential element in the evidence of a true vocation to the ministry, seems to us to be the clear and authoritative doctrine of the Scriptures."<sup>7</sup> Both Smyth and Dabney took issue with this understanding of the call, and its practical outworking in the church. Smyth answered Thornwell

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5. The sermon was printed together with an appendix consisting of two addresses from that controversy delivered in 1843, "Presbyterian Government Not a Hierarchy, but a Commonwealth" and "Presbyterian Ordination, Not a Charm but an Act of Government." See Robert Nickols Watkin, "The Forming of the Southern Presbyterian Minister: From Calvin to the American Civil War" (PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1969), 374 n30. We will review the ruling elder controversy in more detail below. For now it suffices to explain that in the debate over "the elder question," as it came to be known, Breckinridge and Thornwell contended against the Old School Presbyterian Church General Assembly's 1842 and 1843 decisions (which were supported by Charles Hodge and Thomas Smyth) that ruling elders were properly excluded from laying hands on men being ordained to gospel ministry and that a quorum of Presbytery does not need to include any ruling elders. See Benjamin Morgan Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell* (1875; repr., Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 251ff.; Luder G. Whitlock, Jr., "Elders and Ecclesiology in the Thought of James Henley Thornwell," *Westminster Theological Journal* 37, no. 1 (Fall 1974): 44-56; Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1963), 1:516ff.; Edgar Caldwell Mayse, "Robert Jefferson Breckinridge and the 'Elder Question'," *Affirmation* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1993): 73-88; Mayse, "Robert Jefferson Breckinridge: American Presbyterian Controversialist" (ThD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1974), 356-439; John Lloyd Vance, "The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell" (PhD diss., Drew University, 1990), 194-208; and Mark R. Brown, ed., *Order in the Offices* (Duncansville, PA: Classic Presbyterian Government Resources, 1993), especially the article therein by Iain Murray, "Ruling Elders – a Sketch of a Controversy," 157-168. Breckinridge and Thornwell also stood on opposite sides from Hodge and Smyth on the question of the propriety of church boards. See Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:510ff.; Kenneth J. Foreman, "The Debate on the Administration of Missions Led by James Henley Thornwell in the Presbyterian Church, 1839-1861" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1977); Vance, "The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell," 171-194; Thomas Erskine Clarke, "Thomas Smyth: Moderate of the Old South" (PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1970): 98-108; and A. Craig Troxel, "Charles Hodge on Church Boards: A Case Study in Ecclesiology," *Westminster Theological Journal* 58 (1996): 183-207.

6. James Henley Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister: Being a Review of Breckinridge's Christian Pastor," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 1, no. 3 (December 1847): 127-153. This article was reprinted in Thornwell, *Collected Writings* (1873; repr., Vestavia Hills, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2004), 4:15-42. Citations from this article will be from the latter source.

7. Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 32.



with two articles in the second volume of the *Southern Presbyterian Review* the next year.<sup>8</sup> At some point in the following years, Dabney published an article giving his own answer to the question, “What is a Call to the Ministry?”, responding obliquely to the views of Thornwell.<sup>9</sup> The second round of debate ensued in 1869, just before Thornwell’s collected writings were published posthumously in 1871 and 1873. Abner Addison Porter continued the argumentation along similar lines to Smyth and Dabney, and John Bailey Adger picked up the Thornwellian mantle.<sup>10</sup> Other individual pastors, including Thomas Ephraim Peck and William Swan Plumer, also weighed in through their writing during these years, though sometimes in less polemical fashion.<sup>11</sup>

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8. Thomas Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – And the Call to the Ministry,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 2, no. 1 (June 1848): 99-133; and Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 2, no. 2 (September 1848): 157-183.

9. Robert Lewis Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry?” in *Discussions*, vol. 2, *Evangelical* (1891; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), 26-46. Sean Michael Lucas has stated that this article “had its roots in a recruitment sermon that he regularly preached between 1853-60 as he went looking for men and money for Union.” Sean Michael Lucas, e-mail message to author, October 6, 2015.

10. From January 1872 to January 1873, Porter and Adger engaged in a spirited debate within the pages of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*: Abner Addison Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 23, no. 1 (January 1872): 64-104; John Bailey Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 23, no. 2 (April 1872): 287-334; Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 24, no. 1 (January 1873): 90-136; Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” *Southern Presbyterian Review* 24, no. 1 (January 1873): 136-163. Unfortunately, Porter died just before publication of the last two articles, so the conversation was not able to continue. Adger’s editorial comments regarding Porter remind us that this debate was conducted between brothers whose disagreements did not sever their bonds of love: “The names *friend* and *brother* have been applied to him throughout this discussion in the fullest sense in which they are ever used. A particular friendship of more than a quarter-century’s duration bound us together, and it was never interrupted for an hour...May the divine Spirit qualify and call many more such men, as Dr. Abner A. Porter was, into the ministry of our Church.” Adger, “A Few Observations,” 136. (Two articles immediately preceded their debate: the anonymous “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, *Southern Presbyterian Review* 20, no. 4 (October 1869): 508-519; and James Addison Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, *Southern Presbyterian Review* 21, no. 3 (July 1870): 338-348.)

11. Thomas Ephraim Peck, “The Call to the Ministry of the Word,” *Writings of Thomas E. Peck* (1896; repr., Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1999), 2:97-106; William Swan Plumer, *Hints and Helps in Pastoral Theology* (1874; repr., Harrisonburg, VA: 2003), 24-35; Plumer, “The Scripture Doctrine of a Call to the Work of the Gospel Ministry,” in *Princeton and the Work of the Christian Ministry*, ed. James Garretson (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2012), 99-122.

All of these Southern Presbyterian pastors were in agreement that God was the one who called a man to the gospel ministry, and that this call to the ministry was evidenced by “the testimony of [his] conscience, the approbation of God’s people and the concurrence of God’s earthly courts.”<sup>12</sup> Yet they parted ways on the theological questions of how the Holy Spirit called a man, and how a man came to be assured that the Spirit was calling him, as well as a host of practical questions surrounding who should seek to enter the ministry and how the church was to be involved in the raising up of new ministers. This surprising disagreement arose from their more fundamental divergence on the nature of the Holy Spirit’s work, and from the different weight they gave to the various dangers facing the church in regard to ministerial calling. Their controversy illuminates the theological and practical heterogeneity within the old Southern Presbyterian Church, challenges the conventional understanding of James Henley Thornwell in particular, and forces modern Christians to ask and answer questions about their own principles and practices in relation to identifying and equipping new ministers of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This call controversy is almost completely unfamiliar today, yet it raised questions of great theological and practical importance that still impinge upon us today. How does the Holy Spirit work to call a man to gospel ministry? Does He do so directly and immediately, or indirectly and mediately? How does the Holy Spirit assure a man of His call? How does His work in assuring with regard to the call relate to His witness with regard to our sonship (cf.

Romans 8:16)? What role do the Scriptures, providence, and other means play in discerning one’s call? What is the relationship between God’s call of priests and prophets in the Old Covenant and his call of ministers in the New Covenant? What is the nature of a man’s conviction of duty in relation to gospel ministry? What is the nature of his assurance that he is

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12. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 24.

called? What standard of experience should the church look for in those who believe themselves called by God? How should church courts examine a man regarding his sense of call? How does the call to gospel ministry relate to the call to ruling elder or deacon, or to other vocational callings? Should every male Christian inquire whether he is called to gospel ministry? Should every pious man necessarily become a minister if he has gifts and the desire for ministry? Is a man's supposition that he can be more useful in the ministry than anywhere else good grounds on which to enter the ministry? How does a church seek to get more ministers for vacant pulpits? Should the church look solely or primarily to younger men? To what degree should the church assist candidates for the ministry financially? Should the church ordain men to office without respect to pastoral charges (*sine titulo*)? What is the proper understanding of the office of Evangelist in the Presbyterian church? What should we think about ministers laboring in secular callings? Should ministers without calls, or without pastoral charges, be allowed to vote in church courts? All these questions and more were raised and addressed from a variety of perspectives in the Southern Presbyterian controversy over the minister's call. It is apparent that this debate remains and will remain relevant and urgent for the church until her Savior returns, and deserves to be more widely known and considered.

Even in the secondary literature, however, the call controversy has elicited little comment. Several authors have referenced it, yet no one has examined in depth the two positions and their thematic variations, the reasons for disagreement, the practical differences that resulted from the two theories, or the application for the church today. Most of those who do mention the controversy do so in relation to the ruling elder controversy to which, as noted above, it was directly connected. Elwyn Smith gives a brief summary of Breckinridge's position on the

minister's call in his discussion of the ruling elder controversy,<sup>13</sup> properly observing that "[f]ar more than the issue of elders' rights in church government was involved."<sup>14</sup> He argues that Breckinridge viewed "an incorrect view of [ministerial] calling" as the source of the erroneous "high churchism," "clericalism," and "prelatical mindset" of Breckinridge's opponents.<sup>15</sup> Smith notes several abuses that Breckinridge challenged in his sermon, in particular "church boards...attempt[ing] to recruit ministers by spurious arguments, such as that all converts are called to be pastors unless specifically directed by the Spirit into some other work;" the church's "ordaining large numbers of 'evangelists': young men without calls to specific pastorates, many of whom were accepting employment essentially secular in nature;" and "the whole scheme of free education for indigent candidates."<sup>16</sup> He also summarizes the practical solutions Breckinridge proposed: "[T]hat the church should altogether cease to ordain *sine titulo* (literally, "without a title"). This would strip board agents, professors, and the whole nonpastoral ministry, of ecclesiastical power...[R]espect for the ruling eldership [should be] restored by granting it full parity with pastors in presbytery, including the right to lay on hands at ordination. Ordination, with its governmental powers, should be confined to pastors and bona fide evangelists."<sup>17</sup> Smith's discussion is helpful as far as it goes, particularly in highlighting some of the

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13. Elwyn Allen Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry in American Culture: A Study in Changing Concepts, 1700-1900* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962), 176-187. Ernest Trice Thompson mentions the ruling elder controversy in his seminal work on Southern Presbyterianism, but makes no mention of the call controversy. Erskine Clarke, in his dissertation on Thomas Smyth, mentions neither the ruling elder controversy nor the call controversy. John Lloyd Vance, writing on the ecclesiology of Thornwell, discusses the ruling elder controversy and acknowledges Thornwell's understanding of the manner of the Spirit's call, but does not indicate awareness that this was a controverted point. Vance, "The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell," 208ff.

14. Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry*, 176.

15. These are Smith's descriptors of Hodge's views. Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry*, 178, 181.

16. Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry*, 179-181.

17. Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry*, 183.

precipitating causes of the controversy. But it barely scratches the surface of Breckinridge's understanding of the nature of the ministerial call, and does not progress beyond Breckinridge.<sup>18</sup>

Robert Watkin comments more thoroughly on the disagreements over the call to the ministry.<sup>19</sup> He recognizes the “diverging views” within the Presbyterian church over recruitment of new ministers, and he discovers another source of the call controversy, namely, the different responses to the historical context of a large number of open pulpits: “Was it right for the church to present the challenge [to become a minister] in so strong a fashion that some might try to enter the ministry when they were not truly called? Judging from the literature, many Presbyterians were willing to risk this possibility, because of the desperate need for ministers.”<sup>20</sup> While presenting the two opinions on this question of recruitment, he does not drill down deeply into the arguments of either side.<sup>21</sup> He wrongly states that in contrast to their perspectives on recruitment, “There was more unity among Presbyterians as to what constitutes a call to the ministry.”<sup>22</sup> Yes, all did agree that the call is from God, and all agreed that the evidence of the call is threefold. But Watkin fails to see that the two sides disagreed on how the Holy Spirit called a man and assured him of that call. To be sure, Watkin's dissertation only covers the period of time through the Civil War, so he would not have considered the ongoing debate

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18. Smith does cite New York Presbyterian pastor Gardiner Spring's view of the ministerial call, setting it over against Breckinridge's position; Smith, *The Presbyterian Ministry*, 184. As stated above, we are limiting our discussion of the debate to the Southern Presbyterian context.

19. Watkin, “The Forming of the Southern Presbyterian Minister,” 376-382.

20. Watkin, “The Forming of the Southern Presbyterian Minister,” 377.

21. For example, he quotes from a source that equated the hesitation of Breckinridge and Thornwell in terms of urging everyone possible to enter the ministry with a hyper-Calvinistic disavowal of the use of evangelistic means because God is the one who calls unto salvation. Yet he does not allow Breckinridge or Thornwell to respond to this claim. Watkin, “The Forming of the Southern Presbyterian Minister,” 379.

22. Watkin, “The Forming of the Southern Presbyterian Minister,” 379.

between Porter and Adger. Yet already before the Civil War, there was a deeper level of variance than he recognizes or acknowledges.

Mike Plant has recently reflected upon the opposing views of Thornwell and Dabney on the call, and gives the most detailed presentation heretofore of the two sides of the controversy.<sup>23</sup> He writes as the General Secretary of the Evangelical Fellowship of Congregational Churches in the United Kingdom, and his examination of the controversy is grounded in a similar situation in which the Southern Presbyterians found themselves: a shortage of ministers. Thus his general assessment of the debate is sound: “The discussion is about the nature of the call to the ministry and inferences are then drawn about the best measures to take - or the validity of taking any measures at all - in order to stimulate recruitment to the ministry.”<sup>24</sup> He identifies the crux of the matter in the manner of the Spirit’s call (is it immediate or mediate?), and he shows the divergent practices taken consequentially by the two men.<sup>25</sup> Plant does not inspect what lies beneath the varying concepts, in large part because it is not Dabney, but Smyth and Porter, who bring out the underlying reasons for disagreement. He does, however, clearly demonstrate what we have noted above, that the controversy over the minister’s call has continued significance for the church today.

Given the paucity of scholarly mention of the call controversy, as well as the argument’s practical nature, this thesis aims to be primarily an academic work of narrative historical investigation, and secondarily a contribution to applied pastoral theology. In the next chapter we

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23. Mike Plant, “The Call to the Ministry,” *Foundations* (Spring 2008): 29-37, accessed October 9, 2015, [http://www.affinity.org.uk/downloads/foundations/Foundations%20Archive/59\\_29.pdf](http://www.affinity.org.uk/downloads/foundations/Foundations%20Archive/59_29.pdf).

24. Plant, “The Call to the Ministry,” 29.

25. Plant, “The Call to the Ministry,” 31ff. He connects Thornwell’s view with that of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Plant, “The Call to the Ministry,” 31, 35.

will investigate the first phase of the call controversy (which took place in the 1840s), examining briefly the ruling elder controversy out of which the call controversy grew. Before moving on to the second stage of the debate during the early 1870s, we will go back chronologically to look at some other important historical contexts in which the call controversy initially arose. In the final chapter, we will examine the theological issues at stake, and draw useful conclusions for the church today. In this way, the underlying reasons for the call controversy, particularly the differing views on the work of the Holy Spirit and the contrasting historical factors deemed important by the two sides, will be made plain and presented before the reader for current application. The church historian's task is one of recollection, re-presentation, and assessment.

Our goal is to bring a forgotten controversy back into the modern memory, to describe accurately its source and meanderings for a contemporary audience, and to show how it still has bearing on the way the church believes and acts in the present.

## Chapter 2

### Phase One of the Controversy: Breckinridge/Thornwell vs. Smyth/Dabney

The impetus of the call controversy was the publication in 1845 of an installation sermon preached by Robert Jefferson Breckinridge the previous year, during the height of the ruling elder controversy. The debate over the minister's call publicly ignited two years later when James Henley Thornwell's favorable review of the sermon in the first volume of the *Southern Presbyterian Review* elicited a negative response by Thomas Smyth in subsequent numbers of that periodical. In this chapter, after laying the foundation of the ruling elder controversy, we will examine the positions held by Breckinridge and Thornwell, and Smyth's response to them. We will also inspect the recruitment address of Robert Lewis Dabney, given in the 1850s, which engages the view of Breckinridge and Thornwell without naming them specifically.

Unfortunately, Thornwell wrote no rejoinder to Smyth or Dabney before he passed away in 1862, so the continuation of the disagreement in the late 1860s and early 1870s is vital to understanding the two sides. We will investigate the second phase of the controversy later in this thesis.

#### A. *A Summary of the Call Controversy's Immediate Context: The Ruling Elder Controversy*

In 1837, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America divided, as the Old School and New School parties within the church were unable to maintain unity in the face of their ecclesiological and theological differences.<sup>1</sup> In the following years, like other

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1. For more on the Old School – New School split, see George Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (1970; repr., Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2003); James Wood, *Old and New Theology* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1845); and Peter J. Wallace, "The Bond of Union: The Old School Presbyterian Church and the American Nation, 1837-1861" (PhD diss., Notre Dame University, 2004), accessed February 1, 2018, <http://www.peterwallace.org/dissertation>.



denominations of that era, the strongly Calvinistic Old School Presbyterians were beset by differing opinions in the areas of church government. Until the outbreak of the Civil War, when Old School Presbyterians were rent asunder sectionally, the annual Assemblies saw frequent wrangling over matters of polity.<sup>2</sup> The elder question arose in January 1841, when the Synod of Indiana's decision to allow ruling elders to take part in the ordination of ministers was challenged in the press. Breckinridge engaged the issue, contending for the elder's right to lay hands on ministers being ordained.<sup>3</sup> At the 1841 General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, at which Breckinridge was elected Moderator, the Synod of Indiana put forward an overture recommending that "the question of the office of ruling Elders in ordination, be sent down to the Presbyteries." The overture was taken up but indefinitely postponed.<sup>4</sup>

In 1842 the matter came back to the Assembly, this time as a communication from the Western District, a presbytery of the Synod of West Tennessee.<sup>5</sup> The Assembly approved the unanimous recommendation of the Committee of Bills and Overtures: that the church should

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2. See Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:510ff.; Whitlock, "Elders and Ecclesiology in the Thought of James Henley Thornwell," 45. For Breckinridge's views on the connection between the division of 1837 and the ruling elder controversy, see Mayse, "Robert Jefferson Breckinridge and the 'Elder Question'," 73-74.

3. Mayse, "Robert Jefferson Breckinridge and the 'Elder Question'," 76. Mayse opines, "Although it would not be fair to call the elder question 'a controversy of Breckinridge's personal creation' [quoting Elwyn Smith, *The Presbyterian Minister in American Culture*, 176], it is certain that the dispute would never have achieved its prominence and bitterness had the Baltimore pastor decided to confine his polemical attacks to the Catholics and abolitionists." Mayse, "Robert Jefferson Breckinridge and the 'Elder Question'," 76.

4. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: The Stated Clerk, 1841), 447. Mayse writes that Breckinridge was not in the Assembly hall when these votes were taken, but when he returned he was able to convince the members to reconsider their vote. Due to time constraints, the issue was referred to the next Assembly. Mayse, "Robert Jefferson Breckinridge and the 'Elder Question'," 77. I was not able to find these actions in the Minutes of the Assembly, but it is possible that Breckinridge mentions them in the newspaper articles he published during the controversy, to which I do not have access. Cf. Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 254.

5. Whitlock, "Elders and Ecclesiology in the Thought of James Henley Thornwell," 46.

adhere “to the order, and until recently, the uniform practices of our Church on this subject, viz. to allow preaching elders or bishops only to engage in that service [i.e., the ordination of ministers].”<sup>6</sup> The battle began to be waged even more fervently in the lower church courts and in the press, particularly in the Philadelphia *Presbyterian*, Breckinridge’s *Spirit of the XIX Century*, and Princeton Seminary’s *Biblical Repertory*.<sup>7</sup> The West Lexington Presbytery sent a resolution to the 1843 General Assembly, declaring that it believed ruling elders did have the right to unite with ministers in the ordination of ministers. After much debate over several days, the Assembly, by a 138-9 vote, judged, “that neither the Constitution, nor the practice of our Church, authorizes Ruling Elders to impose hands in the ordination of Ministers.”<sup>8</sup> Breckinridge voted with what was a definite minority. At the same Assembly, it was resolved that ruling elders did not have to be present to constitute a quorum of a Presbytery, but “any three ministers of a Presbytery, being regularly convened, are a quorum competent to the transaction of all business, agreeably to the provision contained in the Form of Government, Chap. x. Sec. 7.”<sup>9</sup> On this matter the vote was closer, 83-35, but Breckinridge still found himself in the minority.

At this point Thornwell and Breckinridge began to correspond regularly about this controversy.<sup>10</sup> Thornwell wrote “The Ruling Elder a Presbyter,” published first in Breckinridge’s *Spirit of the XIX Century*.<sup>11</sup> That fall, Breckinridge delivered the two arguments before the Synod

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6. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: The Stated Clerk, 1842), 16.

7. Mayse, “Robert Jefferson Breckinridge and the ‘Elder Question’,” 77-80.

8. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: The Stated Clerk, 1843), 183.

9. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: The Stated Clerk, 1843), 196, cf. 190.

10. See Palmer, *Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 251ff.

11. It can be found in Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 4:115ff.

of Philadelphia that were subsequently published together with his sermon that catalyzed the call controversy: “Presbyterian Government not a Hierarchy, but a Commonwealth” and “Presbyterian Ordination not a Charm, but an Act of Government.” These matters came before the 1844 General Assembly by way of an appeal and complaint by Breckinridge against the Synod of Philadelphia, and overtures from the Presbytery of Cincinnati, Transylvania, South Alabama, and East Alabama, asking the Assembly to reverse its 1843 decision.<sup>12</sup> The Assembly judged that Breckinridge’s complaints and appeals were not permitted by the Constitution to come before the Assembly, and answered the overtures with three resolutions:

1. *Resolved*, That in the opinion of this Assembly, the last Assembly in determining that Ruling Elders are not authorized by the form of government to impose hands in the ordination of ministers, did not depreciate the office of Ruling Elder, nor did they in any respect contravene the letter or the spirit of the constitution, or the principles and practice of Presbyterian Churches in Europe or America since the Reformation; but in conformity with both the principles and practice of our own and other Presbyterian Churches, they did decide that as the rite of ordination is simply a declaratory ministerial act, the laying on of hands as a part thereof belongs properly to ordained Ministers, while to Ruling Elders is left unimpaired and unquestioned the full and rightful power of ordering the work of ordination, and of judging in the discipline of ministers in common with those Presbyters who labour in word and doctrine as in all other cases.

2. *Resolved*, That the last Assembly, in determining that three ministers are a quorum of the Presbytery when no Ruling Elders are present, did not detract in any degree from the dignity and importance of this office, nor did they question the perfect right or duty of Elders to be present and take part in all acts of government and discipline; but only declared that according to the true intent and meaning of our constitutional rules, their absence does not prevent the Presbytery from constituting and transacting business, if three ministers are present; and this decision is based upon the fact that ministers are not only preachers of the Gospel and administrators of sealing ordinances, but also ruling elders in the very nature of their office.

3. *Resolved*, That this Assembly, in re-affirming these decisions of the last Assembly which have been called in question, design to maintain the purity, order, and peace of the Church, and the continued and faithful observance of those principles and regulations which have heretofore been found to consist with true Christian liberty, and secure the common welfare of all classes in the Church. Also, they re-affirm and maintain the

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12. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: The Stated Clerk, 1844), 352, 362, 364.

scriptural authority of the office of Ruling Elder, and the great importance and solemn obligation of the attendance of Elders on the meetings of the judicatories of the Church, and of their equal participation in the exercise of government and discipline.<sup>13</sup>

With this decision, the matter was settled with respect to the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America. Breckinridge was content to “rest his case with providence after continual defeat,” and “never again advocated the divine right of elders in the church courts.”<sup>14</sup> But he never changed his mind about the principles involved:

I thought it my duty to submit unreservedly to the decision of the minority of that body, and other Presbyters, both Preaching and Ruling then present, whose opinions on these great questions coincided, in general, with my own; the line of conduct which it behooved us to adopt in such a case. Their judgment was clear and unanimous, that we were bound, in conscience, to adhere to our principles, to promote them as we had opportunity, and faithfully testifying for them, to await the developments of God’s providence.<sup>15</sup>

What were the principles for which Breckinridge contended in this debate? Underlying his convictions that ruling elders should be allowed to impose hands in the ordination of ministers, and that ruling elders are necessary for a quorum of a Presbytery, were several key beliefs. First, he held that ruling elders were a constituent part of Presbytery, and therefore had a right to be present at Presbytery, and participate in the act of ordination, which was the work of Presbytery.<sup>16</sup> Second, he held that making ruling elders unnecessary for a quorum or ordination

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13. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: The Stated Clerk, 1844), 366, 370-371.

14. Mayse, “Robert Jefferson Breckinridge and the ‘Elder Question’,” 83.

15. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 4. Through this sermon, and the footnotes in the published edition, Breckinridge gives his commentary on the way the controversy played out. He was clearly upset at how the Princeton Seminary party in particular treated him, and had little patience for their arguments.

16. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 38n19. See also the protest written by Breckinridge in *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: The Stated Clerk, 1843), 199.

struck at the heart of Presbyterian church government. The representative nature of ruling elders, writes Breckinridge

is an *essential element* of Presbyterianism: destroy *this*, and the entire system perished. This is *the element* that distinctly separates it from prelacy on the one hand, and congregationalism on the other. Admit the principle that the ministry may, without the presence of any representative of God's people, transact *the business of the people*, and you lay our glorious system of representative republicanism in ruins: and over those ruins you may easily pave a highway to prelacy and popery.<sup>17</sup>

Though there were many more arguments made by Breckinridge, Thornwell, and those with them, we note finally, and most fundamentally, their belief that Presbyterianism was *jure divino*, by divine right: “the order of [Christ’s] house is not a question left to us – but it is one distinctly settled by himself.”<sup>18</sup> Jesus had prescribed the government for his church:

The Lord Jesus Christ is King in Zion; the whole model and working of his kingdom are matters of revelation; the complete execution of the mission of his church is absolutely impossible, until she puts away all carnal devices and puts on the whole armour of light; and we have no more warrant from God to make a church government for him and in his name – than to make any other part of his religion. It is idle to talk about church government being *jure divino*, in its great principles and not in its details; or as they say, in the *abstract* and not in the *concrete*. The truth is, it is both: for not only are the great principles laid down for us, but the officers and courts are names; the nature and duties of the one, the qualifications, vocation, and powers of the other, are set forth; the relations of all the parts to each other and to the whole are precisely set forth. A government, in general – the kind of government in particular – the officers and courts in special – their duties and powers in detail: this is what God has set before us, by revelation, for the Christian church.<sup>19</sup>

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17. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: The Stated Clerk, 1843), 199-200. Emphasis his.

18. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 43.

19. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 43-44.

From these principles, Breckinridge argued for the rights of ruling elders. As he made one more effort at defending these principles and rights, in the installation sermon in 1844, the call controversy was ignited in the Southern Presbyterian Church.<sup>20</sup>

B. *The Sermon That Started It All – Robert Jefferson Breckinridge’s “The Christian Pastor”*

1. **The Call to Ministry Controversially Defined**

Breckinridge preached and published his sermon from the conviction that “obscure and unscriptural opinions, upon the whole subject of a call to the Gospel Ministry, are very common.”<sup>21</sup> Based upon Ephesians 4:8, Breckinridge began his sermon by noting Paul’s declaration that among the ascended and exalted Christ’s gifts to his church are office bearers, in particular pastors.<sup>22</sup> The fact that the church existed prior to her officers, “and that the church is not, in any conceivable sense, given to them,”<sup>23</sup> informed Breckinridge’s understanding of the nature and work of the pastor. The pastor, or minister, is a servant, called to pray for and with the

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20. Ironically, it would be the Southern Presbyterian Church after the Civil War who would finally codify the position of Breckinridge and Thornwell on ruling elders.

21. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 3.

22. Breckinridge does not indicate explicitly here whether or not he understands “Pastors and Teachers” to be two separate offices or one office, though it appears that he would distinguish them. Following the punctuation of the King James Version, he connects the phrase “for the work of the ministry” with the officers Paul lists, rather than with the saints, and understands Paul to be declaring “that [the officers listed] are all ordained not in a way of honor, but for arduous labor, [and] that the work required is in the proper sense a service of the church not a dominion over it....” Yet he is adamant that the word “ministry” is used in the New Testament to refer to every type of office bearer and “is applied to many sorts of functions, in the way of service, which even private persons can perform.” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 8. This latter fact has bearing for Breckinridge on the elder controversy: “That...it should be seriously contended by persons of high standing for learning and talent, that *ministry*, in the New Testament, is now to be taken emphatically, if not singly, as meaning the office of a Preacher of the Gospel – to the exclusion of the office of Ruling Elder and that of Deacon – is a signal proof of the extent to which prejudices, party zeal, and official pride can carry men.” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 8n(a).

23. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 9. He observes that the neglect of this truth “has been one great reason why such confused opinions have prevailed on the whole subject under consideration.” His comments here are directed against an over-exalted view of the ministry.

flock, to read the Scriptures publicly, to preach the word, to administer the sacraments, to bless the people from God, to take care of the poor, and to bear rule with other elders among the flock and in the church at large.<sup>24</sup> Breckinridge recognized that the existence of a divine call to the ministry can “never be contemplated apart from the nature of the work to be performed, the duties which its performance will enjoin, and the qualifications declared to be indispensable for their faithful and edifying discharge.” Yet the focus of his sermon was on the nature and the proof of the divine call.<sup>25</sup>

Breckinridge began his exposition of the nature of the call to gospel ministry by briefly assessing three improper grounds upon which the pastor is frequently believed to hold his office: the assertion that one is an apostle; the contention based upon a perpetual, unbroken succession of the office of Pastor from the time of Christ; and the claim that “every one is the sole judge in his own case, and necessarily must be; and that all other evidence, but the convictions of his own mind, is inconclusive and needless.”<sup>26</sup> According to Breckinridge, these three grounds were pretentious and absurd. The true foundations of a call to the ministry, on the contrary, “have relation, 1 To God himself: 2 To the man’s own conscience: 3 To the Christian people: And 4 to those who bear office in the church.”<sup>27</sup> Breckinridge defined the divine call as “a spiritual fitness imparted by the Holy Ghost, for the performance of the great work...which is divinely committed to the Pastor’s hands.” This fitness is manifested by “the settled conviction, in the light of God’s word, God’s providence, and God’s inward work, upon the man himself, upon Christ’s people,

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24. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 10.

25. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 42-43.

26. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 12.

27. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 12.

and upon those who bear rule amongst them, that indeed God has raised up the man to do the work.”<sup>28</sup> It is God who calls a man, and the job of the church and its courts is to ascertain whether or not God has in fact called him. To be sure, there may be in the mind of a man “serious and painful doubts” whether or not God has called him, and difficulties on the part of the flock and shepherds of God to discern God’s call, yet in the end the church elects and ordains a man “because she believes God has called him.”<sup>29</sup>

On the surface, these statements do not appear particularly controversial, and even in the period we are examining there would have been agreement with them in the main. Yet debate arose in the Southern Presbyterian Church, particularly over the call in relation to God and to the individual’s conscience. Breckinridge’s explanation of the nature of God’s call was provocative: “At every period and under every dispensation, God has been pleased to reserve to himself a great *and a direct agency* in designating those who should minister to his people in holy things.”<sup>30</sup> Just as God called prophets, priests and kings under the Old Covenant by an “immediate agency,” so He does under the New Covenant.<sup>31</sup> Breckinridge acknowledged that there is in the New Covenant “a three fold perpetual ministry of Pastors, Elders, and Deacons” as opposed to a priesthood that offers sacrifices (Christ having appeared as the great High Priest and offered himself once and for all), yet “[n]o human being has any more right to intrude into either of these offices, without a divine call, than there existed to intrude into the office of a Priest or a Levite under the Mosaic dispensation.”<sup>32</sup> He cited Hebrews 5:4-10, which states that

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28. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 15.

29. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 15.

30. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 12. Emphasis mine.

31. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 13.

32. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 14.



even Jesus Christ himself was “called of God an High Priest after the order of Melchisedec.” Much more is it true for pastors in the church of Jesus Christ, according to Breckinridge’s interpretation of this passage, that “no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron.”<sup>33</sup> So Breckinridge argued “that the call of Aaron was not more really divine, than that of every office bearer – and of course every Pastor – in the Christian church should be.”<sup>34</sup> As we shall see below, these words, though seemingly innocuous, were viewed with great suspicion, as opponents of Breckinridge (and Thornwell after him) disagreed with both the application of Hebrews 5 to the new covenant ministry and the use of the words “direct” and “immediate” in relation to the pastor’s call.

## **2. The Errors Breckinridge Confronted**

Breckinridge believed that most Presbyterian ministers in his day were indeed called by God, but he was concerned that an increasing number were not.<sup>35</sup> As he surveyed his ecclesiastical situation, he noted several “prevailing, and some almost unquestioned principles and practices” that in his mind belied and subverted the belief that a minister’s call was divine.<sup>36</sup> He mentioned first the view (propounded in particular by the American Education Society) that it

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33. He also cites John 3:27, “A man can receive nothing except it be given him from heaven;” God’s call of preachers in Romans 10:12-15; and the analogy between the methods God employed in admitting persons into the visible church and calling persons to religious tasks in the Old and New Testaments: “Under the former all was by natural generation; under the latter all is by spiritual generation...And if the call of the Levites and their seed in the place of the first born, and the call of Aaron and his descendents [sic], was in that sense divine, that every Levite and every Priest in all their generations was truly under a peculiar divine designation...; how much more now, when the work is altogether spiritual, when God has expressly reserved to himself the power to call and qualify and send forth the workmen, and has graciously promised to do it, must it appear evident that this calling, and fitness, and mission from God, is itself divine and spiritual?” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 14-15.

34. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 14.

35. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 20.

36. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 16.

was the duty of every godly and gifted young man to devote himself to the ministry, “and that the burden of showing he ought not to do so, rests upon him.” On the contrary, Breckinridge held that “there is no sense whatever, in which any man has any right, much less is under any obligation to be an office bearer in Christ’s church – unless he be specially called of God thereto, and then it is his duty to make out evidence of that call.”<sup>37</sup> To insist that entering the ministry was incumbent upon every young man of piety and talents would be sure to ensconce many ministers “whom God never called.”<sup>38</sup>

Breckinridge also observed with dismay a variety of human schemes that in his mind operated under the assumption that man can stimulate or increase God’s calling men to gospel ministry. He was particularly alarmed by the fact that these plans were put into effect among youth in the early stages of religious experience, and among those of financial situations “in which a gratuitous [i.e., financially free] education is itself very often a powerful temptation and the station of a minister of the Gospel a seduction nearly irresistible.”<sup>39</sup> At bottom, however, his concern was less about the class from which ministers came, and more about whether the ministers coming were indeed called by God. He wryly remarked, “Such schemes, to say the very least, seem not so much directed to enquiries for such as God has called, as to experiments which may ascertain if he has not called a multitude besides.”<sup>40</sup>

One of the practical errors that struck most egregiously at Breckinridge’s understanding of a minister’s divine call was ordination *sine titulo*, that is, ordination without respect to any

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37. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 16.

38. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 16n4.

39. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 16.

40. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 16.

particular pastoral charge. Breckinridge had little respect for these men, believing that many of them were “idle, unprofitable, self-seeking ministers, who...exercise all the powers of Pastors called of God, without performing a solitary function of the pastoral office.” There was in his mind an increasing number of ordained men who were exclusively engaged in secular employments, and who had even been ordained from the start to those parachurch jobs, usually under the auspices of being Evangelists.<sup>41</sup> Even worse, these men, once ordained, sat in church courts judging whether or not God had called the candidates coming before them for ordination. To Breckinridge, this fact was egregious: “[E]very one of these persons...may take upon himself to settle, so far as his voice and influence go, the most difficult and important matters that belong to the doctrine, the government, and the discipline of that church whose confidence he has abused, into whose ministry he has intruded – and whose entire spiritual power his example is calculated to subvert.”<sup>42</sup> It was easy to multiply ministers, he affirmed, “but it is impossible for

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41. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 17. He was particularly piqued that the most vocal opponents to his speeches on the ruling elder controversy were ministers serving as college professors and agents of extra-ecclesiastical boards. After laying out some of the chronology of the ruling elder controversy as it came before the General Assembly in 1844, he lays the question before his readers: “Now with all respect for most of these gentlemen, I just ask any man of plain common sense, to look at this chain of facts; and inform himself how many of those persons who have thus manifestly controlled the decision of the General Assembly would, in a church court below the Assembly, represent any body or thing, but themselves; and then decide upon the nature of that influence which has become predominant in our church, and upon the channels through which it acts, and say, if he can, that this is the kind of government contemplated in our Standards.” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 17n5. This issue of *sine titulo* ordination tied together the ruling elder controversy and the call controversy, at least for Breckinridge. He believed that the same pretentiousness that marked an individual claiming that he was called and no other evidence was necessary, also marked church courts that were devoid of ruling elders: “[T]he government of the church of Christ...is subverted in the pretension that the officer is the sole judge of his own call. I confess I do not see how the result would be varied, if this pretension were allowed to office bearers jointly, instead of severally; a form in which it is by no means uncommon to urge it, by such as assert that church courts are properly composed only of ministers of the word, and that these courts, independently of any thing else than their own judgment, and without any call from any particular flock, may regularly and commonly ordain men *sine titulo*.” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 12.

42. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 19.

us to multiply such as are called of God.”<sup>43</sup> So in his mind, “perhaps above all other practical reforms, we need the most one in regard to the improvident ordination of Ministers of the Gospel: a reform which shall put an absolute end to all ordinations *sine titulo* – which shall limit the ordination of Evangelists strictly and truly to persons who will be Evangelists – which shall constantly demand sufficient evidence of a man’s call and fitness before the irrevocable step of his ordination is taken.”<sup>44</sup>

### 3. Breckinridge’s View Unfolded

The pressing question, then, for both the man pursuing the ministry and the church pursuing ministers, is how to know whether God has in fact called him. Breckinridge stated that the primary evidence that a man is called of God is “the inward testimony of the man’s own conscience.”<sup>45</sup> If God is the one who calls his ministers, Breckinridge concluded, then those men are bound to know that he has called them. “For a man...to presume to be an ambassador for Almighty God, and that touching questions no less awful than the glory of his throne, and the endless states of his rebellious subjects, without a settled conviction in his own soul that this fearful trust is laid upon him by the King Eternal – is insane audacity.”<sup>46</sup> It is not that a man must be convinced that he ought to be called, or is fit to be called (for none are sufficient in and of themselves for the ministry), but he must have an “inward fixed conviction” that he is called. The

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43. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 17. For more on why he believed ordinations *sine titulo* were unbiblical, and the historical circumstances surrounding his battle against it, see Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 22n8 and 23n9.

44. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 46.

45. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 20.

46. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 21.

testimony of consciousness is the only proof needed to “beget within us the strong assurance that it is God’s Spirit which has wrought us for this self same thing.”<sup>47</sup> This assurance, this testimony of conscience and consciousness, was given by the Holy Spirit in the same manner by which he assures the soul of salvation: “[T]he Spirit of God is a faithful witness to all who will listen to the still small voice in which he communes with the soul; and the testimony of that Spirit with ours that we are God’s children, is hardly more plainly promised, than the convincing power of the same divine Comforter that we are chosen to bear office in his church.”<sup>48</sup> Just as the reality of assurance of salvation ought to lead a Christian to self-examination (e.g., II Corinthians 13:5), so Breckinridge believed the truth of the Spirit’s inward call necessitated self-examination – and he was convinced that “it is very seldom that a sincerely pious and faithful child of God is allowed to deceive himself upon [this] point.”<sup>49</sup>

Breckinridge acknowledged that the inward testimony and assurance may ebb and flow in strength, being at times only “a whisper to the soul,” and that it will be assaulted by “doubts and perplexities, trials very sore, and temptations of the adversary...; for if these things be not, it is either that grace is overwhelmingly abundant, or that Satan judges us to be workmen that he need not fear.”<sup>50</sup> He also conceded that, because of the wiles of Satan and the deceitfulness of the human heart, it was possible to be deceived regarding whether one was called or not. Such a situation was “one chief reason, why the testimony of our conscience cannot be sufficient

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47. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 21.

48. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 24. Breckinridge lists several passages in the footnotes as proof texts for this statement: Jeremiah 20:9; Job 22:16-22; Amos 3:8 and 8:15; Luke 9:62; Acts 4:20 and 17:5; Romans 1:14; I Corinthians 9:16-17; and Colossians 1:17.

49. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 24.

50. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 21.

evidence to others, and why it needs to be enforced even to ourselves by other and concurring proofs.”<sup>51</sup> As we noted above, Breckinridge agreed that a self-authenticating claim to be called was ridiculous.<sup>52</sup> The chief corroborating evidence of a man’s inward call, in Breckinridge’s view, was the testimony of God’s people.

The right of the members of the church to determine who should oversee and minister to them is a fundamental right set forth in the Scriptures, and in the polity of Presbyterianism. Yet Breckinridge observed practices in the Presbyterian church of his day that “in their principles differ[ed] but little from the worst form of patronage.”<sup>53</sup> The absence of this corroborating testimony of the church was one thing that made ordinations *sine titulo* so erroneous, and dangerous to the church.<sup>54</sup> Since the purpose of the ministry is the perfecting and edifying of the

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51. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 22.

52. Cf. also Breckinridge’s comments, “It is manifest that unless men were directed, individually by a divine infallibility, we cannot trust to their individual decisions that they are divinely called to such an office as this: nor is it less clear that nothing less than miraculous powers on their part, or a divine illumination on ours, is sufficient to enable us to decide individually with infallible certainty, on the value of such pretensions. And yet it is of supreme importance, that both they who minister and they who are ministered unto, should not err in such a case. Nor need they, if they will deal humbly, faithfully, and honestly, with God, with their own souls, and with each other.” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 10-11.

53. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 26. He mentions “the usurpation of the election of Pastors, in many of our largest congregations, by the pew owners and occupiers, without regard to the Christian character of the voters, and to the exclusion of all beside themselves; and the exclusion, in other cases, of all Christians who are not heads of families; and in others still of all but males. Nor can it be denied that a system of patronage of another sort has been rapidly extending in our church, by means of which ministers are constantly settled in congregations under the influence, direct or indirect, of the professors in our Theological Seminaries, and the action of Board of Missions; which, in its legitimate sphere, it is not perhaps possible, nor even desirable, to discountenance entirely; but which requires an unusual share of wisdom in its exercise, and is therefore correspondingly liable not only to mistakes but to abuse. That our Theological Professors should, any of them, be safe depositories of an influence of this kind, when they are themselves, to a great extent amongst the fiercest partizans [sic] in the present controversies in the church, will scarcely be asserted by any but those who approve not only of all their opinions, but also of all their methods of propagating them.” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 27. One hopes that Breckinridge took these words to heart when he himself became a seminary professor!

54. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 22. This belief led Breckinridge to seek an amendment to the Presbyterian Church’s rules of discipline, making provision for those “of whom it has been discovered, by themselves or by others, after they were ordained, that they never were called of God,” to demit the ministry with honor. He saw this change as being necessary to relieve such men “from the dreadful temptation to continual hypocrisy, and from the degrading sentence of deposition for what was perhaps as much their misfortune as their sin, and in which – whether one or the other – the church herself was an accessory before the fact.” Breckinridge,

saints, “the saints are the best of all judges whether the ministrations on which they wait fructify them or not.”<sup>55</sup> Of course, the testimony of the church is necessary but not sufficient. That is, those whom the church discerns could edify her are not necessarily called to gospel ministry, while those she disapproves of ought necessarily to be kept out of the office; “[t]he *positive* testimony of the Christian people, is not conclusive...[b]ut it is otherwise of its *negative* testimony.”<sup>56</sup>

The final ground upon which a divine call to the ministry rests, according to Breckinridge, was the approval of the Presbytery, “a divinely constituted spiritual court, met in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and acting by his authority.”<sup>57</sup> Breckinridge was of the opinion that in his day, unfortunately, neither teaching nor ruling elders possessed the sense of solemnity and weightiness that the duty of examining and ordaining candidates ought to have laid upon them: “If [Presbyteries] had no other work to perform, this [work of examining and ordaining candidates] ought to fill their members with a deep sense of the dignity, and momentous importance of their mission.”<sup>58</sup> It was at this point in his argument that he especially connected the call controversy to the ruling elder controversy.<sup>59</sup> The Presbytery that was to examine a man as to the reality of his divine call, and thereafter set him apart to gospel ministry, was composed of both teaching elders (ministers) and ruling elders, and therefore ruling elders

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*The Christian Pastor*, 23. The *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church in America has this provision in 38-2.

55. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 30.

56. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 30.

57. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 35.

58. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 36n17.

59. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 31.

were to participate in the laying on of hands: “If ordination is by the court, and [ruling] elders are part of the court, it has always been a mystery to me, how they could be excluded from taking part. And if imposition of hands be part of ordination, and be the work of the Presbytery, and elders be members, it is still another mystery how they can be set aside.”<sup>60</sup> While recognizing that at the point in history in which he preached and published, his position had not won the majority of the Presbyterian Church, even so he proceeded to give a brief survey of the nature of church power and the relation between the teaching elder and the ruling elder.<sup>61</sup>

From this discussion we see that already in Breckinridge’s day he and those who agreed with him were being accused of holding principles on the subject of the ruling elder that “tended to subvert entirely the office of Minister of the word.”<sup>62</sup> In fact, however, the whole of his sermon serves to undermine such a thesis, as he clearly stated and developed his belief that preaching was “the most important duty of all” in the church.<sup>63</sup> He argued, “[O]f all outward gifts there is not one more precious and indispensable than Pastors sent of God; since, as they cannot preach except they be sent, so neither can we hear except they preach, nor believe unless we hear, nor call on him in whom we believe not – nor be saved except we call on the name of the Lord. (Rom. x, 13-14.)”<sup>64</sup> As mentioned above, he saw a distinction between the “three fold perpetual ministry of Pastors, Elders, and Deacons,”<sup>65</sup> based upon the three-fold division of

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60. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 38n19.

61. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 31ff.

62. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 37.

63. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 40.

64. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 49.

65. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 14. Elsewhere, he refers to these three officers as “Preachers, Governors, and Distributors – commonly called Ministers, Elders and Deacons.” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 32.



church power granted by Christ to His officers, “namely – of doctrine – of discipline – of distribution.”<sup>66</sup> He did view ruling elders as biblical Presbyters, with the same right to join in the ordination of other ruling elders and of teaching elders,<sup>67</sup> but he was explicit that only Ministers had the right to administer the sacraments, since the duty was “in one respect a symbolical teaching, and, of course, annexed to doctrine.”<sup>68</sup> It was precisely because Breckinridge held the office of Pastor in such high regard that he was concerned that the nature of the Pastor’s call be rightly understood, and that only those men who were actually called of God be ordained in the churches: “What can such Ministers do for us, as have mistaken their calling? What good is to be expected of such as have falsely intruded into a work for which they have no heart? What can the best of our Ministers do, without a charge? What can our hundreds of vacant congregations do without Pastors? The first office in the church of God for dignity, importance, and usefulness, is the Pastor’s office. If matters go ill with us here, the action of every part of the system is impeded.”<sup>69</sup> For these reasons, Breckinridge contended earnestly for the direct and immediate agency of God in the minister’s call, evinced by a man’s own conscience, the approbation of the people, and the concurrence of the elders of the church.

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66. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 32.

67. See especially Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 44n22.

68. He quotes from the Second Book of Discipline, “Unto the Pastors only appertains the administration of the sacraments, in like manner as the administration of the word; for both are appointed by God a means to teach us, the one by the ear, and the other by the eyes and other senses that by both, knowledge may be transmitted to the mind.” Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 32n14.

69. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 45. Cf. also *The Christian Pastor*, 48.

C. *The Article That Fanned Debate Into Flame – James Henley Thornwell’s Review*

1. **Thornwell’s Understanding of the Call to Ministry**

Two years after Breckinridge published his sermon, James Henley Thornwell reviewed it in the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. After making several insightful comments about matters indirectly related to the minister’s call,<sup>70</sup> he moved to unpack Breckinridge’s view of the call itself. Thornwell agreed with Breckinridge that both the Scriptures and the Presbyterian Standards taught that the call to the ministry was “Divine, supernatural...by the immediate agency of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>71</sup> The fact that “it is God, and God alone, who can either call to or qualify for the sacred office” led Thornwell to note several consequences which were “absolutely incompatible with many prevailing principles and practices.”<sup>72</sup> Thornwell followed Breckinridge in disagreeing with the view that every talented or pious young man should enter the ministry unless they had a good reason not to do so. Rather,

[T]he true doctrine is that no man, whether young or old, rich or poor, learned or unlearned, should presume to dispense the mysteries of Christ without the strongest of all possible reasons for doing so – the imperative, invincible call of God. No one is to show cause why he ought *not* to be a Minister: he is to show cause why he *should* be a Minister. His call to the sacred profession is not the absence of a call to any other pursuit; it is direct, immediate, powerful, to this very department of labour [sic]. He is not here because he *can* be nowhere else, but he is nowhere else because he *must* be here.<sup>73</sup>

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70. Thornwell’s explanation of how the office of Evangelist “makes [Presbyterianism] so pre-eminently a missionary Church” is worthy of mention. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 18. He also shows how the Presbyterian view that the Church exists prior to its form makes Presbyterians “avoid the narrow and exclusive spirit which would limit God’s covenant to their own little household; they can find members of Christ’s Church beyond their own doors. By contending, at the same time, that Christ has prescribed the model in conformity with which His people should be governed, they avoid the licentiousness which would give to man the same power and discretion in fixing ecclesiastical, which may be lawfully claimed in settled civil, constitutions. They are, consequently, neither bigots on the one hand nor libertines on the other.” Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 21. We note, finally, his comments on the *jus divinum* (divine right) of Presbyterian Church Government. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 21ff. Cf. also Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 43ff.

71. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 41.

72. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 24-25.

73. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 25. Emphasis his.

In these words we have one of the clearest statements of both the primary point over which this debate was waged (namely, that the call to the ministry is “direct, immediate, powerful”) and one principal practice that flowed from the position of Breckinridge and Thornwell (only those who believe they are called of God to the ministry should be encouraged to stand as candidates).

Thornwell believed that instead of urging men to consider that God was likely calling them, the church should spend more time in prayer:

[I]nstead of pressing upon the consciences of boys to examine themselves with a view to be ascertained whether or not God has chosen them for the ministry, we should wait till God sends them to us, and then thoroughly scrutinize their claims. We are to be earnest in prayer for an increase of labourers [sic], and when God answers us He will make the answer plain to those who are sent and to us who pray...It is the *call* which makes it his duty, and until the call is known there can be no pressure of conscience about it...The effect of just views would be to make us pray more and contrive less, depend upon God and trust nothing in machinery. We should look to the Lord and not to societies, and we might consequently expect a ministry of power and not of caste. What we want is faith in God, and it is simply because we are afraid to confide in the Lord that we resort to manifold expedients of our own devising to supply the waste places of Zion...Our duty is to ask for them; it is His prerogative to give them.<sup>74</sup>

If the call is divine, averred Thornwell, “it must be sovereign; and it must impart a peculiar fitness, an unction of the Holy Ghost, which alone can adequately qualify for the duties of the office.”<sup>75</sup> Learning, piety and discipline are necessary, but they are not divine power, and do not imply qualification in themselves. Certainly fitness for ministry “can be stirred by diligence, study, prayer, meditation and discipline,” but the Holy Spirit immediately imparts “the unction from on high” apart from the instrumentality of man.<sup>76</sup>

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74. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 29-31.

75. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 27.

76. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 27, 28.

## 2. The Proofs of God's Call

Thornwell next proceeded to discuss the proofs of God's call, beginning with the inward testimony of a man's own conscience. It was in this section of his article that he made his most controversial statement, the one that would foment and frame the debate for years to come: "That a supernatural conviction of duty, wrought by the immediate agency of the Holy Ghost, is an essential element in the evidence of a true vocation to the ministry, seems to us to be the clear and authoritative doctrine of the Scriptures."<sup>77</sup> Thornwell believed that if God is calling a man to gospel ministry, then that man would know it. He would know the weight of God's call upon his life, for "the Word of the Lord is like fire in [his] bones; [he] *must* preach it or die..."<sup>78</sup> Not only would he know it, wrote Thornwell, he must know it, and ought not to take even the first step in seeking the ministry unless he has some confidence that God is calling him: "A man ought to have assurance that he is no intruder before he should dare to assume responsibilities at which an angel might tremble. He should have a commission certified to his own mind from the King of heaven before he should venture to announce himself as God's ambassador or Christ's herald."<sup>79</sup> Similar to Breckinridge, Thornwell recognized that a minister's assurance regarding his call was like the assurance of one's salvation – it was at times turbulent, shaken by fluctuations and doubts.<sup>80</sup> Yet his belief was settled: "We cannot persuade ourselves that a man who has never

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77. Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 32.

78. Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 33. Thornwell mentions several signs that one is called that by themselves could be spurious: a love for the work of the ministry (for many are called of God who are loath to do it); a desire for the office (for many desire it who are not called of God); zeal for the glory of God and the salvation of souls (for this should mark every believer); and a supposition that you'll be most useful in the ministry because of your gifts (for usefulness is a result of God's appointment). Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 32-33.

79. Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 33; cf. also page 34.

80. Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 33.

had this assurance at all has ever been called of God. We see not how such a man can have the testimony of a good conscience. Conscience supposes light, but in this case, according to the very terms of the supposition, there is no light.”<sup>81</sup>

Thornwell was quick to point out, however, that the testimony of conscience “is not final and conclusive.”<sup>82</sup> It is necessary but not sufficient. “We may deceive ourselves as well as be deceived by others; and to fortify our hearts and diminish the dangers of deception, God has appointed the approbation of His own people and the concurrence of the courts of His house as additional links in the chain of evidence which, in all ordinary cases, is to authenticate a call from Him.”<sup>83</sup> He held that no man can know with confidence that he is able to edify the people of God unless some particular congregation, usually following some period of probation or internship, actually extends a call to him. The only exception to this rule were those ordained by the Presbytery as Evangelists to labor in areas the church has not yet been established.<sup>84</sup>

Thornwell was in hearty agreement with Breckinridge that ordinations *sine titulo*, except in the case of genuine Evangelists, were “irregular, unscriptural and dangerous,”<sup>85</sup> and that ministers who had no charge had no right “to act, deliberate and vote in any ecclesiastical judicatory. The thing is contrary to the whole spirit of Presbyterianism, utterly unsupported by the Word of God, and directly subversive of a free, representative government.”<sup>86</sup> Thornwell,

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81. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 33.

82. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 35.

83. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 35. Thornwell reserves most of his comments on Breckinridge’s view of the Scriptural makeup of church courts for later articles. See Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 41.

84. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 36.

85. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 37.

86. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 37.

like Breckinridge before him, insisted that the people of God give their direct approval of the men they wanted as their shepherd. Some held that his view too heavily smacked of Independency, and that the voice of the whole Church (i.e., the Presbytery), without regard to the desire of a local congregation, was necessary and sufficient to affirm a divine call.<sup>87</sup> Thornwell responded by arguing that any theory that puts the Presbytery in the place of the people in the election of their rulers is in fact essentially Prelatic; “it assumes a fundamental principle of that system touching the relation in which the rulers stand to the ruled. The Bishop is potentially the Church: the voice of the Bishop is consequently its voice and the act of the Bishop its act.”<sup>88</sup> The true relationship between the parts and the whole is akin to the members of the body and the body itself. “The voice of a part, properly expressed, is the voice of the whole.”<sup>89</sup> The man called by a local church is, once approved by the Presbytery, called by the whole church; whereas the man without a call from the people of God “can, under no circumstances, become a shepherd of the Lord’s flock.”<sup>90</sup>

Like Breckinridge, Thornwell held a high view of the office of ruling elder, especially when it came to his right to approve and ordain ministers, or teaching elders.<sup>91</sup> Yet as John Lloyd Vance has argued, “One should not deduce...that Thornwell thought he had devalued the status of the Christian pastor because he sought to enhance the dignity of the office of the ruling

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87. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 37.

88. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 38.

89. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 39.

90. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 39.

91. See his articles in Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 4:43ff.

elder.”<sup>92</sup> Indeed, as his review of Breckinridge’s sermon makes clear, Thornwell had a high esteem for both the teaching and the ruling elder.

Thornwell’s discussion of the nature of a minister’s call (divine, direct, and immediate) and the evincing evidence of God’s call (conscience, congregation and court), had a disproportionately greater impact on future discussion than its length would appear to warrant. This effect was due not only to the enormous influence of the man, and of the mouthpiece in which his beliefs were promulgated, but also to the fact that Thomas Smyth responded negatively to Thornwell’s article in the immediately subsequent numbers of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. We turn now to that rejoinder, as well as to the comments on the minister’s call made by Robert Lewis Dabney. Unfortunately, Thornwell did not develop his views further or engage Smyth or Dabney in any more debate in his published writings, so we are unable to know how he might have replied directly to his critics. After his death in 1862, it was left to others (primarily John Bailey Adger) to take up the pen to defend him and his view of the minister’s call.

#### D. *Framing the Debate – The Response of Thomas Smyth*

##### 1. **A Familiar Foe**

Like James Henley Thornwell, Thomas Smyth was a fellow South Carolinian, though by way of Ireland and Princeton Seminary. The pastor of Second Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina, he would preach the installation sermon of Thornwell at the First Presbyterian Church in Columbia, South Carolina, on May 4, 1860. In the 1840s and 1850s, however, he stood on the other side of the aisle from Thornwell on several ecclesiastical debates,

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92. Vance, “The Ecclesiology of James Henley Thornwell,” 207.

including the ruling elder controversy and the board controversy. Likewise, Breckinridge's views of the minister's call, as explicated by Thornwell, did not sit well with him. In the first and second numbers of the second volume of the *Southern Presbyterian Review* (published in June and September, respectively, of 1848), Smyth took issue with several aspects of Thornwell's published beliefs.<sup>93</sup> In so doing, he highlighted the main areas of disagreement between the two sides, framing the debate along particular lines that would reappear in future discussions. Though Smyth disagreed with his fellow South Carolinian, whom he referenced obliquely in his introduction, he held Thornwell in the greatest respect.<sup>94</sup> As the lines of the argument were drawn, it was plain that this debate was intramural in nature.

## **2. Assurance and the Call to Ministry**

Thornwell had written that assurance of one's calling to the ministry was indispensable to a gospel minister,<sup>95</sup> and Smyth agreed:

[I]n proportion as any duty is arduous and responsible, such an assurance of obligation and acceptance becomes necessary to zeal, energy and success. The ministry, therefore, being confessedly the highest sphere of Christian activity, and the most momentous of human instrumentalities, demands for its warrant, motive and support, the most satisfactory assurance that it is undertaken in accordance with the will of God, by His authority, and under the promise of His all-sufficient and ever-present help and guidance. And the fact is, just so far as ministers have been men of sincere, ardent and devoted piety, have they given all diligence to make their calling and election to this high and holy office sure and satisfying.<sup>96</sup>

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93. Thomas Smyth, "Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 2.1 (June 1848), 99-133; and "The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence," *Southern Presbyterian Review* 2.2 (September 1848), 157-183.

94. Smyth, "Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry," 102.

95. Cf. page 36n81, above.

96. Smyth, "Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry," 101; cf. 159.



A minister's call is "a divine call, mission, commission, and authority, approved by God the Father – issued by God the Son – and signed, sealed and witnessed by God the Holy Ghost."<sup>97</sup> This call must "be imparted by the Holy Ghost, and an assurance of His having given it, must be imparted to the soul, in order that it may become effectual and operative."<sup>98</sup> Smyth recognized two errors with regard to the call: running where one was never sent, and refusing to run where one had been sent. The one was as sinful as the other. "[W]hile it is true, that to enter the work of the ministry uncalled is presumption, it is equally and emphatically true, that to refuse to enter it when called – however feebly that call may be expressed, if given at all – is dangerous rebellion."<sup>99</sup> Those who had not engaged in the work of the ministry needed assurance that they were not resisting God's call. Likewise, "[t]he nature of the ministerial call depends upon the nature of assurance and the witness of the Spirit."<sup>100</sup> Thus the primary question for Smyth was concerning the nature of assurance, and the way in which the Holy Spirit bore witness in His work of assurance, both with regard to salvation, and more particularly with regard to a call to the ministry. Before he began to investigate the call specifically, he thus turned his attention to the doctrine of assurance.

Smyth began with a definition of assurance: it is "the certain knowledge of the reality of that of which we are assured. It is a conviction produced by evidence. The certainty of this conviction is characterised [sic] by the nature of the evidence on which it is based, and may therefore be said to be of different kinds or degrees, in all cases, however, conveying that kind or

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97. Smyth, "Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry," 101.

98. Smyth, "The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence," 158.

99. Smyth, "The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence," 171.

100. Smyth, "The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence," 158.

degree of certainty which is sufficient to warrant the most undoubting confidence and the most unhesitating obedience.”<sup>101</sup> Smyth believed that the Holy Spirit imparts assurance to the believer personally, directly, instrumentally, and rationally,<sup>102</sup> yet in a different manner today than He did when revelation was still being inspired. “The Holy Spirit produces assurance in the hearts of believers *now, in all ordinary cases, and in reference to all ordinary truths and duties*, only through the instrumentality of His word, His ordinances, and those holy affections, principles and desires, which by His personal and direct operation He implants within the soul.”<sup>103</sup> On the question of instrumentality, Smyth viewed Thornwell as “most seriously wrong.”<sup>104</sup>

Smyth distinguished between the Spirit’s enabling or granting a capacity to believe, know or do, and the actual experience of that capacity; assurance, according to Smyth, lay in the latter rather than the former.<sup>105</sup> He saw no place for “any private voice, whisper, or suggestion from

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101. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 103. Following Thomas Boston, and the seventeenth century Westminster divines, Smyth distinguishes between *objective* and *subjective* assurance, the former being of the essence of faith, while the latter is not. He writes, “[The] assurance of faith is...altogether *objective*, and regards the outward evidence of salvation, and warrant of our faith, and was therefore carefully distinguished by these Divines from the reflex assurance of faith, or what they termed the assurance of sense, which is *subjective*, and regards the internal evidence of a personal possession of Christ, and an interest in him. This two-fold assurance of faith – the direct and the reflex – regards different objects. The former relates to the doctrine and the latter to the grace, of faith – the former to the foundation and the latter to the exercise, of faith – the former to the root, and the latter to the flower – the former to justification, and the latter to our knowledge of it as a sense of adoption – the former to our actual belief, the latter to our knowledge of having believed. The former is the direct act of faith on Christ and his righteousness, the latter is the reflex light of this faith in the heart. The former cannot admit of doubt, while the latter is not inconsistent with many and frequent doubts. The former is the way of salvation, and the latter, of comfort; and the only way to secure, restore, or strengthen the latter, is by the former. The assurance of faith is the exercise of the mind, in actually receiving and resting upon Christ. The assurance of sense or experience, is the joyful confidence that we are in a state of gracious acceptance with God, from an examination of the work of God in our own souls. The former is necessary and invariable, and of the very essence of saving faith, while the latter is desirable, is a privilege, and may and ought to be attained, but is manifested in different ways, and given in very different degrees to different believers.” Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 108-109.

102. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 110.

103. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 111, cf. 125. Emphasis his.

104. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 172.

105. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 112-113.

the Spirit, separate from the written word,” to assure a man that the Bible was the word of God, that he was genuinely converted, or that the ministry was a duty God has laid upon him.<sup>106</sup> In his view, the “bearing witness with our spirits” of Romans 8:16 occurred “not by any immediate suggestion or impression, accompanied by a kind of internal light or noise; nor by any distinct enunciation, in any way, of what is truth or duty in the case; not, in short, by way of *assertion*, but by way of substantial evidences and proofs.”<sup>107</sup> To the objection that this view makes the witness not that of the Holy Spirit, but only of our own spirits, Smyth responded,

This objection does not give us credit for believing and teaching as truly as the objectors can, the direct and personal operation of the Spirit in the production of every holy principle, capacity, feeling, desire and purpose, and also in upholding, strengthening, and confirming them. What we deny, is not the direct and personal operation of the Spirit, but the *sensible and self-evidencing nature* of this *process* as a necessarily required test and evidence of the reality of what is thus produced.<sup>108</sup>

In his discussion Smyth sought to avoid two extremes: “errors of defect” and “errors of excess.” The former errors taught a “low and carnal policy which derogates from the work and glory of the ever blessed [S]pirit,” exemplified by the Sadducees, the Pelagians and the Semi-Pelagians.<sup>109</sup> The latter went beyond the Scriptures in their affirmations, and Smyth cited the Montanists and Romanists as examples – as well as Breckinridge and Thornwell, who erected “as a standard of experience and a test of sincerity, a sensible manifestation of the personal and direct operation of the Holy Spirit, as is unwarranted and unrequired by the word of God.” Smyth viewed this extra-Biblical standard as one that was “adapted to throw doubts, darkness and difficulties, if not absolute despair, in the way of the truly conscientious and sincere, while it

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106. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 112.

107. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 115. Emphasis his.

108. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 131. Emphasis his.

109. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 102, 130.

offers no obstruction to the self-confident, hypocritical, or presumptuous, and which, therefore, can do only harm, and that to God's dear and most tender-hearted and spiritually minded children."<sup>110</sup>

Clearly, Smyth believed that his view steered the middle path, and that Breckinridge and Thornwell, in teaching that the assurance and conviction of ministerial duty was supernatural, immediate and direct, were essentially teaching the continuation of extraordinary revelation. He understood them to be holding a belief similar to the Quakers and Methodists, rather than the view of the Westminster Standards.<sup>111</sup> Smyth rejected these supposed "suggestions and extraordinary impulses" of the Holy Spirit, believing that the Spirit "cannot impart such a witness or call, except in the way of actual inspiration, accomplished of course with miraculous attestation," and that "in all ordinary cases He does not in fact" act in this manner.<sup>112</sup> In his first article, Smyth gave sixteen reasons to bolster this claim. Though space prohibits relating all sixteen, the most significant arguments shed greater light on the true focus of this controversy.

### **3. Smyth's Reasons Why the Call to Ministry is Not Direct and Immediate**

First and foremost, contended Smyth, far from being the "clear and authoritative doctrine of the Scripture," the Bible gives no reasons to think that the position of Breckinridge and Thornwell is true. To Smyth, suggestions of the Spirit actually "supersede and set aside the Scriptures."<sup>113</sup> He charged, "To make a call to the ministry depend, therefore, upon a direct and

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110. Smyth, "Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry," 130; cf. 102.

111. Smyth, "Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry," 118-119.

112. Smyth, "Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry," 118-119.

113. Smyth, "Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry," 120.

immediate suggestion of the Spirit, constraining an individual to engage in this work, is to teach that the Scriptures are not the only infallible guide to duty, and that they are not able ‘thoroughly to furnish for every good work,’ since the ministry is expressly described as ‘a good work;’ it is to teach that God immediately, directly, and independently of His own Word, which is perfect as a rule of duty, reveals and imposes duty...”<sup>114</sup> In addition, it is impossible to prove that such a conviction of duty actually arises from the Holy Spirit. The witness or call could be traced to imaginations of the mind itself, or even the deception of Satan, and thus be a “blind call.”<sup>115</sup> A conviction of a call “arising from an audible voice, or an immediate suggestion... is, therefore, either a gross delusion, or, if from God, it is the *accompaniment*, but not the *essence* of the call.”<sup>116</sup>

According to Smyth, “It is only when the Holy Spirit gives such evidence as *proves* the truth of what is believed, that He is said to witness with our [s]pirits.”<sup>117</sup> That evidence is found only in the Bible, to which the renewed and sanctified reason should take any impression or suggestion that it senses. “This is the only rational way of receiving the Spirit’s testimony, and that testimony or witness is...given in accordance with our rational powers...[W]e are led by a most rational process and a most rational demonstration to a most rational conclusion.”<sup>118</sup> In light of these reasons, Smyth maintained that Thornwell’s view of an essential, immediate, supernatural conviction of duty conflicted with the fact that others were to judge the ministerial

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114. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 169.

115. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 161.

116. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 162. Emphasis his.

117. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 120. Emphasis his.

118. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 121-122.

candidate: “[C]an we believe that God would embody the infallible evidence of His call in a state of mind and feeling of which the recipient can give no account to others, nor any *rational* account whatever – an evidence which *might* – be produced by the natural powers of the mind, or by Satanic influence – and to which *might* be opposed the authorized determination both of God’s people, of God’s officers, and of God’s rule of judgment by outward fruits[?]”<sup>119</sup>

Smyth also asserted that the history of the church (apart from the Quakers and Methodists) was against Thornwell and Breckinridge. “In no one writer have we found the doctrine of the Reviewer [Thornwell]...Any such immediate, direct, and self-evident operation of the Holy Spirit, convincing an individual of his duty to enter the ministry is, so far as we know, universally regarded by all judicious writers, as unwarrantable, unattainable and delusive.”<sup>120</sup> A few orthodox divines concede that the Holy Spirit “may and does shed abroad in the soul, an illuminating influence, giving very perceptible and unusual experience, but this they believe is done not by way of suggestion, independent of the reading or hearing of the word, and independent of our graces, convictions and feelings, but on the contrary, in, by, and through these.”<sup>121</sup> Again, for Smyth, assurance of salvation, as well as assurance that one is called to the ministry, is not the result of a direct and immediate suggestion of the Holy Spirit to the human soul, but “is produced by the Holy Spirit shining upon His own word, His own ordinances, and His own work in the soul.”<sup>122</sup>

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119. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 124. Emphasis his. Cf. also Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 170.

120. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 164.

121. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 125.

122. Smyth, “Assurance – Witness of the Spirit – and the Call to the Ministry,” 125.

Lest anyone grow suspicious, Smyth affirmed with Thornwell that God was the ultimate author of the call, “the only efficient and authoritative source from which it flows.”<sup>123</sup> He was clear that he did believe the call was not only external, but internal as well:

The *internal* call, is that supernatural influence, communicated by the Holy Ghost, by which the soul is freely persuaded and enabled to obey the command, to believe the promises, to desire the privileges, and willingly undergo the self-denial and the labor of the Christian ministry...Under his guidance, a spiritual application of the command to preach the Gospel, gives to the soul a relish for the holy and divine work commanded; an adoring view of the sweet and wonderful grace of Christ, in instituting and entrusting it to men; a sense of the all-sufficiency of Christ to fulfill His promise in enabling us to discharge the duty; and a conviction of our title to, and interest in, the work prescribed.<sup>124</sup>

The evidence of the internal call is the “conscious exercise of [the] qualifying graces and gifts, with a conviction more or less free from doubt, assuring us that they were given by the Holy Spirit, and that by them God testifies to the personal application of His command to our souls.”<sup>125</sup> Smyth held that a call to gospel ministry was “no more special as a privilege and duty than the Christian calling, or than any other particular Christian duty,” and so “the ability to apply this doctrine of the ministry to himself individually...is the result of its special application by the Holy Ghost to his soul, which application is to be sought and secured in this, just as it is in every other case of Christian privilege and duty.”<sup>126</sup>

Thus for Smyth, part of Thornwell’s error was in making the call to the ministry unique. The ministry was no different from any other Christian vocation, such as Elder, Deacon, Teacher, Professor, Missionary, or Evangelist<sup>127</sup>:

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123. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 161.

124. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 160. 161.

125. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 162.

126. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 168, 169.

127. See Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 168n||.

All [Christian duties] are permitted and bestowed by sovereign goodness. The proper discharge of all is beyond mere natural ability and capacity. All are unwarranted, except to those specially called to undertake them. As is the case with all other Christian duties, therefore, the ministry depends upon divine appointment; its qualifications are measured by divine requirements; fitness for its discharge proceeds from the divine bounty; obligation to use the gifts thus bestowed is created by the divine command; and the sense of *individual* responsibility, is an inference from our actually possessing these gifts, wrought in us by the Holy Ghost, and from the opportunity of engaging in the work.<sup>128</sup>

If these other callings did not necessitate a direct and immediate work of the Spirit, but could be inferred from giftedness and providential opportunities, then thus so the call to the ministry. As those callings were dependent upon human instrumentality, so was the calling to be a minister of the gospel. Unlike the extraordinary call to be an apostle or prophet, the ordinary call to be a minister is “always mediate, that is, through and in conjunction with, the instrumentality of man...The Holy Ghost employs such means, in order to influence a man’s views preparatory to his engaging in the work, by leading him to think of it, to desire it, and to shape his course of life and study with a view to it; and they affect also his final conviction of duty, and his actual determination to engage in the work itself.”<sup>129</sup>

#### **4. The Practical Implications of Smyth’s View**

Thornwell had drawn the practical conclusion from his view, that “instead of sounding a trumpet and hunting in the highways and hedges for those whom God has called,-- instead of pressing upon the consciences of boys to examine themselves with a view to be ascertained whether or not God has chosen them for the ministry, we should wait till God sends them to us, and then thoroughly scrutinize their claims...None have a right, in the first instance, to deal with

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128. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 168.

129. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 172.



the consciences of others upon this subject but God alone.”<sup>130</sup> Smyth, on the other hand, while believing that the church must indeed pray that God will raise up ministers for her oversight and care, insisted that “THEY MUST DO MORE THAN THIS, OR THEY ARE VERILY GUILTY CONCERNING THIS MATTER. Prayer without effort is presumption.”<sup>131</sup> From his presuppositions concerning the mediate nature of the ordinary call to ministry, he concluded, “Means must, therefore, be used by others and by themselves, and preeminently by parents and pastors, in order to ascertain the will of God concerning the children and youth of the church.”<sup>132</sup>

Smyth gave several examples of the means parents and pastors, in particular, were to utilize. Pastors were to teach their flocks about “[t]he nature of the ministry – its necessity – its design – its permanence – its qualifications – its obligations and demands.”<sup>133</sup> Parents were to dedicate their children to the Lord, and be on the lookout for a “natural bent and gifts” for the ministry, and when they saw it in a particular son, they were to direct the inclination accordingly. Smyth believed that God often called a person to the ministry in their infancy, and so identifying one so gifted and called early would allow parents to ensure the proper education and training suitable for the ministry. Likewise, “[P]astors and elders should carefully look out among their youth for such as give evidence of natural fitness for this work; and in addition to the teaching of the pulpit, they ought to bring the subject of the ministry before their minds and advise them to pursue a course of study in reference to it, if peradventure God may open up to them an effectual door of entrance.”<sup>134</sup> Smyth would not allow the objection to be raised that the use of means

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130. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 29-30.

131. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 173. Emphasis his.

132. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 173.

133. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 173.

134. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 174.

contradicted a belief in the sovereignty of God, “because they [i.e., means] only present to the minds of the young a work which God has appointed – the requirement and duty God has commanded – and the promise which God has imparted. And as it is only in God’s name this is done, so it is only to His Spirit all parties look for ability to make these means effectual.”<sup>135</sup>

Contrary to the belief of Breckinridge and Thornwell that only those called by God should seek entrance into the ministry, Smyth argued that every young man in good health was duty bound to investigate whether God was calling him into gospel ministry: “It is manifestly the duty of all those who have reason to think they possess in any degree the necessary qualifications for the work, to examine into its claims upon them, and God’s purposes concerning them...He who cherishes an inclination to this work, with a proper sense of its nature, and of the necessity of seeking it in that way of orderly preparation and trial which God has ordained...need not hesitate to act upon his desire...”<sup>136</sup> Against Breckinridge’s and Thornwell’s hesitation to pay for the education of the poor, Smyth also held that since God “has chosen the poor of this world,” then “IT IS THE PRIVILEGE AND DUTY of the church to encourage and sustain them” financially.<sup>137</sup> Thus, as is always the case, Smyth’s quite different theology of the minister’s call led to a dissimilar emphasis in regards to practice.

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135. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 174.

136. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 180-181. Smyth detailed the nature of this investigation into God’s will: “They must ascertain the *natural* qualifications for it, and examine whether they possess them. They must inquire into the *special* qualifications laid down for it by the Apostle, and see how far they may hope to attain to them. They must look at its *trials*, and ‘examine themselves’ how they can hope to bear them. They must analyze its *motives*, and ascertain how far they are actuated by them. They are to pray, to read, to take advice, and *in every other way*, according to the Scriptures, to seek by ‘doing God’s will to know the mind of the Lord.’ NO YOUNG MAN IS GUILTLESS WHO HAS NOT DONE ALL THIS AND MORE. If he has done all this, and then finds himself conscientiously excluded from the work, by natural, providential, or any other *certain* hindrances, then, and NOT TILL THEN, can he rest satisfied that he ‘may sit down and take his ease in Zion.’” Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 181-182. Small caps his.

137. Smyth, “The Call to the Ministry – Its Nature and Evidence,” 182. Small caps his.

E. *Another Voice Against Breckinridge and Thornwell – Robert Lewis Dabney*

1. **Dabney's Disagreements**

During the 1850s, as Robert L. Dabney travelled around to raise money and recruit students for Union Theological Seminary in Hampden-Sydney (Farmville), Virginia, he delivered and published an address entitled, “What is a Call to the Ministry?” Though this article did not mention Breckinridge or Thornwell by name, yet its assertions were a direct response to their views, which by that time, through the organ of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, would have been common knowledge. Smyth's rebuttals also would have been familiar to Dabney and those in Dabney's hearing.

Like Smyth, Dabney agreed with the assertion that “none should preach the gospel but those who are called of God.”<sup>138</sup> But he dissented from the attempt to ground that statement in the divine call of prophets, priests, or apostles, or in passages such as Hebrews 5:4. According to Dabney, that verse speaks not of ministers, but of priests, and though there is a “general analogy” between the call to these two offices, “[t]he call of [a priest or apostle] was extraordinary and by special revelation, suited to those days of theophanies and inspiration. But those days have now ceased, and God governs his church exclusively by his providence, and the Holy Spirit applying the written Scriptures.”<sup>139</sup> Dabney found sufficient proof of the divine nature of the ministerial call in Acts 20:28, I Corinthians 12:28, and in the “obvious reason” that only a King can appoint his ambassadors.

From Dabney's practice it is obvious that he took issue with Thornwell's view that “the whole system of urging, as it is called, the claims of the ministry upon the minds of the young is

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138. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 26.

139. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 26.

inconsistent with just and scriptural views of its nature and duties.”<sup>140</sup> Dabney also protested against “the vague, mystical and fanatical notions of a call.” Here he appears to have Breckinridge and Thornwell in his sights, though those men likely would not have seen their view in his description:

People seem to imagine that some voice is to be heard, or some impression to be felt, or some impulse to be given to the soul, they hardly know what or whence, which is to force the man into the ministry without rational or scriptural deliberation. And if this fantastic notion is not realized – as it is not like to be, except among those persons of feverish imagination who of all men have least business in the pulpit – the young Christian is encouraged to conclude that he is exempt.<sup>141</sup>

In agreement with Smyth, Dabney held that God makes his will known under the new covenant only through the Bible; the call to the ministry was like every other call to some particular duty. Specifically, Dabney explained that God communicates His purpose for a particular man to preach the gospel “by enlightening and influencing the man’s conscience and understanding, and those of his Christian brethren, to understand the Bible truths and the circumstances and qualifications in himself which reasonably point out preaching as his work. The full and certain call to the ministry is uttered by the Holy Spirit, both to the candidate himself and to the church. The medium of its utterance is God’s dealing with the candidate and the principles of the written Scriptures.”<sup>142</sup> Dabney thus viewed the Holy Spirit’s working as mediate rather than immediate, in accordance with the rational constitution of men – although he was insistent at the same time that the process was utterly spiritual in nature: “[W]e are assured that the Holy Spirit always operates on human souls in accordance with [the natural laws of the human understanding] when

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140. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 30.

141. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 26-27. Perhaps the disciples of Thornwell and Breckinridge were explaining their view in this manner?

142. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 27.

he instructs them by the Holy Scriptures, his only instrument for rational adults. But let us not be mistaken. The process by which the call is ascertained is strictly reasonable, but it is also spiritual. The true minister is as really ‘taught of God,’ concerning this call as the prophet in the revealed word was; it is only that the mode of the teaching is different.”<sup>143</sup>

The particular “principles of the written Scriptures” Dabney envisioned the Spirit using were those which speak to the self-consecration of the believer to the service of God, and the qualifications of a minister. Ministers, like Christian teachers, doctors, lawyers, mechanics, or farmers, must be motivated by the belief that they can best serve the Lord Jesus in that calling.<sup>144</sup> In this position Dabney took the opposite side of the field from Thornwell and Breckinridge.

Rather than seeing the potential for great usefulness as evidence of God’s call, Thornwell had opined:

Duty must ever be the measure of expediency; and a man can only know in what line he can promote the greatest good by knowing in what line God has called him to labour [sic]...All the deductions of a cold, utilitarian philosophy will absolutely come to naught. The grand question, then, is, Will God bless? And that question can be satisfactorily answered only by answering another, Has God called? Here conscience, under the guidance of the Spirit, must *first* answer, and until it is prepared to answer in the affirmative, the first step should not be taken in seeking the ministry.<sup>145</sup>

Dabney, on the other hand, believed that “the question of the profession in which he shall serve God will be seen by every Christian to be only the relative one as to his own capacities and the demands of God’s cause at that time.”<sup>146</sup>

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143. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 43.

144. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 28.

145. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 34.

146. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 28; cf. 41-42.

As to the “circumstances” that lead a man to determine that preaching is his life’s work, Dabney urged caution. Asserting that “[t]he light which ‘providences’ cast upon the question of God’s will as to our conduct is chiefly cast backward on the past, not forward on the future,” he acknowledged that one’s situation can indeed present evidence that one is not called (such as the lack of health, the voice or the knowledge necessary to be a minister). But a man cannot know what God means by providential difficulties and hindrances, and so he must “take heed how he presumptuously misinterprets a providence which God has not authorized him to read at all; let him turn to the Bible and prayer.”<sup>147</sup>

## **2. Different Principles Lead to Different Emphases and Different Practices**

The differences between Thornwell and Dabney as to the nature of the ministerial call are not as explicitly clear in Dabney’s article as in Smyth’s writing. Yet we see the disagreement in the differing emphases they make as they speak of the qualifications for ministry. Thornwell noted that a man “may be both godly and learned, and yet utterly unqualified for the sacred functions of the ministry.”<sup>148</sup> Dabney took aim at the other end of the spectrum, declaring that “it by no means follows that [a man] may excuse himself from the duty of preaching because he is conscious his piety is low...the fact that one’s piety is low cannot prove it is not his duty to preach, because he knows it is his immediate duty not to let his piety remain low.”<sup>149</sup> Likewise, Dabney viewed a lack of strong desire to preach, as a sin to be repented of, and not evidence

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147. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 30. For Dabney’s view of the importance of prayer in discerning the call, see Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 44.

148. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 28.

149. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 32.

from which one should conclude he is not called.<sup>150</sup> For in Dabney's view, "every true Christian on the earth, young and old, male and female, ought to feel, with reference to the work of preaching, that he would be glad to preach if God permitted him."<sup>151</sup>

Again, with respect to Christian character, Dabney's challenge to the immature believer was patent: "The man whose Christian character does not command confidence and respect would, as a minister, only dishonor God and his cause. Yet it is every man's duty to reform those inconsistencies by which he has forfeited the respect of mankind, whether he is to preach or not. And having thoroughly reformed them, he may find his way open into the pulpit."<sup>152</sup> Thornwell asserted that intellectual abilities and education are not of the essence of a ministerial call, whereas Dabney believed that many were excusing themselves from the ministry based on a misapprehension of their mental talents.<sup>153</sup> Dabney also challenged those who thought they were not eloquent enough to be a minister: "No young man whose vocal organs are not fatally maimed is entitled to conclude, because he is now unskilled, that he cannot learn to speak to edification."<sup>154</sup>

Like Smyth, and contrary to Breckinridge and Thornwell, Dabney held that every young Christian who was able to preach should examine whether he was called: "We hesitate not to say, that while all Christians, of course, are not to be preachers, and while none should preach

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150. Dabney, "What is a Call to the Ministry," 33.

151. Dabney, "What is a Call to the Ministry," 34.

152. Dabney, "What is a Call to the Ministry," 35.

153. He wryly wrote, "We fear that in many cases, if their friends were to concur candidly in this doubt [as to whether they had the requisite learning or ability], their vexation would betray the insincerity of the pretended humility." Dabney, "What is a Call to the Ministry," 36.

154. Dabney, "What is a Call to the Ministry," 37.

whom God does not call, in such a time as ours every Christian who can preach, should conclude that the *a priori* presumption is in favor of his doing so until the contrary is evinced; and he should approach the examination of his duty on this supposition.”<sup>155</sup> There is a nod of agreement to the view of Thornwell and Breckinridge here (“while none should preach whom God does not call”), but Dabney’s concern was that men were “tarrying when [they] ought to run.”<sup>156</sup> He warned, “To intrude into the pulpit without a call is doubtless a sin...But to stay out of the pulpit when called to enter it is also a sin...” Significantly, Dabney’s view that the latter was a greater danger than the former was influenced heavily by the way he viewed the historical situation of his day (“in such a time as ours”), to which we will turn in the next chapter.

#### F. *The End of the First Phase*

The contributions of Breckinridge, Thornwell, Smyth, and Dabney identified the sides of the call controversy. There was no resolution of the theological issues at hand, however, in part because none of the four further advanced the debate beyond their initial submissions. Certainly personal conversations would have ensued at Presbyteries, Synods, and Assemblies, and elders and church members would have, if inclined, wrestled individually with the issues at hand. The issue would remain a live one in the Southern Presbyterian Church, and would resume in the years after the Civil War, due not only to strong convictions on both sides, but also to historical factors that persisted into the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To several of those factor we now turn, before coming again to the controversy itself, as it unfolded in the late 1860s and early 1870s.

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155. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 41.

156. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 44.



### **Chapter 3**

#### **Historical Context**

No disagreement arises in a vacuum. Therefore in order to understand and evaluate the call controversy properly, it is necessary to recognize from whence it arose. Having examined the ruling elder controversy above, in the midst of which Robert Jefferson Breckinridge made the statements that became so controversial in the mouth of James Henley Thornwell, this chapter will briefly trace other factors that contributed to the fomenting of debate over the call of the minister: vacant pulpits throughout the middle part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the development of ministerial training, highlighted by the rise of seminaries, and of boards assisting candidates financially. Each of these in their own way influenced the call controversy, flavoring the perspectives of the participants and forming the grid through which they approached the conflict.

#### *A. Vacant Pulpits*

##### **1. A United Recognition**

We have already heard Breckinridge refer to the reality of vacant pulpits in the American Presbyterian Church in the 1840s.<sup>1</sup> He believed that the lamentable practices he sought to correct were arising because “the demand for ministers of the word is so urgent.”<sup>2</sup> In fact, all of the participants, in both phases of the debate, recognized this problem in some shape or form, and most made their arguments with it squarely in view. Thornwell mentioned the “waste places of Zion” that some were devising man-made plans to supply rather than trusting the Lord to provide through prayer.<sup>3</sup> From the opposite persuasion, Dabney held forth “the present wants of the

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1. See page 32n69 above.

2. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 16.

3. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 30.

church, and the relation of supply to demand” as a reason young men ought to consider that they might well be called of God.<sup>4</sup> He spoke plainly:

[I]t is true in our day that the harvest is plenteous, and that *suitable laborers* are comparatively few. Our home destitutions are large, many of them of long standing, and rather increasing in number. The supply of young ministers barely repairs the waste of death and removals. For the whole pagan world we may be said to be doing nothing, in consequence of the paucity of young ministers; for we have only one soul from the whole Synod of Virginia, a godly woman, laboring on pagan ground. And for the teeming multitudes of the new commonwealths springing up in the west and south we are doing almost as little.<sup>5</sup>

As he surveyed his native Virginia, he calculated “that the ratio which the number of our candidates bears to the number of our communicants is not only far smaller than that observed in other favored sections of the church, but smaller than the average in the whole church.”<sup>1576</sup> He was discouraged by the fact that in his day Virginia was having to import ministers from other states, and did not supply enough ministers to meet the demand of her populace.<sup>1587</sup> He noticed that there was not the same supply and demand problem in “other useful professions,”<sup>1598</sup> such as merchants, physicians, and lawyers – “[b]ut to supply all our home destitutions, to carry the gospel to every one of the eight hundred million of pagans on our globe, the church needs a hundred times as many ministers.”

The participants in the second phase of the debate, examined below, also were aware of the unoccupied pulpits, and for those opposed to the view of Breckinridge and Thornwell, the lack of ministers was a motivating factor to reject that position. An anonymous author protested

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4. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 37-38.

5. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 38.

6. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 39.

7. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 40.

8. Dabney, “What is a Call to the Ministry,” 41.

to the church in 1869, “That the popular theory of our Church [Thornwell’s view] in regard to [the call] exerts a powerful influence on the question of the supply of ministers, cannot be doubted...We languish for want of ministers...There are, doubtless, scores of men in our churches who are fit to be pastors, and who ought to be set apart to that work; and if the step were once taken, hundreds more would spring up, ready to enter the field...”<sup>9</sup> A. A. Porter lamented the pulpits that had become vacant as a result of the Civil War: “Many of our best and most useful ministers had been taken up to the heavenly glory during that wicked war. Many of our young men, who were being led by the Lord and the Church to the work of the ministry, had died triumphant in the faith while in the service of their country.”<sup>10</sup> John Baily Adger, Porter’s sparring partner, also recognized the “dearth of ministers” in the postbellum period.<sup>11</sup>

## 2. An Old Presbyterian Struggle

The fact that there were more congregants than ministers was not a recent problem, however, or only due to the war, or to Thornwell’s position purportedly taking hold among the church. Indeed, as Barry Waugh has noted, “The earliest extant records of American Presbyterianism illustrate the perpetual problem of ministerial shortages.”<sup>12</sup> Even when the New Side split from the Old Side in the mid-1700s (in part over too-rigorous educational requirements for ministers), they were not able to solve the problem of vacant pulpits.<sup>13</sup> From the 18<sup>th</sup>

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9. “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 508, 519.

10. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 104.

11. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 332.

12. Barry Waugh, “The Ministerial Shortage Problem in Presbyterian History & George Howe’s Appeal for More Ministers,” *The Confessional Presbyterian* 4 (2008): 43.

13. Waugh, “The Ministerial Shortage Problem,” 44.

century into the 19<sup>th</sup> century the supply of pastors continued to be outpaced by the demand.

Ashbel Green wrote a letter to the General Assembly of 1805, which began with these words: “It is a melancholy fact, which requires no confirmation with those who are acquainted with the state of our church, that not only her welfare in particular, but the general and substantial interests of vital godliness, and of the Redeemer's kingdom, are suffering for the want of a greater number of able and faithful ministers of the gospel of our denomination...It has been suggested by some, and perhaps not without reason, that if the number of our clergy were doubled, it would not exceed the demand which exists for their labours...”<sup>14</sup>

As America grew southwestward after the Louisiana Purchase (Louisiana became a state in 1812, Mississippi in 1817, Alabama in 1819, Missouri in 1821, and Arkansas in 1836), the number of Presbyterian pastors did not keep pace with the population or the Presbyterian congregations. Ernest Trice Thompson cites the 1833 report of a secretary of the American Home Missionary Society: “In Tennessee, with a population of 700,000, there are only 68 Presbyterian ministers, which is less than *one to ten thousand*. Mississippi has a population of about 145,000 & only 20 Presbyterian ministers...Arkansas Territory, with a population of perhaps 40,000 has only one minister of our denomination...The population of Louisiana is not less than 230,000, & yet there are not more than seven or eight Presbyterian ministers within its limits...”<sup>15</sup> A report from the Synod of Mississippi and South Alabama in the mid-1830s alerted the Church that though congregations were multiplying in number, yet “the number of our

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14. *Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, 1789-1820* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1847), 341.

15. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:175. Emphasis his. The secretary, Absalom Peters, went on to give his opinion that one reason there were fewer churches and ministers in the South than in the North, was because the large plantation operations served by slaves (compared to smaller family farms in the North) led to fewer country villages, and thus fewer points where a house of worship might be erected. “Thus in the state of Alabama, for instance, which possesses perhaps double the commercial wealth & nearly double the population of Illinois, there are fewer ministers than in the latter state, the number of Presbyterian ministers in Alabama being only *thirty*,

ministers has not kept pace with the rapid increase in population.”<sup>16316</sup> The scarcity of ministers led some churches to meet only once or twice a month, and descendants of Presbyterian families often joined Baptist or Methodist churches when no Presbyterian churches existed in the neighborhoods in which they settled.<sup>17</sup>

In 1836, some ten years before the call controversy erupted, George Howe (the Professor of Biblical Literature at Columbia Theological Seminary) had published an address, *An Appeal to the Young Men of the Presbyterian Church in the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia*, that spoke to the issue of vacant pulpits directly and gave statistics to support his observations. When he surveyed the churches of South Carolina and Georgia, he bewailed the conditions that met his eyes:

Many of our churches lie waste and unoccupied; a large extent of country in which the doctrine and discipline of Presbyterianism would find ready support, is unvisited by the feet of our ministers; our theological seminary, reared thus far with much labor and sacrifice, is frequented by comparatively a little band of students; our missionary, education, tract, and Sunday school organizations languish, because we have not men coming forward for the ministry in numbers sufficient to meet the demand and to secure the best good of society. While the church elsewhere is instinct with life and action, and is rousing herself with surprising energy to the work of converting the world, a gloomy lethargy has crept over our Southern Zion, which makes the heart sad, and damps the zeal of those in whose bosom the desire of a better day arises. The fathers are passing away, and few, lamentably few are the young Elishas who shall take up the fallen mantle of the ascending prophets and fill the places they have occupied.<sup>16418</sup>

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which is less than *one to ten thousand* of the population.” Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:176. Emphasis his.

16. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:177.

17. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:121, 215. Unfortunately, these realities have not changed for some Presbyterian churches and families in 2018. Thompson comes back to this point of ministerial scarcity several more times in his work. See Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:618.

18. George Howe, *An Appeal to the Young Men of the Presbyterian Church in the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia* (n.p: 1836), 5-6. A complete transcription of this book can be found at the end of the article by Barry Waugh.

In statistical tables Howe had compiled and included in the appendices of his book, he showed that in the Synod of South Carolina and Georgia, there were 41 vacant churches, 36 pastors, 33 stated supplies, and 120 churches supplied.<sup>19</sup> Howe observed that the population of South Carolina and Georgia was 1,098,000, one thirteenth of the population of the Union. He also estimated that 3,280 men were studying to enter the ministry. One thirteenth of this latter number would mean 252 men should have been preparing for gospel ministry from the bounds of his Synod.<sup>20</sup> Yet Howe noted not more than 40 men from South Carolina and Georgia in any stage of training for the ministry. As a South Carolinian, it pained him to see neighbor North Carolina, with a population half that of the two states within his Synod, sending 100 men for pastoral preparation.

Howe was hesitant to ascribe any one reason for the small number from his Synod, although he did acknowledge, “[I]t is certain, that young men of piety educated in our colleges and academies, turn their backs on the ministry, and assume the law, or medicine, or the occupation of the planter, as their business for life, without raising a doubt in the community as to the propriety of their conduct.”<sup>16521</sup> Motivated by a conviction similar to that of Smyth and Dabney, that nearly every educated young man of piety ought to feel himself bound to spend his life in preaching the gospel unless otherwise disqualified, Howe published his book to spur young men to take seriously the claims of the ministry.<sup>16622</sup>

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19. Howe, *An Appeal to the Young Men*, 46.

20. Howe, *An Appeal to the Young Men*, 6.

21. Howe, *An Appeal to the Young Men*, 10.

22. Howe appealed to several considerations: what God had done to redeem them; the nature of the vow assumed in becoming a member of the church; the command of Christ; the fact that the ministry is most suited to advance the kingdom of Christ; the great privileges of being a minister. Howe sounded notes contrary to the position of Breckinridge and Thornwell: “*Your duty plainly is, to put yourself into that situation in which you can subserve, on the whole, the best interest of Christ’s kingdom...* The Savior is not now on earth to say to you in an audible voice

### 3. The Flip Side of the Coin of Vacant Pulpits

As we have seen above, however, some had as much consternation about the large number of ministers who did not fill a pulpit as they did about vacant pulpits.<sup>23</sup> Breckinridge was exasperated by the men who had been ordained *sine titulo*, without the confirming call of a congregation, and typically as an Evangelist. He charged that in his day the ministry was often “sought by persons who habitually make it a means to other ends; who take it up as a living, or who resort to it as a respectable profession without any purpose to devote themselves to its duties.”<sup>24</sup> He noted that the ordination of men as Evangelists to “frontier or destitute settlements,” without calls by specific congregations, began only in 1821, and he viewed the practice as valid yet open to great abuse, since some ordained in this extraordinary way did not actually fulfill the work or duties of an evangelist.

How this provision...has worked, and what are likely to be its effects, both in depriving the congregations of permanent Pastors, and in crowding our church-courts with nominal Evangelists, may be inferred from the fact, that considerably less than one-half of all our Ministers of the word, are reported in 1844 as sustaining the Pastoral relation; in other words, that more than half of them are in a position never contemplated by the great and general provisions of our church constitutions – and utterly inconsistent with their exercise of any power of rule, under any system pretending to be representative or free. And so long as even a few Presbyteries conveniently situated to the Theological

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as he did to the sons of Zebedee, ‘Follow me.’ The day of miraculous calls and supernatural visions has passed away. It is an abuse of the doctrine of divine influence, to suppose that an irresistible and sensible influence, *capable of being distinctly separated in our consciousness from the influence of motives*, is made on our minds by the Holy Spirit. This error has been the fruitful source of most of the fanaticism which has disturbed the world.” Howe, *An Appeal to the Young Men*, 24. Emphasis his. Howe did clarify in a footnote, “The writer does not mean to deny the doctrine of special agency of the Holy Spirit upon the mind of man, an agency immediate, direct, and separate from motives. Still it is hardly, if at all possible, for the subject of direct influence to separate in his consciousness that influence which comes immediately from heaven, from that which comes *mediately*, through the truths of nature and revelation. He can only judge the divine by the fruits produced within him and upon him. He cannot, at least at the present day, distinguish it by any inherent and sensible difference, from the effect produced through second causes. The acting from impressions, which are construed into divine suggestions by an over-active fancy and by strong and unreasoning willfulness, has filled the world with deeds which have disgraced the church and dishonored our common nature...” Howe, *An Appeal to the Young Men*, 24n. Emphasis his. One wonders what Thornwell was thinking about Hodge’s publication in 1836, or what influence it may have had on his own position.

23. See page 22ff. above.

24. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 19.

Seminaries may choose to receive under their care candidates from all quarters of the church, and may see fit to ordain their numerous Licentiates *sine titulo*, and send them over the church as missionaries, as professors, as agents, as teachers, or in search of settlements [i.e., settled pastoral charges]; it is easy to see that this *ministerium vagum*, which is abhorrent to the whole spirit of Presbyterianism, can be repressed only by an energetic and general resistance.<sup>25</sup>

He pointed out that in the Presbyteries of New York, New Brunswick, and Philadelphia, there were 90 ministers in 1844, but only 46 of them were actually pastors. What irked Breckinridge even more was that these Presbyteries were able to send more men to the General Assembly given their larger number of ministers, and thus had a disproportionate influence at the Assembly, even though they did not have a call from a congregation.<sup>26</sup>

Thornwell shared Breckinridge's concern. He affirmed that ordinations *sine titulo*, "except in the case of real Evangelists, [were] irregular, unscriptural and dangerous."<sup>16727</sup> He also disagreed with "all who make the ministry a means to any other ends but those with which Christ has connected it," and pointed to the example of Dr. Theodore Dwight Woolsey, who was made a minister in order to become the President of Yale College (a post he held from 1846-1871). Thornwell held that Woolsey's ordination "was a mockery, an awful prostitution of the sacred office."<sup>16828</sup> He lay part of the blame at the feet of church courts who gave too much credence to seminary completion or professorial endorsement when contemplating whether a man was called of God: "It ought not to be a matter of course that a young man who has completed the *curriculum* of study prescribed in the Seminary is licensed by the Presbytery; his call and gifts

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25. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 28. See also page 29 for more of his dismay at his current situation.

26. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 28n11.

27. Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 41.

28. Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 25-26.



should be thoroughly scrutinized as if they had undergone no scrutiny before.”<sup>16929</sup> Thornwell, like Breckinridge, wanted pulpits filled, but he wanted them filled by men who had been called immediately and directly by God, and whose call was confirmed by the people of God. He gave his hearty “Amen” to Breckinridge’s declaration: “It is easy for us to multiply ministers of the Gospel; but it is impossible for us to multiply such as are called of God.”<sup>30</sup>

## B. *Ministerial Training*

### 1. **The Increasing Number of Ministers in the Early Nineteenth Century**

It is unsurprising that attempts to increase the number of Presbyterian ministers accompanied the perception of a diminished supply. Presbyterians were keenly aware that Baptists and Methodists were expanding more rapidly than they were, and sought to address the perceived issues as they thought most effective. Yet as we witnessed above, several of the methods utilized were in themselves controversial or had troubling effects.<sup>17031</sup> That this tension and the call controversy itself arose in the first half of the nineteenth century is not accidental, as that century witnessed an increase in the total amount of Christian pastors in America overall, and a marked difference in the way these men were recruited and trained. Several factors led to the transformation in ministerial numbers and ministerial training, according to Donald Scott.

During the eighteenth century, young men had been identified, supported, and often trained locally, through “the hierarchical relationships and organic values of the local community.”<sup>32</sup>

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29. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 31. Emphasis his.

30. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 17; quoted in Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 29.

31. See above, page 20ff.

32. Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry 1750-1850* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), 53.

Impoverished youth were sponsored by wealthy laymen, relatives, or town pastors. But the nineteenth century brought about significant changes. The Second Great Awakening supplied a growing number of converts with an eager zeal for evangelism and discipleship. In addition, an increasing American population and changing economic circumstances led many young men to look for work outside their family or local networks. Most importantly, the clergy created new mechanisms by which these new recruits were equipped with funds for training, and the training itself. As Scott summarizes, “Clerical expansion thus was a result both of a vast new pool of potential ministers and of the institutions to channel them into the ministry.”<sup>33</sup>

One of these new funding mechanisms was the American Education Society (AES), founded in 1815 in Boston “for the purpose of aiding indigent young men of talents and hopeful piety in acquiring a learned and competent education for the gospel ministry.”<sup>34</sup> One of several volunteer parachurch organizations that were founded and that flourished in the early decades of the nineteenth century,<sup>35</sup> Scott notes that by 1826, the AES had become a large-scale operation with a full-time general secretary, a full-time assistant secretary, and additional part-time and full-time staff.<sup>36</sup> The Society promised to support “every young man of proper character in the

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33. Scott, *From Office to Profession*, 54-55. He notes that the state of New Hampshire increased from about 40 new clergy per decade in 1790, to 60 per decade in 1815, to 160 per decade in 1830. Scott, *From Office to Profession*, 54.

34. *True Liberty: A Sermon Preached in Boston on the First Anniversary of the American Society for Educating Pious Youth for the Gospel Ministry, October 23, 1816* (Andover: American Education Society, 1816), 29. Presbyterian pastor Daniel Dana was one of the founding members. *True Liberty*, 30.

35. By 1826 the following had been founded: the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (1810); the American Education Society (1815); the American Bible Society (1816); the American Colonization Society (1817); the American Sunday School Union (1824); the American Tract Society (1825); the American Temperance Society (1826); and the American Home Missionary Society (1826). Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:289.

36. He also remarks, “[U]nder the pressure of numbers – the seemingly unended need for new ministers and the seemingly limitless supply of poor young men clamoring for aid – the AES developed into a totally new kind of institution...As Allmendinger has put it, with the 1826 reorganization of the AES, ‘a bureaucratic organization without precedent in American higher education’ was born.” Scott, *From Office to Profession*, 59.

United States who may apply for aid and who may not otherwise be provided for.”<sup>37</sup> Scott argues that the existence of the AES transformed the way ministers were recruited; rather than approaching their local leaders, interested young men contacted the AES in Boston directly.<sup>38</sup>

## **2. Resistance to New Methods**

We saw above how Breckinridge and Thornwell bristled at the doctrine that it was the duty of every gifted, healthy, and pious young man to devote himself to the ministry; this teaching was “one of the main and one of the first reasons which induced [Breckinridge] to desire the exclusion of that society from our churches – many of which [he] did not doubt, [that society] would ultimately fill – by force of this doctrine – with a ministry of the word, whom God never called.”<sup>17239</sup> Thornwell believed it was an error to look primarily to young men to be pastoral candidates, so that they might be trained from an early age just like other professions. “If [the call] be sovereign, it may extend to all classes and ages, to young and old, to rich and poor; to all professions and pursuits, to publicans at the receipt of custom, lawyers at the bar, merchants at the desk and physicians in their shops...He can call whom He pleases, and we should pray for an increase of labourers, without respect to the classes from which they are to spring.”<sup>40</sup> Breckinridge also objected to the plan of the AES to fund impoverished young men for the ministry. He was in no way opposed to helping candidates in need, but saw great danger in

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37. Scott, *From Office to Profession*, 55.

38. Scott, *From Office to Profession*, 59.

39. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 16n4.

40. Thornwell, “The Call of the Minister,” 27.

the presuppositions upon which and the manner in which such aid was being offered and distributed:

I greatly doubt if it is the best way to accomplish this important end, either to throw the door wide open, and invite all to enter, that those we need may come in with them; or to cultivate the idea, as is constantly done, that God calls a very great majority of his ministers from this class, and to talk as if he called few or none from any other; or to proceed as if it were not an immense evil for men to find entrance, who are not called of God – or as if it were not a fearful calamity to weaken, in such poor youths as are called of him, the spirit which leads them to struggle for self-support; or to set aside, virtually, the tribunals of God’s house, in any part of the work of training and settling ministers of the word; or to train them, because they are of this class, in any respect differently from other candidates.<sup>41</sup>

He feared such plans would result in an “eleemosynary class ministry.” He provocatively connected the large number of vacant pulpits and the increasing number of ordained ministers without a call to the offer of free education for the poor:

I fear it is too true that this class [of ministers without a call] has steadily augmented with our efforts to multiply Ministers, and with the increasing facilities for their gratuitous education. It is also true, that the great mass of our vacant Churches, are not only willing to do something for the support of the Gospel in their midst; but very many of them are constantly and eagerly, begging for Ministers; and yet the proportion of unoccupied, and secularized Ministers increases. It is a curious, and I think an alarming fact, and one not at all attended to, that in the great majority of instances, our beneficiaries being in debt where they are licensed, and having no means with which to pay, except the savings from their salaries, are in circumstances which render it nearly impossible for them to settle in congregations which are not able to give them more than a support: so that the remarkable result is produced of an eleemosynary Ministry educated, as it were, expressly for rich congregations, and thrown precisely where, ordinarily, their previous training had not fitted them to go. I feel the extreme delicacy of the subject: but surely, it ought to be most thoroughly and wisely pondered.<sup>42</sup>

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41. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 16-17.

42. Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 20n5.

### 3. The Rise of the Seminary

Along with interdenominational charitable organizations, denominational seminaries had grown strong and influential by the dawning of the call controversy. Andover Theological Seminary, a Congregationalist school in Massachusetts, had formed in 1807 during the Unitarian Controversy, and attracted several Presbyterian students, including James Henley Thornwell and Gardiner Spring. Princeton Theological Seminary in 1812 became the first national Presbyterian seminary, although that same year the Synod of Virginia called on Moses Hoge to deliver theological education to ministerial students at Hampden-Sydney University (Union Theological Seminary in Virginia formally began under John Holt Rice in 1823).<sup>43</sup> Columbia Theological Seminary was founded in 1828 to serve the churches in South Carolina and Georgia primarily. In the north, Western Theological Seminary was formed in 1825, Lane Theological Seminary opened in Cincinnati in 1832, and Union Theological Seminary (in New York City) began in 1836. Though in the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, many ministers continued to be trained for ministry informally by another minister, yet these institutions were a boon to the Presbyterian Church in the United States.<sup>44</sup> For their part, Breckinridge and Thornwell did not in the 1840s see the seminary as absolutely necessary or without danger. Thornwell expressed his ambivalence plainly:

Human learning is necessary – the more, the better; but human learning cannot, of itself, make a preacher...The whole routine of theological education supposes a previous fitness in the subject, which it may aid but cannot impart. Hence this training becomes necessary only among novices – among those whose faculties have not been developed and expanded by previous pursuits and previous studies. But in cases in which men of cultivated minds are called from other walks of life, it is absurd to suppose that they cannot be efficient preachers unless they have been graduated in a Theological Seminary. There is no charm in such institutions: they only burnish the weapons which the Minister

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43. See Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:258, 275ff.

44. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, 1:285.

is to use, but they do not supply him with his armour [sic]. Men may be able Ministers of the New Testament without being trained to it as a mere profession; and although human learning is indispensable, yet human learning is not of the essence of a call. He who is called must acquire it if he does not previously possess it; but he may possess it, and want that fitness which alone can render him successful.<sup>45</sup>

Breckinridge, as has already been observed, connected the seminaries closely to the egregious practice of ordination *sine titulo*, and as the footnotes of his sermon demonstrate, he had little patience for the way seminary professors conducted themselves (especially toward himself) in the church courts.<sup>46</sup> Several of the participants in the debate over the call (Breckinridge, Thornwell, Adger, and Dabney) were at some point in their lives seminary professors, so they clearly believed in the efficacy and importance of the work being done there. But the perceived diverse fruit produced by the seminaries, coupled with the increasingly perfunctory nature of ordaining seminary trained men, was fuel for the call controversy.

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45. Thornwell, "The Call of the Minister," 28. We assume his views had not changed when he became a professor at Columbia Theological Seminary in 1855.

46. I.e., Breckinridge, *The Christian Pastor*, 17n5, 33n15, 34n16, 37n18, etc.

## Chapter 4

### Phase Two of the Controversy: Porter vs. Adger

Drowned out by larger national and ecclesiastical conflicts, the call controversy faded into the background in the late 1850s and the 1860s. Because Thornwell never responded in print to Smyth and Dabney's arguments, however, it is unsurprising that debate over how the Spirit calls a man to ministry surfaced again in the years following the War Between the States. The contest was held once more in the pages of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*. Two shorter pieces appeared in 1869 and 1870, the former (an anonymous article) attacking the position held by Breckinridge and Thornwell, and the latter (written by James Addison Quarles) defending it. These two articles were overshadowed both in length and substance by the subsequent "pamphlet war" between Abner Addison Porter and John Bailey Adger. Each man contributed two articles, Porter beginning the debate by submitting a discourse on the topic that he had previously delivered to his Presbytery.<sup>1</sup> Adger took issue with Porter's positions, and the two men went back and forth twice, being forced to stop presumably only by the death of Porter in late 1873.

#### A. *An Anonymous Voice Resumes the Debate*

Though relatively insignificant, we ought not to overlook the first missives of this second stage, since Adger engaged them in his writings and Porter voiced his approval of the initial salvo. The author of the October 1869 article, "What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?", though unknown to us, was highly respected by Adger and Porter.<sup>2</sup> Declaring that "this is one of those troublesome questions in casuistry which it seems impossible to settle," the author acknowledged

1. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry," January 1872, 64n\*.

2. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 287; Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry (1873)," 136.

that Thornwell's position (stated in a broad manner with which even Thornwell's opponents would have agreed, "that God designates those who are to preach the gospel by a supernatural divine call to their work") had by that time become the "popular theory of our Church." He sought to rebut Thornwell's position in five ways. First, he charged that it necessarily implied that ministers are inspired, since they receive the knowledge of their duty immediately from God rather than through the word. Second, he contended that the practice of the Church seemed to be conducted without reference to this theory. The process of Presbytery examination on the basis of character and qualifications, as well as requiring a church to call a man, led him to assert, "[I]t would be difficult to imagine any thing [sic] more simple, plain and matter-of-fact, more free from suspicion of mystery or the supernatural, or more in accordance with the dictates of common sense, than are the requirements of our Book [of Church Order] and the practice of our presbyteries in the matter of inducting men into the gospel ministry."<sup>3</sup>

Third, he argued that Thornwell's understanding of the call was unauthorized by the Westminster Standards and the Form of Government. He believed that in no place did these documents teach the Thornwellian theory of the call to the ministry. Fourth, he posited that it was incompatible with a Presbyterian doctrine of Scripture. The Confession of Faith states, "[T]he whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelation of the Spirit or traditions of men." To the unnamed author, Thornwell's view contradicted this passage, as it taught that ministers could not learn their duty from the Scriptures, but by direct and immediate agency of the Holy Spirit. He was not satisfied with the

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3. "What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?", 509.



proof-texts that Dr. Thornwell and Dr. Dabney adduced, and he spent a portion of his article in giving his exegesis of Acts 20:28, I Corinthians 12:28, II Corinthians 5:18-20, and I Corinthians 9:16. He argued that these passages proved too much (i.e., that they must also apply to ruling elders as well as teaching elders), and that the minister was not in any way an ambassador to the church.<sup>4</sup>

Finally, he objected that it was inconsistent with a proper view of the Church as a “free corporation.”<sup>5</sup> In his view, “the Church makes her own ministers. She takes of her own sons and sets them apart to this work.”<sup>6</sup> The qualifications set forth in I Timothy and Titus evince no “thought that there was any thing [sic] supernatural or extraordinary in their call to this work...If a supernatural call had been requisite, would not a prominence have been given it in these epistles? And as no mention is made of it, is not the inference that it does not obtain unavoidable?”<sup>7</sup> He deemed Thornwell’s view as one belonging rightly to Papists, not Presbyterians. For “[w]ith them the Church is dependent upon the priesthood for an authoritative interpretation of the Scriptures, and for the efficacy of the sacraments. Hence a dignity and sanctity is claimed for the priesthood, which is not attributed to the laity. But it is not so with us.”<sup>8</sup>

In closing his argument, the anonymous author connected (as Dabney had done before him) the practical adoption of Thornwell’s view to the lack of ministerial supply in the Southern Presbyterian Church: “Under the combined influence of our popular theory of a supernatural call,

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4. “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 512-514.

5. “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 516.

6. “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 517.

7. “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 518.

8. “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 518.

and our rigid requirements as to learning, the supply of ministers in our Church falls far short of the demand.”<sup>9</sup> Though this reasoning is similar to Dabney’s, by the fact that this author lumps Dabney in with Thornwell as an advocate of the “popular theory,” he proves himself not only to not understand fully the issues at hand, but also to be one of the most extreme voices in this debate.<sup>10</sup>

B. *The Response of James Addison Quarles*

In July of 1870, James Addison Quarles briefly rebutted this article from his Thornwellian perspective. In Quarles’ estimation, it smacked of rationalism, and depreciated the work of God the Spirit. Quarles embraced the idea that ministers were inspired, in a particular sense, namely, that they are those in whom the Holy Spirit dwells, the temple of God. He asserted that God’s Spirit in the call to ministry “is an influence extraneous to the ordinary power of the means employed. The influence accompanies the means, but is something entirely independent of the means.”<sup>11</sup> He disagreed with the author’s charge that the practice of Presbyteries did not correspond with the theory propounded, contending “that it is the well-nigh universal custom of our Presbyteries to examine candidates closely as to the divinity of their call.”<sup>12</sup> Quarles also argued that references within the *Book of Church Order* of the Presbyterian Church to the examination of motives were proof that the Constitution did affirm the Thornwellian theory. He challenged the description of the church as a “free corporation” by asserting that the church “is not free in the only respect in which it can avail in this argument.

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9. “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 508, 519.

10. “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 508, 512-513.

11. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 340.

12. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 341.

With reference to God, with reference to Jesus, the only King in Zion, it is not free. His will is its law. Whom he chooses to bear office in his Church, them that church must receive.”<sup>13</sup>

Quarles also responded to the supposition that the ministerial shortage at that time was due to the Thornwellian view on the call prevailing within the church. First, he told the anonymous author that he could not have his cake and eat it too: if it was indeed the practice of the Presbyteries not to require a supernatural, direct call, then how could it also be the barrier preventing men from entering the ministry? Second, he pointed to the Methodists and Baptists, who also believed in a supernatural call, and yet they did not suffer from a ministerial shortage. Third, he reminded his readers that when Jesus was presented with a paucity of laborers, His counsel was to pray to the Lord and rely on Him to send workers into His harvest fields (Matthew 9:37-38). Finally, he expressed his opinions on the causes of the dearth of ministers: God’s sovereignty had only assigned so many ministers to the Presbyterian church; a lack of prayer to God to supply the deficiency; the rigid mental requirements of Presbyterian ministry; and the meager support given to ministers.<sup>14</sup>

Quarles ended his article by examining several passages of Scripture with regard to the call to the ministry. Though he disagreed with Dabney’s assessment of the non-applicability of the call of God to prophets and priests in the Old Testament (Quarles did therefore see Hebrews 5:4 as relevant to the call controversy<sup>15</sup>), yet he believed the Thornwellian position could be grounded sufficiently in the New Testament alone, if need be. He appealed to the Great Commission in Matthew 28:18-19 as demonstrating that “the duty and the right to bear this

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13. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 342.

14. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 342-343.

15. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 346-347.

commission can come alone from this central or supreme authority,”<sup>16</sup> and to John 15:16 and 20:21, Acts 1:24, I Corinthians 12:4-11, 18, and Ephesians 4:1, 11, to show that Jesus chooses His ministers. As to II Corinthians 5:20, Quarles unequivocally saw this passage as referring to gospel ministers, sent to beseech the nations to be reconciled to God through Jesus. The language of “ambassador” as applied to teaching elders “is an unanswerable proof that they must receive their appointment directly from the court of heaven,”<sup>17</sup> as indeed were all the titles given to those who hold this office.<sup>18</sup>

Quarles’ article was short, and thus he did not delve into the meat of the disagreement, as Porter and Adger were to do. Yet his closing statement revealed again the differing perspectives from which the two sides approached the issue of the call. Rather than emphasizing the vast number of men who should have been in the ministry but were not (either because they were avoiding God’s call or the academic and spiritual bar was too high for them to enter), Quarles focused upon the men who were in the ministry without God’s authorization:

It is our solemn conviction, that, so far from its being true that there are scores of men who ought to be in the ministry, and are not, because they have no divine call, we fear that there are scores in the ministry *who ought not to be, because they have no divine commission*. In these days of superficial piety, of the extensive spread instead of the intensive permeation of religion, so far from the Church lowering her standard of mental, spiritual, or divine qualification, it should more than ever heed the injunction: ‘Lay hands suddenly on no man,’ and beware of putting men to work who will build the walls of Zion with untampered mortar. May the Lord save his Church from the temptation of sacrificing quality to quantity! May he spare us the untold evils of an unsanctified and uncalled ministry!”<sup>19</sup>

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16. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 344.

17. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 346.

18. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 347-348.

19. Quarles, “What is a Call to the Gospel Ministry?”, 348.

C. *Abner Addison Porter's first contribution to the debate*

1. **The Life and Labors of Abner Addison Porter**

In January of 1872, a year and a half after Quarles wrote his response to the anonymous author, the Presbytery of Abner Addison Porter requested the *Southern Presbyterian Review* to publish the substance of a discourse he had given them on the call to the ministry.<sup>20</sup> As Porter is nearly unknown today compared to the other key participants in this debate, it is appropriate to spend a moment familiarizing ourselves with his life and ministry. Porter was born on October 2, 1817, to the Reverend Francis Hamilton Porter (1786-1845) and Isabella Kilpatrick Porter (1788-1860), in Asheville, North Carolina.<sup>21</sup> Porter's father, originally from South Carolina, had moved his family to Asheville two months before Porter was born, in order to take a call at the Presbyterian churches in Asheville and Reems (Rim) Creek. By the time Porter was thirteen years old, he had also lived in Spartanburg, South Carolina, and Selma, Alabama. He travelled north to attend Washington and Lee University, but graduated from Princeton University in 1838 with the English Salutatory academic honor.<sup>22</sup>

After studying at Columbia Theological Seminary, Porter was licensed by the Tuscaloosa Presbytery in the spring of 1842 and ordained and installed as pastor of two small churches in

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20. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 64n\*.

21. The following biographical information comes from information on Porter found in Alfred Nevin, ed., *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Encyclopedia Publishing Co., 1884), 1199, and at Ancestry.com (<https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/29627576/person/12285442720/facts>, accessed December 22, 2017). A. A. Porter's parents had six sons, four of whom were ministers: Abner Addison Porter, Joseph D. Porter (1821-1879), Rufus Kilpatrick Porter (1827-1869), and David H. Porter (1830-1873).

22. *Catalogue of the Officers and Alumni of Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Virginia, 1749-1888* (Baltimore: John Murphy & Co., 1888), 173; John Rogers Williams, ed., *Academic Honors in Princeton University, 1748-1902* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1902), 41. Porter actually presented the Valedictory oration, likely due to an excuse granted to the original appointee by the Faculty. Williams, *Academic Honors in Princeton University*, 41n2. The *Presbyterian Encyclopedia* states that Porter graduated from Princeton in 1836 or 1837, but Williams lists him as an 1838 honoree.

Greene County. He married Hannah Napier Leland of South Carolina on June 13, 1844. A year later the young couple had a daughter, Hannah Napier Porter, but sadly, Porter's wife died a day after giving birth to her. In the fall of that same year, Porter's father passed away. Sorrow did not cease, as his infant daughter also died just before her second birthday in 1847. The events of these years must have been devastating, yet by God's grace Porter was able to move forward and continue his ministry. He had moved to Charleston, South Carolina, to assist Thomas Smyth at the Second Presbyterian Church in that city. As a result of the Spirit's work, the congregation increased, and planted Glebe Street Church in 1848. It appears Porter was the congregation's first pastor. That same year, on May 11, 1848, he married Isabelle Jane Pratt in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. His daughter Isabelle May Porter was born on May 6, 1849. He remained at Glebe Street until 1851, when he relocated his family to Selma, Alabama, to pastor the First Presbyterian Church, which his father had planted in 1838.<sup>23</sup> Just after Porter began this pastorate, he knew the grief of bereavement once again, as Horace Southwood Porter, who had been born on March 28, 1851, died on April 4, 1852. Four more children were born to the Porters in Selma: Francis Leland Porter (July 10, 1853), Lillah Pratt Porter (June 1, 1855), Jeanette Hannah Porter (April 13, 1857), and Abner Addison Porter (November 13, 1859).

By 1860, Porter's health weakened, and he decided to give up pastoral work and move back to South Carolina. In Columbia he became the editor of the *Southern Presbyterian* newspaper. A third season of tragedy struck him in the early years of the 1860s. Henry Campbell Porter was born on November 4, 1860, but he only survived ten days. Porter's mother died that same year, and in 1862 his wife of fourteen years also passed away. In God's providence, Porter was married for a third time in 1864, to Sarah Elizabeth Black, who was twenty years younger.

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23. <http://www.cspressselma.com/our-history/> (accessed December 22, 2107).

The couple had two children in Spartanburg, South Carolina (where Porter began preaching in 1865), Mary Logan Porter in 1867 and another Francis Porter in 1869. Under direction of the Home Mission Committee of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, he visited Texas in 1868. The First Presbyterian Church in Austin had just gone through a bitter division between those who wanted to align with the Northern Presbyterian Church (the majority of the church) and those who wanted to remain connected to the Southern Presbyterian Church. The minority left and started a fledgling work in the city. When Porter visited, he saw the need of the tiny congregation and moved his family to Austin to pastor them.<sup>24</sup> Unfortunately his health failed in the midst of his ministry, and he passed away in Austin on December 8, 1872.

Porter was a highly respected minister in his day, known for his strong convictions and his remarkable piety, especially in prayer.<sup>25</sup> His obituary noted his effectiveness in ministry:

Abundant testimony is borne by his co-laborers in South Carolina and Alabama to his eminent ability and faithfulness in his work... Though laboring under many disadvantages in Texas, he was equal to the expectations formed concerning him. He had a power in setting forth the truth plainly and forcibly, seldom equaled. Of the pungency of his preaching a judgment may be formed from the remark of one who, after hearing him, said that he left less ground for the sinner to stand upon than any man he had ever heard. The last weeks of his life were a time of much suffering; but he left abundant testimony to the faithfulness of the Savior he had so long trusted and so faithfully and ably preached.<sup>26</sup>

John Bailey Adger, his antagonist in the debate over the call to the ministry, expressed his affection and appreciation for Porter upon hearing news of his death:

The names *friend* and *brother* have been applied to him throughout this discussion in the fullest sense in which they are ever used. A particular friendship of more than a quarter-century's duration bound us together, and it was never interrupted for an hour. He was eminently worthy to be loved, trusted, and admired. He leaves behind him, in the whole

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24. <https://cpcaustin.org/about/history-of-cpc/> (accessed December 22, 2017).

25. Nevin, *Presbyterian Encyclopedia*, 1199.

26. [https://www.ancestry.com/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/29627576/person/12285442720/media/a5e26536-504a-4d4b-8ed2-5ecd6fff22c5?\\_phsrc=pNP8&usePUBJs=true](https://www.ancestry.com/mediaui-viewer/collection/1030/tree/29627576/person/12285442720/media/a5e26536-504a-4d4b-8ed2-5ecd6fff22c5?_phsrc=pNP8&usePUBJs=true) (accessed December 22, 2017).

ministry of our Church, no man of broader intellect, combined with more commanding eloquence, thorough scholarship, true-heartedness, and humble piety. His character displayed all these excellencies in a very eminent degree.<sup>27</sup>

The esteem with which Adger held Porter, however, did not keep him from substantive disagreement over the issue of the call to the ministry.

## 2. Porter's View of the Call to the Ministry

Porter's first article was originally an oral discourse given near the end of his life. He opened by dilating upon the uniqueness of the church of Christ as an institution "without priests, without sacrifices, without altars, without a temple, or at least some sacred place."<sup>28</sup> All believers in Jesus were priests, set apart to serve God "according to the gifts and ability bestowed upon him by the providence of God and the grace of the Spirit."<sup>29</sup> The idea that giftedness determined call was a primary presupposition for Porter: "The *power to do* defines the duty and creates the call."<sup>30</sup> In addition to a general gifting and calling of all the saints, Porter recognized a special calling to office in the church in the areas of preaching, governing, and relief of the needy. Once again he asserted, "The gifts and qualifications which impart ability to fulfil [the office], and the appointment thereto by the Church, constitute *a call* to that office."<sup>31</sup>

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27. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 136n\*. See also the tribute to his gifts and grace in Nevin, *Presbyterian Encyclopedia*, 1199-1200. In addition to several journal articles, Porter published four pamphlets during his lifetime: *The Church Setting Up Her Banners: A Discourse Delivered at the Dedication of the Presbyterian Church, in Selma, Alabama, September 28<sup>th</sup>, 1851*; *On the Division of the Presbyterian Church: A Lecture, Delivered in Austin, Texas, December 5, 1869*; *Our Danger and Duty: A Discourse, Delivered in the Glebe Street Presbyterian Church, on Friday, December 6<sup>th</sup>, 1850*; *A Plea for the Old, Against the New, in Education: An Address Delivered at the Close of the Annual Examination of the Presbyterian High Schools, at Greenwood, Abbeville District, SC, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1850*. Harold Prince, *A Presbyterian Bibliography* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc. and The American Theological Library Association, 1983), 268.

28. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 64.

29. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 65.

30. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 66. Emphasis his.



Porter next turned to the main purpose of his article, discussing the question of how God calls men to the office of gospel minister. He rightly recognized, “There seems to be some difference of view among us in reference to this subject; at least some confusion of ideas and misapprehension of the truth and facts of the case.”<sup>32</sup> Affirming that all sides agreed that God is the one who calls, he described the disagreement in terms familiar to us by this point: is the minister’s commission and authority given directly and immediately by divine operation in his soul (“or at least by such a divine operation superadded thereto, as makes the person called conscious, and assures him, that it is Christ who calls”), or mediately and indirectly, through the word, providence, and the Church?<sup>33</sup> Porter, like Smyth and Dabney (and the anonymous author) before him, argued against the former and for the latter.

### **3. Porter’s Reasons Against the Position of Breckinridge and Thornwell**

Though Porter was skeptical that any in his day genuinely and consistently held the “direct and immediate” position, yet to those who professed to do so, he laid out nine arguments in opposition to it. First, and most significantly to him, he believed that the Thornwellian position,<sup>34</sup> however described, affirmed “nothing less than that the individual so called to the

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31. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 70. Emphasis his.

32. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 70.

33. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 71-72. Porter also explained the question in another way. Recognizing general agreement that conviction of duty to enter the ministry is essential to the call, and that the Holy Spirit grants this conviction in the soul, he posited several different scenarios: either the Spirit communicated His will directly and immediately, or through ordinary means but also works to give to the consciousness of the individual assurance that He is the one calling, or through ordinary means without any consciousness that He is calling, or a combination of these three modes, acting differently with different individuals. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry,” January 1872, 73.

34. Porter does not explicitly identify this position with Thornwell by name, though he does quote Breckinridge and Thornwell in describing the view. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 80.

ministry receives *a direct and special revelation* of the will of God in regard to his duty in this particular...The view in question amounts to this, or else to nothing.”<sup>35</sup> Assuming all his readers believed that the era of new revelation – or supernatural communication from God – had ceased, he left this point to be *prima facie* evidence against the “direct and immediate” understanding of the call.

Second, Porter argued that if Thornwell’s view were correct – if “the evidence of such a call to his own consciousness be necessary to authorise [sic] any one to undertake the work of the ministry” – then the confirming judgment of the Presbytery was unnecessary, or a similar testimony of the Spirit’s call was necessary for the Presbytery as well.<sup>36</sup> Third, Porter maintained that a direct and immediate call was not necessary, but rather the Spirit was able to call men into the ministry through a variety of means, so that “the divine commission and authority of the office, together with all its rights, powers, privileges, duties, and benefits, are as effectually established and secured.”<sup>37</sup> Fourth, he asserted that Thornwell’s view “opens a wide and dangerous door to fanaticism, superstition, and blind enthusiasm.” By placing the evidence of the call within a man’s consciousness apart from the use of ordinary means, Porter argued that the ignorant and fanatical were most likely to come into the ministry.<sup>38</sup>

Fifth, Porter agreed with Dabney that Thornwell’s view denied the doctrine of sola Scriptura. “It affirms that in addition to all [the Scriptures] reveal and teach in regard to the duty of Christians, the Spirit does directly and immediately reveal and make known, in many

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35. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 79-80. See also Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 71, 71n\*, 73, 77, and 78.

36. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 81.

37. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 81.

38. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 82.

instances, the duty of his servants.” By adding to the Bible (the only and sufficient rule of faith and practice) evidence impossible to be verified, Porter averred the Scriptures were undermined and warned that superstition would reign.<sup>39</sup> Sixth, Porter argued that the Thornwellian theory was inconsistent with the Bible, or at least added to the instructions given on this subject, since in neither I Timothy 3 nor Titus 1 did he find any mention “of the necessity that they should have a direct and immediate call thereto by the Spirit; not a word requiring of them a consciousness, conviction, or declaration, of any such call.” Indeed, “they omit altogether the one qualification which the advocates of this theory make the one most necessary and essential.”<sup>40</sup> Porter refused to accept that passages merely teaching that God is the one who calls men to gospel ministry were proof in favor of a direct and immediate call: “It is but a feeble and baseless misapprehension to suppose that a commission is not divine except it come direct and straight from his own hand.”<sup>41</sup> In particular, he acknowledged that the Holy Spirit commonly calls to extraordinary duties and offices in a direct manner, but he believed “we cannot argue from these extraordinary calls to those which are ordinary.”<sup>42</sup> Thus he agreed with Dabney that it was illegitimate to apply Hebrews 5:4 to gospel ministers, or to draw the conclusion from this passage that the Spirit’s call must therefore be direct and immediate, since there was not even a direct and immediate call for those who came after Aaron in the priesthood.<sup>43</sup>

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39. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 82.

40. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 83.

41. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 83.

42. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 74, 76.

43. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 74. He cites Owen in making his case against applying Hebrews 5:4 to the minister’s call.

Seventh, Porter understood the historical record as contradicting the “direct and immediate” position, since many men (he included Calvin, Knox, and Halyburton) had served God and the church without a consciousness of the Spirit’s direct and immediate agency. Eighth, Porter understood Thornwell’s view to be contrary to the Church’s teachings and testimonies.

His examination of authorities such as John Calvin, the First Book of Discipline of the Church of Scotland, Francis Turretin, and especially John Owen,<sup>44</sup> found them to teach that the call to the ministry was through ordinary means (the word, God’s providence, prayer, and exhortation to individuals), and that the Spirit executed this call by supplying the needed gifts and leading the Church to call men to its service.<sup>45</sup> As previously stated, Porter believed the church to hold “[t]he possession of these gifts and the call of the Church are the *call of God* – complete, perfect, and of divine obligation.”<sup>46</sup> Ninth, Porter stated that Thornwell’s theory was inconsistent with the practice of the Presbyterian Church in the United States. In his view, since the Presbyteries required every individual’s asserted call to be subject to “test, proof, and trial, and that not merely for the satisfaction and full conviction of the Church, *but also for those of the individual himself*,” then whenever a Presbytery forces a man to surrender “what to him is the higher and stronger evidence in favor of the lower and weaker,” the theory of a direct and immediate call, which to Porter was essentially a self-authenticating call, is either contradicted or is “a mere imagination.”<sup>47</sup>

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44. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 85-93.

45. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 84, 85.

46. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 85. Emphasis his.

47. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 93-94. Emphasis his.

#### 4. The Practical Import of Porter's View

Having rejected the theory set forth by Thornwell, Porter offered his own position in a series of summary points. Most relevant to our discussion are the fourth and the fifth:

4. The gift received by any one in this kingdom of the Lord determines the kind of work and service he is to render therein. In bestowing the ability and qualification for any work, or the opportunity lawfully to acquire them, the Spirit indicates his divine will that that person should perform that work. Thereby he designates him both to himself and the Church to that ministry and office. The possession of the gift is a call to the work.

5. The administration of the Spirit in the ordinary government of the Church, including the bestowal of gifts and ability for the work and service appointed to be done, is by and through means and instruments appointed and chosen and employed by him according to his sovereign and gracious will and pleasure.<sup>48</sup>

He believed that the Church had the responsibility to try and to prove the giftedness and fitness of a candidate before ordaining him to gospel ministry, and consequently, "Any one so placed in the office of the gospel ministry is truly called of God, has a divine commission and authority as such, is a minister of Christ and not of men, has been put into the ministry by him, is by him chosen and sent..."<sup>49</sup>

Three practical points followed from his principles regarding the call. First, "the Church ought, diligently and faithfully, to use means to secure an adequate and abundant number of ministers suitably prepared and qualified for the work."<sup>50</sup> Just as we do not despise effort in evangelism or prayer, so Porter counselled we ought not to reject the use of instruments and planning in increasing the number of gospel ministers. The means Porter had in mind were prayer, instruction in the Word ("touching the nature, necessity, uses, benefits, blessings, authority, privileges, and rewards thereof"), due appreciation and sustenance of those already in

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48. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 95.

49. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 95.

50. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 96.

the ministry, the latter's faithful discharge of ministerial duties "to maintain and make manifest its usefulness and honor, to make it a praise and a blessing in the Church and before the world," and encouragement and assistance to those who possessed the gifts required for ministry.<sup>51</sup>

Second, Porter held with Dabney that there were many "*who ought to be in the ministry and are not.*"<sup>52</sup> Vacant pulpits were an indication, not that Jesus had ceased preparing, qualifying and calling the ministers the church needed, but that many had "hid their talent in a napkin, and stood aside from their duty."<sup>53</sup> Porter lamented that the destitution of the Presbyterian Church was greater than any other denomination.<sup>54</sup> Another possible cause of this reality was that "the Church has not used the necessary means to obtain them from the Lord of the kingdom, or it has required and set up a standard of qualification for the ministry not authorized by the word of God, or it has adopted a theory in regard to the call to the ministry which is false and pernicious, which has no foundation in scripture, and which keeps them out."<sup>55</sup> Porter called for self-examination on the part of his readers, because it was clear to him that with regard to this situation there was the need to repent of sin.

Third, Porter encouraged the church to look around her to see who had been given gifts for ministry, and to call those identified to enter into the work. "It is not for the church in need of a minister to sit with folded hands and wait until one present himself, professing to be called of God and asking to be admitted to the office. But plain duty requires to bestir itself to inquire and make diligent search whether there may be any who has received such qualifications as the work

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51. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 97-99.

52. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 99. Emphasis his.

53. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 97.

54. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 103.

55. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1872), 100.

and the word of God demand.”<sup>56</sup> The need of the hour in Porter’s mind was not caution lest some would enter the ministry from unworthy motives, but courage and trust that the Lord of the harvest would provide for His sheep and His harvest fields.

Thus Porter laid down his pen, perhaps satisfied that his arguments were sound and unanswerable. As evidenced by the footnote introducing Porter’s article, however, the editors of the *Review* (whose number included John Bailey Adger) took issue with some of the positions taken by Porter, and announced their attention to respond in the April issue of the *Review*.

D. *John Bailey Adger’s first response to Porter*

1. **The Life and Labors of John Bailey Adger**

John Bailey Adger, the son of a wealthy merchant in Charleston, South Carolina, was born on December 13, 1810, and graduated in 1828 from Union College in New York, and in 1833 from Princeton Theological Seminary. He served as a missionary in Armenia from 1834 until 1846, and then labored among the African-American population in Charleston, helping to found what afterwards became the Zion Church. In 1857, after Benjamin Morgan Palmer had left Columbia Theological Seminary to pastor First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans, Adger took over as the Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Polity. After seventeen years of faithful service, he resigned his professorial chair in 1874, but continued to minister pastorally among several churches in South Carolina. He was a prolific author for the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, and he helped to edit the *Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*.

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56. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1872), 101.

His crowning literary achievement, however, was his autobiographical *My Life and Times*, completed just before his death on January 3, 1899.<sup>57</sup>

As seen by their overlap at Columbia Seminary and his editorial work on the *Review* and Thornwell's writing, Adger was close to the great theologian, whose untimely death in 1862 dealt an intellectual blow to the Southern Presbyterian Church. Adger was one of those whom the Lord raised up to fill the theological gap, especially on the matter of the call controversy. His knowledge of his fellow South Carolinian enabled him to understand and communicate Thornwell's view of the call (which was also Adger's view) perhaps better than anyone else living at the time. Thus in the issue of the *Southern Presbyterian Review* following Porter's article, Adger responded in summary fashion to the anonymous author of 1869 and with greater length to Porter.

## **2. Porter's Response to the Anonymous Author**

To the charge that the Standards of the Presbyterian Church do not authorize or teach the view propounded by Thornwell and Adger, Adger quoted the Westminster Confession's definition of the church, that "*Christ has given the ministry* to the church for the gathering and perfecting of the saints in this life to the end of the world..." With regard to the Form of Government of the PCUS calling the minister, among other titles, "God's messenger and Christ's ambassador," Adger declared, "Every one of these terms is replete with force and weight; and it will not do for a Presbyterian to make any effort to vacate them."<sup>58</sup> To the argument that actual

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57. Biographical information for Adger can be found in Nevin, *Presbyterian Encyclopedia*, 13-14, the obituary at <http://www.pcahistory.org/HCLibrary/periodicals/spr/bios/adger.html> (accessed January 5, 2014), and John Bailey Adger, *My Life and Times, 1810-1899* (Richmond: The Presbyterian Committee on Publication, 1899).

58. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 287-288. Emphasis his.



practice by Presbyteries contradicted his view, Adger replied, “The very fact that the man *presents himself* [as a candidate for ministry] is proof that he feels more or less certified in his own mind that he is called of God to that office. And the Book requires that Presbytery at the very outset examine closely and particularly into the motives which have influenced him in coming before them. His first and strongest motive ought to be, of course, that he may obey the call of God, and do his duty.”<sup>59</sup>

The anonymous author (as well as Porter) had also objected that the doctrine of a supernatural, direct, and immediate call was incompatible with the doctrine of Scripture’s sufficiency. Adger retorted that such an argument overreached, for the Protestant doctrine did not teach that the Bible tells individuals whether or not they are called to preach the gospel. “And what intelligent Protestant holds that the Bible is our rule of duty in such questions, independent of the supernatural guidance of the Spirit?...And the Holy Ghost does sometimes teach what is not written, as when he witnesses to this or that man that he is a child of God [Romans 8:15- 17].”<sup>60</sup> Finally, with regard to the supposition that the church as a free corporation makes her own ministers, Adger rejoined with the serious charge, “Church-made ministers are of course man-made. What we need is just the thing which the Reviewer over-generously gives away to the Prelatists – ‘a supernaturally-appointed ministry.’ We want in all our pulpits men authorised by no human power, but supernaturally, to take on them the ministry – men called by a direct, special, and personal vocation of the Spirit.”<sup>61</sup>

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59. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 288. Emphasis his.

60. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 289.

61. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 289.

### 3. Adger's Objection to Porter in General: Too Low a View of the Call

Adger then turned his attention to Porter's article. Though more satisfying to him than the anonymous author's contribution to the debate, Adger believed that Porter had "sometimes given expression to views which cannot be sustained, and that the general drift of the article appears to be rationalistic and unscriptural. The view taken of the call, we are constrained to say, is much too low."<sup>62</sup> Adger understood Porter to be denying that the man called to gospel ministry is "designated to his own consciousness to this office; or is made conscious that it is Christ who calls." Not only did Porter deny any direct or immediate work of the Holy Spirit, but "he especially objects to any consciousness on the individual's part, any assurance that it is Christ who calls."<sup>63</sup> In Adger's mind, this position robbed the divine call of its power, for if a man's conscience does not tell him that the Holy Spirit was calling him to the work, then his conscience "tells him nothing of force and value...[Porter] might just as well deny *that God calls*, as deny that the called man *hears, and knows that it is God who calls him*."<sup>64</sup>

In his review of Porter's article, Adger mentioned four primary areas of disagreement. First, he charged that Porter misunderstood and misrepresented the views of Dr. Breckinridge and Dr. Thornwell. Second, he held that Porter disparaged the call and the ministry by not making enough of the individual's convictions that he had been called by God. Third, he faulted Porter for his understanding of the Church's relation to the call, and the relationship of gifts to the call. Finally, he objected to Porter's explanation of the Holy Spirit's action in the call. We will examine each of these in turn.

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62. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 290.

63. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 289-90.

64. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 291. Emphasis his.

#### **4. Adger's Defense of Breckinridge and Thornwell**

Adger disagreed with Porter's allegation that the view of Breckinridge and Thornwell affirmed a revelation additional to the Bible and opened the door to fanaticism and enthusiasm. By lengthy quotations from the documents we have already examined, Adger showed that the two men recognized and avoided any sort of fanaticism by setting up guardrails around their contention of a direct and immediate call. Breckinridge and Thornwell both acknowledged that the testimony of conscience, as important as it is, could not be final and conclusive. They both also understood that the assurance of one's call to ministry is often beset by perturbations. Adger sought to explain that Breckinridge "never dreamed (any more than Dr. Thornwell did) of asserting that every man must be called of God who is so convinced in his own mind, although his view of the subject requires the converse proposition, viz., that whoso is called of God never fails to hear the call and to be convinced that he does hear it." Or to state it otherwise, though the two men claimed that the call of God never fails to be convincing, neither of them uttered the converse, "that the man convinced, never fails to be one called of God."<sup>65</sup> Far from falling into a ditch of charismatic extravagance, Adger contended that Breckinridge and Thornwell held their opinions with sober judgment. Their view of the Spirit's work in the call to ministry was parallel to his work in drawing a sinner to Christ – so "why should Dr. Thornwell be charged with wild, fanatical ideas, because he ascribes another similar, direct, and supernatural operation to the Holy Ghost?... Dr. Thornwell talks of no extravagant pretensions to any infallible call, but he wants an assurance of the call like the assurance of his own pardon and acceptance."<sup>66</sup> Adger summarized what Breckinridge and Thornwell were seeking in their writings on the call: "Fools

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65. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 293-294.

66. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 295.

rush in where angels fear to tread; but a man who would venture on the work of an ambassador for God, ought to be certified to his own heart that he is no intruder, but has received his commission from above.”<sup>67</sup>

## **5. The Conscience and the Call**

Adger’s second problem with Porter’s view was that it rationalistically depreciated and disparaged the spiritual aspect of the call within a man’s conscience, and thus denigrated the ministry itself. Porter’s designating a man’s claim to being convinced and assured in conscience that God has called him as fanaticism based on new revelation was for Adger far along the road toward rationalism.<sup>68</sup> Adger, on the contrary, held that “this assurance no true minister of God ever did entirely lack.”<sup>69</sup> He took issue with Porter’s reading of the histories of Calvin, Knox, and Halyburton, insisting instead that the narratives of the calls of these men and their treatments of the ministerial call argue instead that they held to “a supernatural conviction of duty, wrought by the immediate agency of the Holy Ghost – a settled conviction of a fearful trust imposed by the King Eternal, as the necessary secret experience of every true minister.”<sup>70</sup>

To Porter’s argument that Scripture was against the theory of a direct and immediate supernatural call, Adger replied first that I Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are not a description of preachers as such, and therefore the argument breaks down. Secondly, he stated that his view was not that a Spirit-wrought conviction was one of the qualifications for office, but rather

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67. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 295.

68. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 296-297.

69. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 298.

70. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 298-299. He discusses these men on pages 298-304.

constituted one of the three elements that evinced God's call. Thirdly, Adger turned the argument against Porter by declaring that the two pastoral epistles said nothing about any sort of call at all, whether immediate or mediate, direct or indirect. Adger spilled considerable ink engaging Porter's view of Hebrews 5:4, and his view of John Owen's understanding of that passage and the ministerial call. Unsurprisingly, Adger affirmed that Hebrews 5:4 has bearing on the question of the call to ministry – but he grants that it is by way of application, rather than direct teaching of that text.<sup>71</sup> Adger cited Owen, claiming that the Englishman would “certainly not say with Dr. Porter, that the use and application of this text to set forth, that none may under-take a church-office ‘without a call similar to that of Aaron and our Lord, finds no shadow of support,’ for he makes that use of the passage himself. It is one thing, of course, to expound, and another to apply a passage of Scripture. It appears to be clear that the Holy Spirit did intend to signify by this passage all the truth set forth by Owen in his ‘Observations’ as quoted.”<sup>72</sup> Adger believed that Owen, if he had been alive in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, would side with him over against Porter and those who shared Porter's views:

It is freely admitted that Owen's writing abound with rebukes and warnings against the enthusiastic spirit so rife in his times, and that he was led by discovering on every side of him such swarms of delirious sectaries of every name, to give great prominence in many of his discourses to the monstrous evils of fanatical delusion on the part of pretenders to immediate revelations; but it cannot be allowed that the great theologian ever called in question the Holy Spirit's direct and special dealings with the individual conscience. On the contrary, we affirm and stand prepared to prove it, that his works abound with the most express testimonials to the Spirit's direct and immediate operations on the souls of men. Our age has its own peculiar form of spiritualistic heresy, but it has another tendency also the very opposite of what is spiritualistic – it denies the supernatural. As

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71. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 305-306.

72. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 306. Adger also challenged Porter's reliance on the “prince of theologians,” questioning, “whether the great Independent is indeed worthy of the supreme confidence which Dr. Porter would have us repose in him, when, leaving the general field of theological doctrine, he comes specifically to treat of the Church in its relations to the ministry...[T]he principles held by Presbyterians and by Independents respectively diverge from each other very widely as concerns the office-bearers and the members in the Christian Society.” Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 307-308.

always, so now the truth lies between false extremes. Owen can be quoted largely against one of the two extremes; but it is a great error to charge him with himself running into the other. He is as far as possible from denying or excluding the supernatural. If he were alive to-day, he would not be found striving to depress, but rather to elevate the tone of the prevailing sentiment amongst us upon this solemn question of a call to preach the gospel.<sup>73</sup>

## **6. The Church and the Call**

Adger's third objection to Porter's article and the view he propounded was its similarity to the anonymous author of the 1869, and to August Neander, the 19<sup>th</sup> century German church historian, in its understanding of the Church and its relationship to the minister's call. Adger rejected out of hand Porter's characterization of giftedness and qualification constituting a call. In his mind, such a view makes the Church the direct caller, and God the indirect caller. The Church becomes the one making the selection rather than God. If the ground on which the church ordains a man to gospel ministry is based simply on the possession of gifts, then the Church ought to call every person who is able to preach, whether he senses any inward persuasion or not. Adger declared incredulously, "Thus the ability to preach, as the Church shall be satisfied that a man possesses it, without any inward conviction of his own that he is called to the work, for that is rather a bad mark – a sign of the fanatic, being a claim to special revelation – this ability to preach recognized by the people is all the call any minister needs!...The idea is preposterous!"<sup>74</sup> With regard to the perceived need for more ministers that Adger's view supposedly perpetuated, his solution followed that put forth by Thornwell: "What we want is better preachers, rather than more preachers – more life and power in the ministry, rather than

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73. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 307. For more on this tension in American theology generally, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press: 2003), 69ff.

74. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 310.

more ministry. Instead of shutting out the Spirit of God from this work of calling men into the ministry, let us more implicitly confide to him the selection of them. Instead of putting the Church into the Spirit's place, let us call on her to go to her knees in earnest prayer for the Lord of the harvest himself to thrust forth laborers into his harvest."<sup>75</sup>

## 7. The Spirit and the Call

Adger's final protest against Porter's article lay in "its erroneous representation of the Spirit's action in the call."<sup>76</sup> Adger rightly recognized that the Spirit's part in the call was the heart of the question before the participants in this debate. He began this last section of his response to Porter by defining five terms that were key in the controversy: revelation, extraordinary, supernatural, direct, and immediate. Adger contended that "revelation" can be defined strictly and widely. Strictly speaking, revelation "signifies the immediate and direct communication of God's will to men which is contained in the Scriptures." Adger understood Porter to insinuate that the term is only used correctly in this narrow sense. Yet Adger argued that the Scriptures teach that the word of God must be accompanied by the inward work of the

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75. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 310-311. Adger explained further later on in his discussion, "[W]e may preach publicly and privately about the dearth of ministers, instructing all men, both old and young, relative to the want of more laborers in the vineyard, and especially urging what our Saviour commanded, that we pray the Lord of the harvest to thrust forth such. But prayer for a blessing of course implies every legitimate effort on our part to obtain it. And he who commanded the praying would not forbid, but encourage all proper efforts. It is for the Lord to call; but he does not despise, but honor his own means. And he may sometimes make known his call in one way and sometimes in another, sometimes blessing one means and sometimes another, though still ever acting as the sovereign dispenser of all gifts, graces, and calls. Yes! and we may not only as individuals signify to any man our impressions that he has the needful gifts and graces and call, and our desires to see him serving the Lord and his Church in the ministry, but a whole Church may urge any man, whom they desire, to undertake this work; and a Presbytery may of their own motion signify to any man that they consider him to be called. The call from God is indicated in the being called of the Church. *But let no man go forward upon any such intimations of his duty from other men without having in his own soul the settled conviction that it is not merely man, but God who calls.*" Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 332-333. Emphasis mine.

76. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 311.

Spirit to effect salvation (he quotes Ephesians 1:17 in support, as well as Charles Hodge, “God does hold immediate intercourse with the souls of men”<sup>77</sup>). For Adger, then, “revelation” could also have a broader definition: “[A]ny communication of his will which God makes to man.”

Adger found in this disagreement over whether there could be a wider sense to the term “revelation” a key to the whole debate: “[T]he question between us and Dr. Porter, is, whether or not God can and does communicate, or reveal, his will to those whom he calls into the ministry by any direct teaching of the Spirit. We affirm that he can and does, and Dr. Porter denies. And he aims to employ this word *revelation* against our doctrine of the call, by charging that it supposes new ‘*revelations*’ to the disparagement of the written word of God.”<sup>78</sup>

Adger understood the “extraordinary” officers in Jesus’ church to be apostles, prophets, and, in a sense, evangelists. The extraordinary call was always “authenticated to those to whom [the officer] was sent by extraordinary signs.” Adger recognized that Porter accused his view of applying to the ordinary call what only belonged to the extraordinary call. But Adger stated that he used the terms “direct” and “immediate” with respect to the ordinary call in a different sense than he would with respect to the extraordinary call. To say that a man was conscious of the Spirit’s immediate and direct call was not, for Adger, tantamount to an extraordinary call.<sup>79</sup>

“Supernatural” was another term over which there was debate. Adger defined this term as “that which is not by nature, but above it. The supernatural is the divine and the spiritual...” Following Thornwell, Adger states that the “supernatural” flows from the gracious illumination of the Spirit. So Thornwell’s view of the call as a “supernatural conviction of duty, wrought by

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77. Quoted from Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*, I:67.

78. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 311-312. Emphasis his.

79. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 312.



the immediate agency of the Holy Ghost” speaks of a conviction or consciousness of the Holy

Spirit’s work within a man. Again Adger saw a stark divide between his position and Porter’s:

And so it comes to this, that while the whole operation of saving grace is indeed supernatural – there being a supernatural Agent and a supernatural work by him, this supernatural Agent commissioning men to preach supernatural truth, and effecting by his almighty power a supernatural salvation – yet must we not dare to say that this initial part, this fundamental act by which he commissions his messengers to carry the news of salvation to perishing men, has in it aught of the *supernatural*!<sup>80</sup>

Adger wondered at the fact that Porter viewed the use of the term “supernatural” to the call as an indication of fanaticism and enthusiasm.

As to the terms “direct” and “immediate,” Adger understood Thornwell to mean first “specific” – of this particular man to this particular work – and second, that no *human agency* lies between the conscience of the called and the one calling. “The terms *direct and immediate* relate to the question whether the Church and the Presbytery can certify to any man that he is called, unless he have the inward persuasion of his own conscience also.”<sup>81</sup> Adger did not deny (and affirmed that Dr. Thornwell did not deny) that the Holy Spirit uses the general truths of the word to imprint his call upon a man’s conscience, but he insisted “that the word furnishes no special declaration touching any particular individual’s duty to preach the gospel, and that it is not of itself sufficient therefore to set forth his duty in the premises without the direct and immediate teachings of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>82</sup>

In light of these definitions, Adger held that two of aspects of Porter’s view of the Spirit’s call denied the Scriptures and the Presbyterian standards. He believed that Porter contravened

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80. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 313.

81. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 314. Emphasis his.

82. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 314

Biblical teaching first, by denying any direct and immediate communication of the Spirit with regard to doctrine or duty, and second, by denying that the recipient of the Spirit's work or call can be conscious or assured that such a work or call is in fact of the Spirit. He held that these denials were dishonoring to the Spirit and subversive of the doctrine of assurance.

With regard to the first denial, Adger recognized that Porter's view exalted the church and the word of God – but at a cost, namely, the Holy Spirit. “[O]ur brother, in his zeal to overthrow the doctrine of a supernatural call, would like to prove that the Church herself is competent to make her selection of men, and each man whom she calls able, through the word, to decide his duty, without any direct aid of the Holy Spirit!...[S]urely it is labor lost to strive at the protection of the glory of the word as against the Holy Ghost.”<sup>83</sup> Adger took issue with Porter's limiting the Spirit to the use of the word as an indispensable instrument. Adger held the opposite, that the Spirit is free to use the word, or not use the word, as He sees fits. In Adger's estimation, just as the Spirit works in regeneration, so He works in the call, for the greater work of regeneration includes the lesser work of communicating knowledge. “If we can accept the truth that the Holy Ghost directly and immediately quickens every dead sinner, so that he can begin to hear and understand the word; surely we need not stagger at the doctrine of the sovereign Spirit's immediately operating on the soul of believers to communicate the knowledge of truth and duty.”<sup>84</sup> Adger's understanding was that the word was the only rule of faith and practice, but it was not the only guide. He pointed out the Westminster Confession's emphasis upon the Spirit's illumination, as well as the fact that “the infallible rule of faith does not and cannot give us

83. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 315, 316.

84. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 316. He writes, “When the infant, the insane, or the idiot, is regenerated, who may venture to assert that the Spirit requires to use the truth at all?” Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 317.

specific directions touching every point of our duty.”<sup>85</sup> When faced with a perplexing choice, we have no need of a new revelation, for the word of God is sufficient; “yet we do need, and in the goodness of God we have, a guide whose secret, inward monitions are made directly upon our hearts, and conduct us in the way in which we should go.”<sup>86</sup> Contrary to Porter, Adger held forth the communication of gifts for ecclesiastical office as one clear example of an ordinary operation of the Spirit which cannot be denied to be direct and immediate. “Such being the manner of the Spirit in furnishing men with gifts for office in the Church, upon what ground can it be denied that he directly and immediately calls them to undertake office?”<sup>87</sup> If it was not dangerous to affirm that the Spirit qualifies a man immediately and directly, Adger saw no problem with insisting that the Spirit calls a man immediately and directly.

Porter’s second denial, that the subject of the Spirit’s work cannot be aware of this work in his consciousness, troubled Adger greatly, and he pointed to the Spirit’s witness to our spirits as a counter-argument to Porter’s position. Since Thornwell never responded to Smyth’s objections related to the witness of the Spirit, Adger’s comments at this point are a significant contribution to the debate as a whole.<sup>88</sup> The Spirit’s witness is an element of what Adger calls “the assurance of hope,” as distinguished from “the assurance of faith” (as Smyth noted above, the latter, unlike the former, is of the essence of faith). Adger points out that the Westminster Confession does not classify the Spirit’s witness as “extraordinary revelation” even though “it is an immediate act of the Spirit when he witnesses with our spirits that we are the children of God,

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85. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 316.

86. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 317.

87. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 318.

88. It is worth noting, however, that Adger never refers to Smyth’s articles directly.

for it is not the word which he uses.”<sup>89</sup> To Adger, Porter’s denial enervated the Spirit’s ministry: “What then is the witness of the Spirit worth to us if we cannot know that it is his? How can he constitute an earnest, a seal, a pledge, a token of our acceptance, if we cannot be conscious of his presence and operations within us? As well deny the Spirit’s witness at once, as deny that we can be immediately conscious it is his.”<sup>90</sup> Adger again argued from the greater to the lesser: if we are conscious of the Spirit’s immediate work of witnessing that we are children of God, why is it incredible that we would be conscious of His immediate work of communicating a direct call to the ministry?

#### **8. Adger’s Discussion of Thornwell on the Spirit’s Role in the Christian Life and in the Call to the Ministry**

Adger supported his position with arguments from the work of John Owen and Charles Hodge, but it is his references to other writings of Thornwell on the Spirit’s work beside his writings on the call that are the most enlightening for this debate. Adger brings us as close as we can come to how Thornwell would have answered Thomas Smyth, had he written a response to Smyth’s two articles. In his writing on Roman Catholic baptism, Thornwell declared that the Scripture “clearly revealed and earnestly inculcated” that “the faith by which we apprehend the Redeemer as the foundation of our hope, depends upon the *immediate testimony* of God. It is supernatural in its evidence as well as supernatural in its origin.”<sup>91</sup> Thornwell held that the

89. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 319. Adger is referring to *Westminster Confession of Faith* 18.2-3, though he does not cite it.

90. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 320.

91. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 323. Emphasis his. Adger is quoting Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 3:399.

Spirit's immediate and direct testimony was paramount to vital theology and needed throughout the Christian's life:

Unquestionably the direct witness of the Spirit to the fact of our conversion is one of the most comfortable elements of Christian experience – it is the only evidence which is productive of full and triumphant experience...So important an element of personal religion is the direct witness of the Spirit, that where it is cordially embraced it will infuse vitality into a dead system, counteract the principles of a professed Remonstrant, and mould [sic] his experience into a type of doctrine which he ostensibly rejects. It is the redeeming feature of modern Arminianism; to it the school of Wesley is indebted for its power; it is a green spot in the desert, a refreshing brook in the wilderness. Wherever it penetrates the heart, it engenders a spirit of dependence upon God, a practical conviction of human imbecility, and an earnest desire for supernatural expressions of divine favor; it maintains a constant communion with the Father of lights, a habitual anxiety to walk with God, which, whatever may be the theory of grace, keeps the soul in a posture of prayer, and cherishes a temper congenial with devotion and holiness. He that seeks for the witness of the Spirit must wait upon God; and he that obtains it, has learned from the fruitlessness of his own efforts, his hours of darkness and desertion, his long agony and conflicts, that it is a boon bestowed in sovereignty, the gift of unmerited grace. It is through this doctrine that the personality of the Spirit as an element of Christian experience is most distinctly presented. It compels us to adore him as a living Agent, working according to the counsel of his will, and not to underrate him as a mere influence connecting moral results with their causes.<sup>92</sup>

In these words we see the importance of the Holy Spirit to Thornwell's experiential theology. The Spirit's direct witness evinces His personality, and brings comfort and life to the people of God and to their theological systems.

In his treatise on the personality of the Holy Spirit,<sup>93</sup> Thornwell unfolded his position to a greater degree. Against those who believe that the Spirit's work is not known by the one in whom He works, Thornwell wrote: "Such are the relations of the Spirit to the understanding and

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92. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 323-324. Adger is quoting Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 3:407-408.

93. Adger, in his editorial note prefacing this discourse, tells us that Thornwell delivered it in the South Carolina College Chapel in December, 1843, and in Charleston, South Carolina, in April 1845. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 2:335. Thus these words were written before he and Smyth wrote in the first two volumes of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, and so they are not a response to Smyth. But as Smyth pastored in Charleston, it is likely that he had this address in mind as he wrote his response to Thornwell in 1848.

consciences of men in applying the great salvation of the gospel that it seems to be impossible that his office should ever be discharged in the mind of a sinner, without producing a consciousness of the extraordinary change which has been effected and a consequent impression of the distinct personality of the agent by whom it was wrought.”<sup>94</sup> Such is particularly true in regard to the Spirit’s work of witness bearing, of which Paul speaks in Romans 8. Smyth had denied “the *sensible and self-evidencing nature* of this *process* as a necessarily required test and evidence of the reality of what is thus produced,” but Thornwell was firm: “How can there be a testimony of the Spirit separate and distinct from the testimony of our own hearts, if, after all, we know the presence of the Spirit only from the effects which he impresses on us? How can a witness assure us of a fact, when we do not *know* that the witness is speaking?”<sup>95</sup>

Responding to the accusation that his views would breed an unbiblical fanaticism and enthusiasm, he contended:

Every dreamer, it is said, may receive the ravings of a frantic imagination as the genuine impulses of the Spirit of God. This is nothing more than to say that faith, like every other faculty of our nature, is capable of being abused...[T]he delusions of fancy could never be mistaken for the inspiration of the Spirit if there were no reasons to believe in the truth and genuineness of Divine and supernatural impressions. Still, the argument from abuse is never legitimate. The perceptions of the senses are sometimes delusive... [But shall] we, therefore, from the known and acknowledged abuse of the fundamental principles of knowledge, be led to deny the reality of sensation or the certainty of intuitive convictions?<sup>96</sup>

The potential for abuse, then did not drive Thornwell away from his position. Indeed, in writing to Breckinridge in 1845, he to some degree did not eschew the moniker of “enthusiast,” but

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94. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 328. Adger is quoting Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 2:345-346.

95. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 328. Adger is quoting Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 2:355. For Smyth’s quote, see page 42n108 above.

96. Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, 2:361-362.

embraced what he was convinced was fundamentally Biblical practice: “My friends sometime charge me with a spirit of fanaticism, but it is my deliberate conviction that the only way of arriving at a knowledge of the divine will in regard to us is by simplicity of purpose and earnest prayer.”<sup>97</sup>

To better understand Thornwell’s view of the immediate and direct call, Adger quoted a lengthy discussion from a friend of Thornwell (unnamed, but perhaps John Lafayette Girardeau?). This friend succinctly summarized Thornwell’s position: “*first*, that the call is *supernatural*, in the sense that it originate with God and not in the processes of the believer’s experience, or in the agency of human beings either as individuals or as organisations; and *secondly*, that the call is *immediate*, in the sense that it is directly from God by immediate impressions made upon the man’s own mind, and is not dependent upon the testimony of other men, nor derived from any special deliverance of the word.”<sup>98</sup> Recognizing what we have seen already, that Thornwell saw an analogy between the call to the ministry and the witness of the Holy Spirit, he noted that Thornwell distinguished between “the indirect and mediate testimony of our own spirits, and the direct and immediate testimony of the Holy Spirit, to the fact that we are children of God.”<sup>99</sup> The testimony of our own spirits is inferred from our reasoning based upon the Scripture, and is natural, not supernatural. The testimony of the Holy Spirit is not inferential, but direct and immediate: “The Spirit therefore in this case does not testify *through* the truth, but *in concurrence with* the truth; he does not contradict the word – he concurs with its general principles.”<sup>100</sup> Likewise, explained Thornwell’s friend, Thornwell held that “the call is

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97. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 331. Adger is quoting Palmer, *The Life and Letters of James Henley Thornwell*, 266.

98. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 327. Emphasis his.

99. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 325.

not *through* the truth of the word, though it *concurs with* the word and the facts of Christian experience.” Since there is no place in the word of God where any individual man is obligated to do a particular duty, “in the absence of any declaration of the word making it the duty of *this* man to preach, the Spirit immediately convinces *him* that such is *his* duty.”<sup>101</sup> The immediate and direct call was kept from fanatical extremes by way of the necessary external evidence for the call, namely, the concurring judgment of God’s people and the elders of the church. Thornwell’s friend made clear Thornwell’s view: “[T]he individual, though convinced himself, must be approved, and otherwise the internal evidences of his call are refuted. The conclusion in this case must be, not that he was led into error by a true call of the Spirit, but that he erred in his conviction that he had such a call. Thus the danger of fanaticism is guarded against as effectually as the imperfection of the Church will admit.”<sup>102</sup>

In concluding his response to Porter, Adger listed in bullet point fashion his primary points of contention with Porter’s article:

It will not do for Presbyterians to disparage the supernatural, and cherish the semi-rationalistic... We must not deny that whenever God truly calls, he can and does make the called to hear. We must not hold that gifts always determine the call, as well positively as negatively; for that would bring into the pulpit many of both sexes whom God has certainly not called to preach... We must not encourage any man to enter the ministry who is not persuaded internally of his own call from God... let us never say that the Church may testify that the man is called of God, but that the man himself can give no such testimony lest he prove himself fanatical thereby... It will not do for Presbyterians to say that [the Holy Spirit] stands at a distance and never comes near to act directly on our souls... [W]e may not confine him to any channels; we may not assert that he acts always through the word and by the Church.<sup>103</sup>

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100. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 325.

101. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 327. Emphasis his.

102. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 325.

103. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 332, 333.



For Adger, the controversy over the call to the ministry was at its heart a controversy over the nature of the Holy Spirit's work.

E. *Porter's Reply to Adger's Remarks*

1. **Misrepresentation and Misunderstanding**

In the January 1873 edition of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, Porter published his reply to the article by Adger. An editorial note explains that his response was delayed due to failing health, and indeed, by the time it was published, Porter had passed away, thus making this article "the last important labor performed by our brother with his pen."<sup>104</sup> Porter adamantly claimed that Adger had unfairly (albeit unintentionally) misrepresented his views in two primary places. First, Porter took offense at Adger's portrayal of his view of the Holy Spirit's work. He attributed the distortion to the fact that Adger "seems to confound a real, present, personal, gracious agency of the Divine Spirit with that which is direct and immediate; to recognize no distinction between them, and to suppose that when the latter is denied the former is also rejected. It is impossible otherwise to account for the objections he sometimes advances against the article reviewed and the manner in which he represents its positions."<sup>105</sup> Far from denying all direct and immediate action of the Spirit in the call, Porter asserted he only denied "one kind of direct and immediate action of the Spirit therein, viz.: a direct and immediate communication of God's will in the matter."<sup>106</sup> Porter reacted strongly against the charge that he condemned the use

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104. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1873), 90n\*.

105. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1873), 91.

106. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1873), 92. Porter is referring to Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 314.

of the term “supernatural” with respect to the call, and affirmed his willingness to accept Adger’s definition without hesitation.<sup>107</sup>

Porter charged Adger with a second area of misunderstanding and misrepresentation in his appearing “to confound ‘conscience’ and ‘consciousness,’ and the testimony of consciousness with the testimony of conscience or a conviction of duty.”<sup>108</sup> He disagreed with Adger’s accusation that he had denied that a man called could have an assured conviction in his conscience that the Spirit had called him, and suggests that Adger had taken what he had written about the consciousness and misapplied it to the conscience and the conviction of duty. The true point of disagreement, in Porter’s view, was not regarding a man’s conviction of his call, but

as to the way in which it is arrived at, how it is produced. The theory of the reviewer affirms that it is the result of and follows an operation of the Spirit making known to the individual directly and immediately the will of God and designating him to his own consciousness to the work of the ministry. The theory I advocate teaches that the knowledge of the divine will is communicated to him through means and instrumentalities; and the consequent conviction of duty, of a divine call to enter the ministry may be just as clear, strong, assured, settled, and certain in this case as in the other.<sup>109</sup>

Porter took offense that Adger claimed he depreciated the spiritual and internal aspect of the call, since in his mind “the question is not as to the fact, the reality, or the degree of [the Spirit’s] agency, but as to the *nature* of it.”<sup>110</sup> Yet he did continue to insist, “[I]f to reject the idea that the Spirit does directly and immediately communicate to men any knowledge of doctrine or of duty in the present economy of the divine kingdom, is indeed a low and rationalistic view of his work,

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107. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 92-93.

108. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 94.

109. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 95.

110. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 96. Emphasis his.

then must I in truth plead guilty to the charge. For in fact I do reject that idea and regard it as ‘fanatical and dangerous.’”<sup>111</sup>

## **2. The Core Issue: the Spirit’s Role in the Call to the Ministry**

Besides these two points of misrepresentation (though also of remaining disagreement), Porter identified the “heart of this question” as the Spirit’s role in the call and His work in general. He held fast to his claim that the Spirit’s making known directly and immediately any doctrine or duty was indeed revelation, and unsurprisingly disagreed with Adger’s widening the sense of this word. Any communication of God’s will by any direct teaching of the Spirit was “revelation properly so called,” and rejected by Porter.<sup>112</sup> He did affirm that the enlightening work of the Spirit was needed to understand, apply, and obey the Word of God, “but in this teaching of the Spirit he reveals nothing more than what is written, and the effect of his teaching is only the efficacious and saving knowledge and use of the Word contained in the Scriptures.”<sup>113</sup> With regard to the allegation that he believed the church to be competent to select her ministers without any direct aid of the Spirit, Porter responded, “I believe in [the Spirit’s] real, present, personal, and if the reviewer please, supernatural aid. I admit even *direct* aid in Dr. Thornwell’s sense of putting the soul in a condition to receive, discern and accept the truth; but in the reviewer’s sense of an immediate revelation of God’s will, certainly not; and few beside the reviewer, I think, will admit that.”<sup>114</sup> The argument from the Spirit’s direct action of regeneration

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111. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 96.

112. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 98.

113. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 97.

114. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 98. Emphasis his.

to a direct action of calling a man to ministry did not follow for Porter, since regeneration “does not communicate any knowledge of truth or duty...And while all orthodox theologians hold that this act of regeneration is by the direct and mighty power of God, I know of none who teach that, in the work of effectual calling, the sinner is taught by a direct and immediate operation of the Spirit. They all hold with our Confession of Faith, that for this the Word of God is the indispensable means.”<sup>115</sup> Thus Porter viewed Adger’s charge that he exalted the Word at the expense of the Spirit as “simply gratuitous” and groundless.<sup>116</sup> With regard to the Spirit’s witness mentioned in Romans 8:16, Porter is dismissive: “[T]he reviewer must be aware that the view he adopts has never been generally received by Calvinistic theologians, and he is not warranted in founding an argument on the assumption of its truth. The Reformed theology has always been chary of adopting it, and often has opposed it most strenuously.”<sup>117</sup>

Porter does not back down from applying the labels “fanatical and dangerous” to the belief that the Spirit gives “inward monitions” and “immediate suggestions as to our duty.”<sup>118</sup>

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115. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 99; cf. 102. Emphasis his. He argued as well that the soul is not conscious of the Spirit’s direct action in regeneration or sanctification, citing John Owen (he disagreed with Adger’s reading of Owen), Thomas Chalmers, and A. A. Hodge. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 115ff.

116. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 99. Porter also found Adger’s contention that the Spirit’s communication of gifts for ministry was a point in Adger’s favor to be a “most singular” argument, since for Porter gifts are in part the result of natural constitution and in part the result of providential training. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 100-102.

117. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 119. He quotes from A. A. Hodge’s *Commentary on the Westminster Confession of Faith* at this point: “Some have maintained that the passage [Romans 8:16] teaches that the Holy Spirit, in some mysterious way, directly reveals to our spirits the fact, that we are the children of God, as one man immediately conveys information to another man. The objections to this view are, that Christians are not and cannot be conscious of any such injection of information from without into the mind, and that, as far as such testimony alone is concerned, we would be unable to distinguish certainly the testimony of the Spirit from the conclusion of our own reasons, or the suggestions of our own hearts. An expectation of such direct communications would be likely to generate enthusiasm and presumption.” A. A. Hodge, *A Commentary on the Confession of Faith* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1869), 326-327. Porter declines to quote Hodge’s following sentence: “Some have maintained, on the opposite extreme, that the Spirit witnesses with our spirits only indirectly through the evidence afforded by the graces he has formed within us.” Hodge then proceeds to give what in his mind is a synthetic position, a golden mean between the two extremes.

Belief in “inward and direct impressions, suggestions, monitions, impulses, voices and revelations from the Spirit, has characterized fanatics and enthusiasts and mystics from the beginning...And if we admit the truth and reality of them in a call to the ministry, or at any other point, evidently we have opened a door for their indefinite encouragement and extension.”<sup>119</sup> Porter noted that, from his vantage point and perspective, “there are a good many indications that views are spreading among us in regard to the agency of the Holy Spirit, in no small degree tainted with the odor of the old and dangerous mysticism and enthusiastic errors, and if they are not speedily corrected there is no telling to what they may grow.”<sup>120</sup> Using Adger’s own statements and the definition of mysticism Adger supplies from Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*,<sup>121</sup> Porter pronounced that Adger manifestly meets the standard of a mystic.<sup>122</sup> Porter saw himself as walking (“in accord with...evangelical theologians of the highest authority”) between the two extremes of rationalism and fanaticism.<sup>123</sup>

### **3. Porter Responds to Adger’s Charge that His Views Were Neander’s Views**

Porter closed his response to Adger’s remarks by engaging with the objection that his views were too closely aligned to Neander’s, and by interacting with the other writings of Thornwell that Adger had set forth in his reply. He retorted that his positions on the Church were

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118. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 100.

119. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 103. To this point, Porter adduces selections from the writings of John Owen, Jonathan Edwards, and A. A. Hodge. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 104-114.

120. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 114.

121. Adger, “Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry,” 322.

122. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 118-119.

123. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 120.

the plain teachings of the Bible, and the fact that the German theologian held them also did not undercut the consequences that in his view naturally and necessarily followed.<sup>124</sup> He believed that Adger unfairly expressed his position as, “The ability to preach, recognized by the people, is all the call any minister needs”<sup>125</sup> – for what he had actually written was that “suitable qualifications and abilities” indicated God’s will that he should be a minister, and the ability to preach was just one of several.<sup>126</sup> In this connection Porter reacted to Adger’s replies to his argument based upon I Timothy and Titus. Porter countered that these passages do indeed pertain to preachers as such, since every teaching elder is also a ruling elder, and if these passage did not guide the church in selecting ministers then Scripture gave no instructions at all. As to the distinction Adger put forward between a qualification for office and an element demonstrating God’s call (the latter being where Adger placed the Spirit-wrought conviction that one is called), Porter challenged, “But the reviewer holds, and he must hold, that the call of God, and that just such a call as he advocates, is the indispensable qualification, condition or requisite, or whatever he may please to name it, for the office.”<sup>127</sup> Porter was satisfied that his contention, that an immediate and direct call is not mentioned by Paul, was unanswered by Adger. To Adger’s third point, that these passage say nothing about any sort of call at all, Porter demurred:

[I]n these passages the Apostle teaches us what these necessary gifts and qualifications are: that is he tells us what constitutes a call, what is a call, and whom the Church should therefore call and ordain to the office. We find here therefore precisely all the elements of a complete call to the ministry, viz., the possession of the needful gifts and abilities for its duties bestowed by the providence and Spirit of God, and instructions to the Church

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124. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 121.

125. See page 93n73 above.

126. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 121-122.

127. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 122-123.

actually to put such into the office – ... but of a call according to the reviewer’s theory, not the remotest suggestion.<sup>128</sup>

Related to the question of a man’s supposed consciousness and conviction of the Spirit’s call and the necessity for Presbytery to approve a man’s call, Porter found an inconsistency in Adger’s position. Adger had stated that a man knows God is calling him, but that it was possible for a Presbyterial call to precede a man’s convictions. “I would like to know how all these things are possible; how they can all stand together. How can a Presbytery, or any one else, know that one is called, before he knows it himself, according to the reviewer’s doctrine of a call? How dare a Presbytery go before the Spirit and signify to any that they consider him called?...Does he need any other evidence of his call than the *consciousness* that he is called by the Spirit, which the reviewer affirms? Can he have any better or higher evidence of it? Can he dare to surrender that evidence for the judgment of others?...The thoughtful reader, who shall follow out these questions whither they lead, will not fail to see that the reviewer’s theory is a cobweb, spun of imaginations, and not a structure built of the solid materials of truth.”<sup>129</sup> To Porter, if the Spirit had indeed called, then on Adger’s view the man should perceive it first; thus the fatal flaw in Adger’s view, or at least his presentation of it.

#### **4. Porter’s Discussion of Thornwell’s Writings**

Having given an answer to the accusation that he was parroting Neander, he concluded by speaking to the writings of Dr. Thornwell.<sup>130</sup> Disclaiming any attempt at formally

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128. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 123.

129. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 124, 134-135.

130. Porter also interacted with Adger’s views on Owen, Calvin, Knox, and Haliburton. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 125-131.

representing Thornwell's views in his article, Porter maintained that he was even more confused of Thornwell's real meaning since reading Adger's reply. The latter had explained that Thornwell held the call to be analogous to God's power in drawing a sinner to Christ, but in quoting the friend of Thornwell, it was stated that Thornwell believed the call to be comparable to the witness of the Spirit. Porter mused, "But now the operation of the Spirit in the 'witness,' as explained both by the reviewer and his correspondent, is so different in nature and kind from that he puts forth in the 'mighty and invincible' work by which he draws sinners to Christ; that if his agency in the call to the ministry is similar to the latter, it cannot be analogous to the former. I do not suppose there are any of us more competent to explain the real meaning of Dr. Thornwell than these two, and if they differ so widely, I may be pardoned, if I say I do not know what he meant."<sup>131</sup> Likewise, Porter found the explanations of "direct and immediate" given by Adger and the anonymous correspondent to be incompatible.<sup>132</sup> Porter also disagreed with Thornwell's discourse on the personality of the Holy Spirit, explaining:

It seemed impossible to [adopt all of its statements in their apparent sense] without striking from the number of God's children some, many, of the devoutest and holiest Christians the world ever saw. And it seemed equally impossible to reconcile them with the views of other great and eminent teachers of the Church. They can be accounted for...only on the supposition that, as the greatest and best men are liable to do, he was inclined to make his own experience a standard for others and the interpreter of truth.<sup>133</sup>

For Porter, this debate, while ostensibly over the question of how the Holy Spirit calls a man to the ministry, actually involved the more foundational issue of "the nature of the ministerial office and its relations to the Divine Master and to the Church – the question, whether the gospel ministry are a 'holy order,' a distinct class in the Church, or simply brethren of the

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131. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1873), 132.

132. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1873), 133.

133. Porter, "On a Call to the Gospel Ministry" (January 1873), 134.



brethren...”<sup>134</sup> He viewed the theory of Thornwell (and of Adger) as “deeply infected with the virus of the prelatical, sacerdotal, apostolical-succession spirit, as was suggested by the writer in this *Review* of October, 1869.”<sup>135</sup> How surprised Thornwell would have been hearing he had been accused of having an extreme three-office view of the ministry, God in his providence has not let us know. But Adger was at the ready with one last parry in this debate.

F. *Debate Closed: Adger’s Response to Porter’s Reply*

1. **Rebutting the Charge of Fanaticism**

In the same January 1873 issue of the *Southern Presbyterian Review*, immediately following Porter’s article, Adger wrote “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article.” In ten relatively brief points, several of which we will point out here, he responded to Porter and again made the case for his position. After addressing two questions of his misrepresentation of Porter’s views, Adger considered the charge of fanaticism, which Porter had sought to bolster with the writings of Owens and Edwards.<sup>136</sup> Adger pointed out what we have already observed, that Breckinridge’s article under review by Thornwell had itself identified this danger, and found protection in the facts that the testimony of the individual was necessary but insufficient, and that a congregation and a Presbytery had to concur in the call. The Church is to sit in judgment on the individual’s confidence. Porter had challenged that if Adger’s view were correct about the Spirit’s call to the individual, then “similar testimony is equally necessary to those who are to sit

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134. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 135.

135. It appears that Porter knew who this author was, as he writes that it was an honor to stand or fall beside him. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (January 1873), 136.

136. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 137.

in judgment on it. A lower testimony cannot authenticate a higher.”<sup>137</sup> But Adger rebutted this claim: “This is taking for granted that the pretender has indeed a direct call which is the very question submitted to the Church for her own separate and independent judgment...She is entitled to judge for herself [whether he is called of God, and that he can edify her], and all the individual’s claims are nothing, until confirmed by this testimony of the Church and of the Presbytery.”<sup>138</sup> As he points out a little later, the man may be lying, or he may be confused, or his impressions may come from an evil spirit.<sup>139</sup> Thus the church has the authority “to judge every man’s pretensions to the call to preach.”<sup>140</sup> In light of these realities, Adger did not see that the warnings of Owen and Edwards had any bearing on his position.

## **2. The Role of the Holy Spirit and the Scriptures in the Christian Life**

Adger then moved to examine Porter’s denial that the Holy Spirit ever directly instructs a Christian. Taking Porter’s own admission at face value, that the Holy Spirit does directly aid a man in “putting the soul in a condition to receive, discern, and accept the truth,”<sup>141</sup> Adger deduced an operation of the Spirit “which would seem to be equivalent to a direct illumination of

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137. Porter, “On a Call to the Gospel Ministry” (1872), 81.

138. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 139.

139. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 154.

140. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 155. In his seventh observation, Adger turns Porter’s argument that a lower authority (a church court) can never authenticate a higher authority (the Spirit’s direct call) against Porter himself. Porter taught that a man who knows that he has the gifts requisite for ministry has received an indirect call to the ministry by the Spirit. Adger then deduces, “[I]t is hard to see why Dr. Porter should not insist upon every such individual man’s taking on himself the honor of the ministry without any regard whatever to the Church’s sanction...His indirect call of the Spirit through gifts, is as real and authoritative as our direct call of the Spirit. It can with no more propriety be submitted to the judgment of an inferior authority. Thus the argument forged by him against our position, if it has any force, must operate to destroy his own theory.” Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 156-157.

141. See page 93n74 above.

the soul respecting duty.”<sup>142</sup> Since the man cannot read in the Scriptures the specific command that he must preach the gospel, the Spirit directly shines upon the soul to enable him to perceive that he is called. “Why surely,” wrote Adger, “this amounts to a direct and immediate call from the Holy Ghost, for it is he who interprets to the called his call.”<sup>143</sup> Similarly, Adger turned Porter’s position, that the Spirit instructs through the Word, against him: since there is no revelation within the Bible regarding any particular individual’s duty to preach, it must be that “[t]he general principles are used by him, and the individual is enabled to make an application of them to the special concrete case before his own mind by the Spirit’s direct illumination.

Manifestly then...[the Spirit’s] illumination...is not imparted as to the particular case, *through* the truth, but is *directly* communicated.”<sup>144</sup> These consequences of Porter’s admission appeared to Adger to put Porter and Adger on the same side of the issue, agreeing that “it must be dangerous for any man to hold that he is so appointed without a direct illumination and persuasion from the Spirit thereto.”<sup>145</sup>

Adger held that the distinction between general principles of the Scriptures and specific declarations was key to this debate, and he spent a significant amount of time in discussing it. Adger claimed A. A. Hodge as sustaining his understanding of the Westminster Confession, namely, that though the Scriptures contain all things necessary for a believer’s life, yet the Spirit must guide directly in the practical implementation of the general principles of the Word, which are in many cases only negative, rather than positive.<sup>146</sup> Adger believed that Porter “seem[ed]

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142. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 140.

143. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 141.

144. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 141. Emphasis his.

145. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 141.

146. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 142-143.

disposed to evade all consideration of this distinction...But the reviewer crave[d] to be informed how the Spirit can use [the] Word for guiding us in those numerous cases where nothing specific is said by it touching our duty.”<sup>147</sup> Adger was content to articulate this guidance in a variety of ways, either “in the way of *direct guidance and instruction* as to specific duties, as we have expressed it, or in the way of a *direct illumination of the soul, enabling us to receive, discern, and apply the general principles and precepts of the Word* to the particular case in hand, as Dr. Porter has preferred to express it. The reader is welcome to take his choice between the two statements.”<sup>148</sup>

Adger’s primary concern in discussing this question of the proper understanding of the sufficiency of Scripture was to ensure that the Church recognized that it was Christ Himself who ran His church, and “[m]ost especially he does not leave it for the Church by herself to call his ministers.”<sup>149</sup> As well, Adger was keen to give the Spirit his due:

None of the ordinances, not even the Word itself, has any power or efficacy apart from the Spirit making use of it, and not even to honor the blessed Word itself, may we exclude the direct agency and operation of the Lord Jesus through his Spirit...What we are concerned to insist upon is...that the means of grace, Scripture itself included, are all so many ways TO the Spirit – the galleries in which his glory shall be seen and his power felt. The means of grace are not laws of grace. The Holy Ghost is a Person, and we stand in need of his personal interposition and personal direction. And this is promised to us in the Scriptures. The Word is not the limit either of his power or of his teaching. Let fanatics on the one hand abuse the Scripture doctrine of the Spirit’s guidance, and let rationalists on the other decry it – the one weighs no more with us than the other. Be it ours to walk in the safe middle revealed to us on this subject. The argument from abuse never is legitimate; but it is as applicable to the guidance of the Word as it is to that of the Spirit.<sup>150</sup>

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147. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 143-144.

148. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 144. Emphasis his.

149. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 144.

150. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 144-145.

He held that the Word of God, as explained by the Westminster Standards, could not be savingly understood apart from the Spirit's direct, that is, without the use of means, act of inward illumination. He observed of the language of those Standards, "[E]very where, in our symbols, it is *the Word and Spirit*, which are held up together, and yet apart. It is not the Spirit *through* the Word – it is not the Spirit *by* the Word which our Standards refer to, but it is *the Spirit and the Word*, or else *the Word and the Spirit* – not as though the instrument is the equal of the agent, but as though the agent acts sometimes directly and without the instrument..."<sup>151</sup> Likewise, he pointed to the Bible's teaching on the Spirit's direct communication with the soul of man.<sup>152</sup> For Adger, these direct communications were not "new revelations," as Porter charged, but were the inward illumination and guidance of the Spirit, who "conveys to the understanding not new truth that is general, while he does guide and teach us in all practical matters as to our own particular duty. And this guidance of the Spirit is far safer than that of our own *reason* applying the Word."<sup>153</sup>

### 3. The Immediate Work of the Holy Spirit

In another observation, Adger narrowed the debate to "this single point, Whether a conviction of conscience that one is called to preach may be immediately produced by the Holy Ghost, without the intervention of human instrumentalities."<sup>154</sup> Porter had affirmed "that the

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151. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 146. Emphasis his. With regard to Westminster Shorter Catechism #24, he asked, "If the will of God is revealed to us only by the Word, what for is it added so distinctly that Christ reveals to us *by the Spirit* the will of God for our salvation?" Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 146. Emphasis his.

152. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 147-148.

153. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 148-149. Emphasis his.

154. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 151-152.

conviction of conscience is but indirectly the call of God, being inferentially deduced from the conscious possession of suitable gifts and from the judgment of the Church.”<sup>155</sup> Adger espoused that God’s will that a man should preach the gospel comes directly, the Spirit convicting his conscience immediately, and indirectly, the positive vote of a congregation and the approval of the Presbytery.<sup>156</sup> At this point in his response Adger presents a string of rhetorical (albeit leading) questions for the reader to judge between these divergent views:

Is it indeed true that the Spirit has no direct hand in calling men into the ministry, but that any man may assume the office who infers a call from being conscious of his possessing the needful gifts, provided the Church’s opinion of him is also favorable? And is it on the other hand a fanatical doctrine that the man who is truly called to preach must and will feel a supernatural conviction of his duty wrought by the immediate agency of the Holy Ghost? Is it safe to say that an individual, upon his own judgment that he has the necessary gifts may venture into the awful ministry as soon as the Church will call him, but fanatical and dangerous to say that he may not do this without a call directly from the Spirit impressed upon his heart? Is it safe to say that the Church can discern that this or that particular person ought to be in the ministry, and that her appointment (with his possession of the gifts) is the Call, but fanatical and dangerous to insist that, along with the Church’s call, there must be the direct vocation of the Spirit? Has the Holy Ghost anything directly to do with the Call to the ministry, or has he not? And if he has, where does his direct agency come in? If it is fanatical to hold that he directly teaches the man his duty in the premises, must it be not be fanatical to say that he directly teaches the Church her duty in the premises, and so will not his direct agency in the work of thrusting forth laborers into the Lord’s vineyard be altogether denied? And will it not soon come to this, that calculations of expediency on the man’s part, and on the Church’s part, are to form the whole ground-work of a call to the gospel ministry?<sup>157</sup>

The vision in the last sentence motivated Adger’s theology of the call from a practical standpoint, as it had Breckinridge and Thornwell. It was unthinkable that the Church might have pulpits filled “with a generation of men not called of God to the work, a generation of time-servers and preachers without the demonstration and power of the Spirit.”<sup>158</sup>

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155. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 150.

156. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 151.

157. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 152.

158. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 153.

With regard to the incompatible interpretations of Thornwell's meaning of "direct and immediate," Adger pointed out that Thornwell himself affirmed both explanations: "Dr. Thornwell there<sup>159</sup> himself makes the comparison of the call in one aspect of it, that is, in its *mighty, invincible power*, to the Spirit's drawing a sinner to Christ; but, in another aspect of it, that is, in its *direct and supernatural certainty and force*, to the Spirit's witness with the believer that he is a child of God. Here, then, are the two statements which our brother calls 'incongruous expositions' of Dr. Thornwell's meaning."<sup>160</sup> Adger was not pleased that Porter tried to distance himself from accusing Thornwell with fanaticism, given the content and tenor of his writings, but he was dumb-founded that Porter would at the same time accuse Thornwell (and those who followed him) of a "prelatical, sacerdotal and apostolical-succession spirit."<sup>161</sup> The latter taught that the Church possesses authority in herself to administer grace, whereas Adger was claiming "that the Head of the Church himself calls whom he will into the ministry."<sup>162</sup> Adger bristled at the charge Porter lobbed against his view, since "the idea we hold forth is, that the Holy Ghost directly deals with the individual consciences of true ministers, and that the chief ground of their right to preach is not any external thing whatsoever, but the inward and supernatural and direct call of the Spirit. We exalt the spiritual; but prelacy and sacerdotalism and apostolical succession exalt the external." Adger picked up the grenade and threw it back at Porter, asserting, "Dr.

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159. Adger, "Some Remarks on the Question of a Call to the Ministry," 293, 294.

160. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 157-158. Emphasis his.

161. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 158, 160. Adger was humorously incredulous: "The first impression made by this charge was, that our friend was joking – and the next, that he must count *fanaticism* and *mysticism* attributed by him previously to the reviewer to be not quite so bad as *semi-rationalism* – the charge we had insinuated against his theory; and must therefore intend to throw in this additional accusation against our doctrine just to be even with us!" Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,"

160. Emphasis his.

162. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 161.

Porter himself insists that the call comes from the Church, or at least through the Church, and not directly from the Holy Ghost. Christ did directly call men to bear rule in his house while he was on the earth, but now in his absence the Church calls in his stead, and not the Spirit!...The reader may decide whether of the two views is the more consistent with ‘prelacy, sacerdotalism, and apostolical succession.’”<sup>163</sup>

#### **4. Adger’s Final Word: God Makes His Ministers**

In closing his observations, which due to Porter’s death were the last contribution to the entire debate, Adger stressed what Breckinridge and Thornwell had been at pains to teach, and why their view was urgent to be upheld. Adger’s theological forebears had aimed to inculcate the view

that every true minister is called of God, and feels more or less confidently assured of it. They urged that men cannot make ministers. They said it is not safe nor right to persuade all who seem to have the needful gifts that they ought to preach; and they said that no man may preach unless he feels God’s commission certified to his heart. What they insisted on, was simply that the called will feel his call with a more or less deep and strong assurance wrought within his mind by the Holy Spirit. They held, that when God calls, the called man will hear and will know that God calls, nor will he be able always to resist the call.<sup>164</sup>

Far from fanatical or dangerous, as Adger believed anyone with their writings could judge for themselves, these views were words of sober truth, and served to guard the church against rationalism – which Adger believed was a far greater danger in his day than fanaticism:

The tendency of our times sets more strongly toward a cold materialism than towards even the pseudo-spiritual...There is too much tendency with many to persuade men into the ministry, as an affair of mere human calculation and expediency...There is too great eagerness with many to usher all who have gifts – sometimes alas! in very moderate quantity – into the service of the Church. We do want more, yes, many more ministers,

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163. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 161.

164. Adger, “A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article,” 162.



but we want none whom the Church shall herself make. It is not the call of the Church, it is not the possession of any natural gifts which ought to move any man to engage in this work, but the call directly from the Spirit. It is men whom the Lord himself sends that we want to see running with the message to dying sinners. It is the Lord himself we desire to have thrust forth the laborers into his harvest.<sup>165</sup>

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165. Adger, "A Few Observations on the Foregoing Article," 162-163.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Theological and Practical Summary**

As one walks through the history of the call controversy, several things become obvious on the surface of the debate. At the same time, the issues that this disagreement raises can become muddled by the fact that there are overlapping points of agreement, and a variety of views along a spectrum. In this final chapter, we will seek to observe the obvious, and distill the disagreement down so that the reader might be able to decide which side had the stronger arguments in the debate and what the church should believe about God's call to ministry.

#### **1. Clear and Obvious Lessons From the Call Controversy**

We begin by identifying the clear themes that have arisen from the story we have sought to tell. First, nineteenth-century Southern Presbyterians were a heterogeneous group of ministers. It is perhaps too easy to assume that because of their shared views on, for example, the Westminster Confession and on the issue of slavery, they walked lockstep with regard to all issues. But as we have seen, there was a wide diversity of doctrine and practice among Southern Presbyterians on both sides of the Civil War. In particular, there was a segment of the clergy (and thus presumably of the laity also) that was open to the Spirit's direct and immediate influence, leading, and guiding, and another that was much more dubious, if not outright antagonistic to such claims. John Bailey Adger and Thomas Smyth were brothers-in-law, and one wonders if the issue of the call to ministry ever arose at family reunions.<sup>1</sup>

Second, this study has revealed James Henley Thornwell in a fresh light. Accused of being both a mystic and a prelatist by his contemporaries (with regard to the same matter!),

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1. Imaginary conversation: "John, you are a flaming fanatic!" "No, brother Thomas, you are in fact a resounding rationalist."

Adger has shown us that he practiced a type of spirituality arguably more akin in some ways to modern broad evangelicals, even Charismatics, than to modern Southern Presbyterians.

Likewise, any conception of Thornwell as one whose “two-office” view of ecclesiastical order devalued the teaching elder must be reassessed in the face of what this thesis has brought to light about his exalted view of the gospel minister. Though not a “three-office” man, as his writings on the ruling elder controversy demonstrate, he patently distinguishes the teaching elder from the ruling elder, and no matter how one judges his views on the call, there is no question that he dignifies the calling of the gospel minister. The call controversy reminds us how easy it is to flatten characters from church history, and overlook the nuances and complexity that they and their views might possess.

Third, we have learned that one’s theological positions cannot be separated from what one deems to be the greatest danger facing the church of Jesus Christ. Both sides of this debate recognized that there were pitfalls at either sideline of the field, as it were: the danger of running when one had not been called (hence those in the ministry who, one side adjudged, should not have been there), and of not running when one had been called (hence, the other side concluded, all the vacant pulpits). Likewise, the two sides viewed differently the respective dangers of fanaticism and rationalism facing the church, emphasizing one of these dangers over the other, and holding views on the call that aimed to overcome that particular danger. It is perhaps difficult to answer the question of which came first, the theological position or the recognition of a grave threat to the life of the church? In any event, both sides confirm that theological beliefs, particularly in periods of debate, are intricately connected to what we consider to be the most significant need of the church at that time. We rarely hold to doctrine that is unattached to a web of personal, ecclesiastical, cultural, and sociological concerns.

Fourth, this controversy displays the propensity each of us has to view himself as standing in the middle of two (or more) extremes. Both the Breckinridge/Thornwell/Adger side and the Smyth/Dabney/Porter side declared that they were the side avoiding the ditches of rationalism and fanaticism, in particular, and that their opponents were stuck in the mire of one error or the other. Such a phenomenon ought not to surprise us, and it helpfully reminds us that we need to bring humility to all controversies in which we engage, recognizing that in our attempts to distance ourselves from one extreme position, we must be careful not to swing like a pendulum into the other extreme. History is replete with examples of individuals, churches, and movements swinging back and forth in response to the extremes they have witnessed or experienced personally.

Finally, it has been evident throughout this study that the church is ever in need of remembering past debates and discussions about topics on which we might assume everyone at the current time is in agreement. The lack of knowledge about the call controversy within the Presbyterian Church is not due to the fact that all Presbyterians are now in agreement on this topic, and therefore have had the luxury of forgetting there was ever any disagreement on the matter. Rather, there is likely continued disagreement lurking beneath the surface of every credentials/examining committee and Presbytery, but time has lessened the urgency of answering these questions, and has to some degree revealed that we are able to function satisfactorily without answering these questions comprehensively. Yet exposure to the topics the men in this thesis broached can force us to reconsider what is perhaps our ignorance, our apathy, or our uncomfortableness with certain questions pertaining, in particular, to the Holy Spirit.

## **2. The Controverted Issues Raised by the Call Controversy**

We turn now to the specific questions raised by the call controversy, whose answers at points are starkly black or white, and at other moments are decidedly grey. At its heart, the call controversy can be resolved to this broad question: how does the Holy Spirit work in the new covenant? In particular, how does the Holy Spirit work to call a man to gospel ministry, that is, to show a man that it is his duty to take up the mantle of preaching the gospel as a vocation? Put another way, how does the Holy Spirit assure a man that he is called to take up the office of pastor in the household of God? More questions flow from these root queries: Who should seek to enter the ministry? How should the church seek to raise up new ministers?

Robert Jefferson Breckinridge, James Henley Thornwell and John Bailey Adger argued that the Holy Spirit calls a man immediately and directly, by convicting his conscience apart from any human agency and apart from the Word of God or providence. They did not deny that other believers, meditation upon the Scriptures, and the circumstances of one's life were instruments the Spirit also used, but they were insistent that He Himself guides specific men personally to the work of the ministry by communicating directly to the man's conscience. This work is not new revelation, but inward illumination and guidance akin to the direct and immediate manner in which they understood the Spirit bearing witness to our spirits that we are sons of God. In spite of the ways in which some might abuse this teaching, the necessity of a corroborating congregational call and court approval were in their minds sufficient safeguards. They held that their view was in keeping with the true personality of the Holy Spirit, and the Scriptural teaching that Jesus Christ, the King and Head of His Church, alone possessed the prerogative to call whom He chose to be ministers of His gospel. Flowing out of this belief regarding the call, they maintained that a man ought only to enter the ministry if he is convinced

God is calling him to the ministry (the church did not have the right to make her own ministers), and that the church's primary (if not only) role in working to increase the number of ministers is to pray to the Lord of the harvest to give an increase (as opposed to funding indiscriminately the education of poor youth who showed some giftedness and piety, and telling all young men that they had an obligation to enquire whether they were called to the ministry unless circumstances prevented them from doing so). A man's primary consideration was not to be, "Where can I be most useful?" because this could only be known once one had determined where God was calling one to serve. Presbyteries have a right and responsibility to investigate closely into the motives of those presenting themselves for ordination, and if a man does not have a Spirit-wrought conviction (of varying degrees of strength) that God has called him, then he lacks the primary evidence by which God's call is ascertained. Since the ministry is distinct from other callings, one does not merely make a "mistake" with regard to entering the ministry – he is either obedient or disobedient to the heavenly calling, if he is called, or an intruder, if he is not called by the Spirit immediately and directly, but enters anyway.

Thomas Smyth, Robert Lewis Dabney, and Abner Addison Porter, on the other hand, contended that the Holy Spirit calls men to the ministry only mediately and indirectly, through the Word of God, the church, and the recognition of one's gifts, piety, desire, and opportunities. They did not believe the Holy Spirit in the new covenant immediately and directly communicates anything to Christians, whether assurance of sonship or a call to ministry – rather, through His word, His ordinances, and His previous work within the soul, he presented evidence for the rational aspect of man to conclude with confidence the way in which he should walk. In their minds a claim to immediateness and directness was tantamount to a claim to new revelation, and it struck a blow to the sufficiency of the Scriptures. They were unconvinced by the Scriptural

proofs adduced in defense of the “immediate and direct” view, unimpressed by the assurances that this view did not lead to mysticism and fanaticism, and suspicious (if not persuaded) that this view in fact exacerbated the low supply of ministers relative to the number of empty pulpits. Indeed, they held that the Thornwellian view led some who were called to assume they were not called, because they did not sense an immediate call upon their consciences. They urged every pious and gifted young man to consider the claims of the ministry, and believed the church was not doing enough to spur on young men to pursue the office of pastor.

It is possible to agree with one side on some of these points, and the other side on other of these points, or to recognize a broad spectrum of possible views with regard to certain of the statements above (i.e., to what degree ought the church be involved in raising up new ministers). Yet the foundational question – does the Holy Spirit call immediately and directly – allows only for a yes or no answer, as the participants in the debate themselves recognized. The answer one gives, as we have seen in the course of this debate, is intimately connected to how one views the Spirit’s ongoing work of assuring and guiding believers, how one understand Romans 8:16, and how one defines the illuminating work of the Spirit. This question is also related to that which one deems a greater threat: fanaticism and mysticism, or rationalism and anti-spiritualism.

No matter how one decides this central question, it is clear that both sides held firmly to the divine nature of the call, and to the necessity of an inward call, a call from a congregation, and the approval of Presbytery. It was this agreement that prevented the call controversy from sundering churches and personal relationships. The debate, while intense, was intramural and did not prevent any of the parties from dealing with their opponents as brothers in the Lord and in the ministry. As we strive for soundness of truth and practice, we do well to learn to recognize those disagreements wherein we can agree to disagree, in spite of the unsettling directions we

believe a certain position could tend. Yet, as the participants in this dispute demonstrate for us, love for our brethren and an agreement to disagree ought never to lead us to lessen our strength of conviction or our vigor in contending for the truth as we understand it. May the Holy Spirit continue to guide and lead His church to a knowledge of the truth, in the way and in the time that He pleases.



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