

Separation of Church and Hate: A Brief History of the Political Dissent and Abolitionism of the Antebellum Reformed Presbyterian Church, as Evidenced by the Covenanters of South Carolina and Monroe County, Indiana

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On July 12, 1823, Dorrance Beatty Woodburn, a farmer and teacher from Chester District, South Carolina, wrote a letter to the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church declaring his resignation from the church. Woodburn cited the church's stance on slavery as the reason for his departure from the congregation. "I feel myself contentiously bound to depart from the practice of the ARP [Associate Reformed Presbyterian] on the following grounds . . . the practice of slavery as being contrary to both the moral law [and] the law of nature," wrote Woodburn. He continued with a biblical reference to the book of Acts, "God made of one blood all the nations of the earth and created them free."¹ Woodburn also referenced the incongruence of slavery with republican ideals: "Slavery is inconsistent with Republican principles . . . the declaration of independence says that all men are created free and has [sic] certain unalienable rights among which are [sic] liberty."² His words were moving and forceful, but they were more than mere words. Woodburn went on to become a Covenanter, a member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church. As a Reformed Presbyterian he had the support of his minister and fellow parishioners in his endeavor to form a community, and possibly even a nation, dedicated to the belief that Jesus Christ is the highest authority and through submission to that authority all people can be free and equal.

Reformed Presbyterian Origins:

The roots of the Reformed Presbyterian Church lay in the Westminster Assembly. The British Parliament called the Assembly to order in 1634 during the English Civil War, against the will of King Charles I. Its purpose was to establish a Presbyterian form of government in the Church of England in keeping with the Calvinistic Reformation. The reformers wanted to purify the Church of revisions supported by Charles I and to undermine the bishops, who were among the King's most ardent supporters. The Assembly, which met for over five years, produced three well-known documents, the Confession of Faith (now referred to as the Westminster Confession of Faith), the Larger Catechism, and the Shorter Catechism. All three are part of the Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America.³ Due to the terms of the "Solemn League and Covenant," an agreement that secured the Scottish army for the cause of the English Parliament, delegates from the Church of Scotland attended the Assembly. They influenced the Assembly heavily, and ensured that Presbyterian polity, not Episcopal or Romish rule, would continue to guide the Church.

The Scottish Protestant reformers at the Assembly represented a long history of covenanting. Under this system, members of political and religious bodies signed public covenants to ensure the Presbyterian form of government for the Church of Scotland. Covenanters strictly adhered to the covenants that established Presbyterian polity and declared that all civil and religious authority emanated from Jesus Christ. Therefore, they believed no legitimate government, civil or religious, could be established except by this principle. This tradition forms the basis of the Reformed Presbyterian Church's history of political dissent, which separates the Covenanters from the larger and less radical Presbyterian Church.⁴

Covenanters in South Carolina:

The Covenanters also have a long history in America. The first congregation was established in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania in 1738.⁵ Though originally founded in the North, the Reformed Presbyterian Church's his-

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¹ Dorrance Beatty Woodburn to Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, July 12, 1823, Woodburn Mss., file folder 1795-1829, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

² *Ibid.*

³ "History of the Westminster Assembly," Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bloomington, 2-4.

⁴ For a more complete history of the Reformed Presbyterian Church see W. Melancthon Glasgow's *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, published by Hill & Harvey Publishers in 1888 and republished by Reformation Heritage Books in 2007, from which this paper's short history was distilled. For a thorough description of the Presbyterian system of church government see "The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America," <http://reformedpresbyterian.org/assets/pdf/Constitution04.pdf>.

⁵ "The Constitution of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America," Crown & Covenant Publications, 1989, 1998, 2004, 2010.

tory in the South is almost as long. As early as 1750, Covenanters, mainly Irish immigrants of Scotch descent, settled around Rocky Creek in the Chester District of South Carolina.⁶ From here they carved out dedicated and devout Covenanter communities, built homes, and established places of worship. They also fought for independence from England, grounding their cause carefully in scripture and history. In this, the Covenanters called upon their heritage of resistance against the enforcement of Episcopacy in Scotland and the end of what they believed to be the only true church of Jesus Christ.⁷

In South Carolina, they also encountered the horrors of chattel slavery prevalent among the antebellum plantations. During the four decades prior to the Civil War these Covenanters, along with the rest of southern Protestantism, found themselves embroiled in the debate over the proper place of slavery in civil and religious societies. Woodburn's records reveal portions of this debate.

Dissent and Separation:

After leaving the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church, Woodburn became a member of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, since it refused to allow slave-owners to be church members. In fact, one of the earliest judicial acts of the Reformed Presbytery, at the time the highest jurisdictional body of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, was the unanimous enactment in 1800 that stated slaveholders "must emancipate their slaves or be refused the communion of the church."⁸ At the time, this demand for emancipation was quite radical and put southern Reformed Presbyterianism at odds with the slaveholding elite in the South.

However, the Covenanters of South Carolina were not satisfied with removing slavery from within the walls of their churches; they also worked for the state-wide emancipation of slaves. In 1826, they sent a petition to the state legislature for the abolition of slavery in South Carolina, which is believed to have been written by Woodburn or Reverend Hugh McMillan, the pastor of the Reformed Presbyterian Church that Woodburn joined after his departure from the Associate Reformed Presbyterian Church.⁹ The petition represented the opinions of "sundry inhabitants of Chester, York [and] Fairfield Districts" who viewed with horror "the moral and political evil" of slavery and "its rapid [and] ruinous effects upon the virtues, peace, safety, [and] all the best interests of our country."¹⁰ The petitioners noted that they were "[c]onscious that humanity is suffering, that we [and] our country are suffering for that unhallowed oppression, and that we all stand exposed to the wrath of an avenging God, who in his providence, is ever on the side of the needy [and] oppressed . . ."¹¹

Antebellum Covenanters held very strongly to this belief that God is ever-protective of the downtrodden and oppressed, especially because they were well aware of the oppression faced by their forbearers in Europe, who had relied on the providence of God to preserve them as the true Christian church. The antebellum Covenanters held faith in their chosenness equally tight. God had preserved them, they believed, because they alone represented the purest Christian truth. Thus, they felt the Reformed Presbyterian Church held the highest authority, subject only to the will of God.¹²

In the petition, the South Carolinian Covenanters also declared they were "persuaded that the duty [and] policy of our country is, no longer, to be in a state of apathy and indifference."¹³ The petitioners implored the legislature to take up a "policy that earnestly seeks after ways [and] means for ultimately removing the evil complained of," and that such a strategy "is the only policy, that will lead our country, in safety, through the trials [and] dangers of civil [and] political life . . ."¹⁴ This is interesting because of the Reformed Presbyterians' long history of political dissent, dating back to the 17th century, which they faced horrible consequences in order to uphold. For example, during the Killing Time in Scotland, which spanned between 1680 and 1688, the British crown persecuted thousands of Covenanters. The British government forces evicted Covenanters from their churches, and tortured and killed them for maintaining the covenants and refusing to acknowledge the authority of the kings Charles II and James VII.

The Covenanter Church had continued this spirit of independence and staunch observance of the covenants in

⁶ W. Melancthon Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, (1888; repr., Baltimore, MD: Heritage Books, 2007), 379.

⁷ Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, 384-385.

⁸ Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, 79-80.

⁹ The document in question bears no signature, but it was included in the collected papers of Dorrance Woodburn given to the Lilly Library by Woodburn's grandson, historian James Albert Woodburn. A handwritten annotation at the top of the petition (in the same handwriting as annotations on many documents included in the Woodburn mss.) attributes the authorship of the petition to Woodburn or McMillan.

¹⁰ Petition to the South Carolina Legislature, 1826, Woodburn Mss., file folder 1795-1829, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, 1-2.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹² Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, 273.

¹³ Petition to South Carolina Legislature, 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

America. “Reformation Principles Exhibited,” an official church document adopted in 1806 to serve as both a work of history and statement of belief for the Reformed Presbyterian church in America, stated, “Since the adoption of the Constitution in 1789, the members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church have maintained a constant testimony against these evils.” It continued, “They have abstained from giving their votes at elections for legislators or officers, who must be qualified to act by an oath of allegiance to this immoral system. They could not themselves consistently swear allegiance to that Government, in the Constitution or which there is contained so much immorality.”¹⁵

Covenanters in antebellum America believed deeply in the immorality of the Constitution. While they accepted the Declaration of Independence, due to its reference to the Creator being the ultimate giver of rights, they rejected the Constitution as evil and humanistic. Covenanters also rejected the Constitution because it allowed the continuation of the institution of slavery. For example, one of the documents the American Reformed Presbyterian Church sent to the Reformed Presbyterian Synod of Ireland in 1835 stated, “There are moral evils essential to the constitution of the United States, which render it necessary to refuse allegiance to the whole system. In this remarkable instrument there is contained no acknowledgement of the being or authority of a God—there is no acknowledgement of the Christian religion or professed submission to the kingdom of Messiah.”¹⁶ The document continued with an attack on the Constitution’s acceptance of slavery, “It establishes that system of robbery by which men are held in slavery, despoiled of liberty, and property of protection.”¹⁷ It also attacked the Constitution for violating the ethics of representative rule, an issue very important to the Covenanters who had, in the past, given their lives to maintain such a system of government within the church. According to the document, the Constitution “violates the principles of representation, by bestowing upon the domestic tyrant who holds hundreds of his fellow-creatures in bondage, an influence in making laws for freemen, proportioned to the number of his own slaves.” Thus, they rejected the Constitution based on their perceptions of its “many instances [which are] inconsistent, oppressive, and impious.”¹⁸

Given this history of discarding the Constitution’s legitimacy, the attitude of the South Carolinian petitioners regarding governmental involvement represented a difference of opinion with traditional Reformed Presbyterianism. While this did not necessarily constitute a break from official belief and practice, it was a harbinger of the disunion to come within the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America. Thus, this community of Covenanters not only found itself at odds with the institution of slavery and the state and federal governments that allowed it to continue, but they also began to turn a critical eye toward church doctrine.

These individuals were staunchly independent, but this did not incline them toward disunion or a lack of appreciation for leadership. For example, Reverend McMillan’s parishioners clearly held him in high esteem. In a December 1828 letter objecting to his intention to leave South Carolina, members of his congregation offered many points of objection to McMillan’s reasons for departure. One of the reasons was “[c]omparative freedom from the temptations, evils and dangers of slavery.”¹⁹ Certainly, this was an issue to which McMillan’s congregation could relate, as they, too, wished to be free from the ills of slavery. They wrote, “This we consider a weighty reason, and could we all who are opposed to the System, be enabled to flee from it, we would cheerfully say to Mr. McMillan, and our brethren at large, arise and go.”²⁰ However, to the congregation, this reason was not enough to substantiate his desire to leave. “The evil complained of is of no small magnitude, yet it can (by a firm reliance on that providence who directs all things well) be borne. [H]as it not been borne by our ancestors, for nearly half a century, was their strength greater than ours, or their principles less pure? [W]e think not.”²¹ In this way, McMillan’s congregation called upon persecutions faced by generations past to lend credence to their plea. “Had our venerable forefathers, reasoned thus, in the times of bloody persecution, how many a valuable life might have been saved by flight, but they did not.”²² Instead they “chose rather to suffer affliction with the people of God at home and in their own Congregations than to enjoy the pleasures of peace and safety in a foreign country.”²³ The letter ends with an entreaty to McMillan. “We hope therefore that Mr. McMillan may look beyond the present scene, and not be discouraged, as far as to leave us to encounter the

¹⁵ The Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, *Reformation Principles Exhibited* (New York: Hopkins and Seymour, 1807), 137.

¹⁶ “Resolutions of the Reformed Presbyterian Synods In Scotland & Ireland, Affirming that the RPCNA must Maintain a Testimony Against the United States Constitution & Government as No Moral Ordinance of God,” Minutes of the Reformed Presbyterian Synod, Ireland, 1835, http://www.truecovenanter.com/reformedpresbyterian/rpi_minutes_1835_etc_re_rpcna.html.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “Objections objected against Mr. McMillan’s reasons for disjunctions from his present pastoral charge,” December 1828, Woodburn Mss., file folder 1795-1829, Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

foe from which he wishes to flee, without a leader or a guide.”²⁴ They regarded McMillan as their divinely appointed spiritual guide, without whom they would be lost. Ultimately, the protests of the congregation were unsuccessful and McMillan was established as pastor in Xenia, Ohio in September 1829, “bringing part of his congregation with him.”²⁵ McMillan’s reasoning that slavery made his departure necessary shows just how inhospitable the southern states had become for those who opposed the institution of slavery. This is further supported by the fact that a portion of his congregation, many of whom had adamantly protested his proposed exit, followed him to the North.

In fact, McMillan and his followers were not the only Scotch-Irish Covenanters to make the journey north-west from South Carolina. One year later, in the autumn of 1830, Woodburn also left his South Carolina home. Woodburn did not, however, follow his esteemed pastor to Ohio; instead he made Monroe County, Indiana, his destination. There, in the Bloomington area of southern Indiana, he joined several other Covenanters who had already made a similar journey. John and Thomas Moore were the first Covenanters to migrate to Bloomington, arriving from South Carolina in March 1820.²⁶ The first Covenanter congregation, established in October 1821, had just eight members. The local Session, a governing body in each individual Reformed Presbyterian church, comprised of its pastor and elders, was equally small. John Moore and Isaac Faris were the Bloomington congregation’s first elders. The church functioned for two years without a pastor or a church building until the death of John Moore. Following Moore’s death, the congregation stagnated for two years until it was reorganized and John Blair and Thomas Moore were made elders. The congregation remained without a minister for another four years. In 1827 James Faris, also from South Carolinian, was elected pastor. Still lacking a church building, the Bloomington Covenanters met in a log cabin on the Blair Farm. In 1830, Woodburn and David Smith were made elders of the church.²⁷

Few records remain from the Bloomington Covenanter congregation before 1836, but those that do tell of a church beset with difficulty. During the first six years of its existence, the Covenanter church of Bloomington labored without the services of a minister. The congregation worshiped without a permanent home until a brick church building was erected in 1836.²⁸

However, even greater disturbances faced the Bloomington Covenanters in their formative years. In 1833 the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America split into two divisions known as Old Light and New Light, based almost entirely on the Church’s relation to civil institutions. The Old Light Synod upheld the traditional Covenanter belief that no form of government can be considered moral and legitimate unless it recognizes that all authority is derived from Jesus Christ. Therefore, members of the Reformed Presbyterian Church were forbidden from sitting on juries, running for political office, and swearing oaths of allegiance to the United States because of the immorality of the Constitution. According to W. Melancten Glasgow, whose encyclopedic 1888 work *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America* is perhaps the most detailed account of the 19th century American Covenanters, “members who sat on juries or voted at any elections were censured, and they either confessed their sin or left the Church.”²⁹ In contrast, the New Light General Synod believed in a more progressive relationship between the Covenanter Church and the American government.³⁰

The Bloomington congregation did not escape this rupture. The Bloomington Reformed Presbyterian Church’s records indicate that the congregation and Session, which in 1833 together numbered some 120 people, were split equally with half leaving to form a New Light Covenanter congregation.³¹ The records of the Old Light church also show that Woodburn “went to New Light.”³² This is not surprising given Woodburn’s involvement in the abolition of slavery in South Carolina, which he attempted to accomplish not through the church but by petitioning the state legislature.

Despite the severity of the fracture, disunion did not triumph completely. The Old Light and New Light churches were in agreement on the issue of slavery. Members of both Bloomington congregations worked in the Underground Railroad, a clandestine network of abolitionists that transported fugitive slaves across the border into Canada. John Blair of the New Light congregation, as well as Faris, Thomas Smith, and Robert Ewing of the Old Light church were active in the transportation of escaping slaves through Monroe County. These individuals, among

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, 328.

²⁶ “History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bloomington,” Archives, Office of the Pastor, Reformed Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, 1.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

²⁹ Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church*, 91.

³⁰ George P. Hutchinson, *The History Behind the Reformed Presbyterian Church, Evangelical Synod* (Cherry Hill, NJ: Mack Publishing Company, 1974), 70-76.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

³² *Minutes Book 3*, Archives, Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bloomington.

others, were well-respected members of the community who risked their reputations, the reputations of their respective churches, and their lives to help secure the freedom of those fleeing the bonds of slavery.³³

Insurmountable Odds:

Most antebellum Protestants did not see the value in engaging in such progressive reform. Religious activists in South Carolina often had very different goals than the Covenanters. Most South Carolinian reformers who perceived problems within the institution of slavery believed the solution was to harken back to earlier standards when masters had more authoritarian control of their charges. These reactionary reformers blamed the poor conditions and extreme hardships experienced by enslaved African Americans on the breakdown in the paternal hierarchy.³⁴ Due to the overwhelmingly reactionary reforms sought by Protestants in South Carolina, the state never saw the passage of ameliorative laws enacted in other southern states such as Mississippi and Alabama. These laws, which the Covenanters worked towards, would have allowed slaves to be educated and to have a right to stand trial regardless of the crime committed. They also may have legalized slave marriages.³⁵

The Reformed Presbyterian Church also had to contend with numerous other powerful groups. Some of those forces were ones very close to the Covenanters, such as the Presbyterian Church of the United States of America. The antebellum Presbyterian Church, despite its shared origin and similarities in ecclesiastical government and doctrine, was more conservative theologically and socially than the Reformed Church, particularly in the case of slavery. Thus, it became a formidable foe of the Covenanters, one with greater numbers and clout. In 1818, eighteen years after the Reformed Presbyterian Church banned slaveholders from membership, the Presbyterian Church adopted somewhat strong antislavery principles. However, as the cotton industry grew, the Presbyterian Church found itself susceptible to the sway of the southern slaveocracy. The strong influence of the southern slave industry caused the Presbyterian Church in the south to step back from previous claims of the possible sinfulness of slavery, and many churches went as far as declaring slavery a beneficial enterprise for all involved, slave and slave-owner alike.³⁶ In 1837 the Presbyterian Church experienced a substantial fracture, which resulted in two factions, the Old School and the New School. Abolitionism within the antebellum Presbyterian Church was mainly the territory of “new-schoolers” such as revivalist Charles G. Finney. The more traditional and conservative portion of the church accused these individuals of acting recklessly with regard to church doctrine. Official church history shows these doctrinal differences as the cause of the fracture, but the abolitionist ventures of those forming the New School were likely a more important factor in the division.³⁷

Unlike the Covenanters, Presbyterians were often uneasy with any type of progressive social change. Conservative Presbyterian writings from the early to mid-19th century included much trepidation about civil unrest and concerns regarding an outbreak of revolutionary madness among the masses. Conservative Old School Presbyterians, many of whom were southerners, considered the French Revolution and unrest in Europe, revivalism, Jacksonian politics, and abolitionism to be affronts to a properly ordered and structured society. They considered progressivism, in any form, a dangerous prospect that had to be tightly governed by a strict moralism and only acted upon with regard to the hierarchal social order already in place. However, while they may not have embraced change, they did realize a need for social betterment. They simply believed any alteration to the structure of Southern society had to be slow in order to prevent disruption of the divine plan for America. Southern Presbyterians also feared that change would bring unrest, which they believed would lead to an usurpation of the social hierarchy, which would bring about chaos.³⁸ This desire for a continuation of the status quo, fostered by fears of civil unrest, stood in stark contrast to antebellum Covenanter aspirations.

The pressure to conform in the South became increasingly extreme after 1830. The slaveholding gentry, including laymen, clergy, and legislators, labored diligently to ensure a unified majority in support of slavery and made sincere attempts to suppress dissent.³⁹ After earnest efforts to end slavery both within and outside the church, the Covenanters of South Carolina decided to free themselves of the pressures placed on them to conform and traveled to the free states of the American West, particularly Indiana. Therefore, it is no surprise that the Covenanter commu-

³³ Henry Lester Smith, “The Underground Railroad in Monroe County,” *The Indiana Magazine of History* 13, no. 3 (1917): 296; “History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church,” Archives, Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bloomington, 2.

³⁴ Kimberly R. Kellison, “Toward Humanitarian Ends? Protestants and Slave Reform in South Carolina, 1830-1865,” *The South Carolina Historical Magazine* 103, no. 3 (2002): 212-213.

³⁵ Kellison, “Toward Humanitarian Ends,” 218.

³⁶ Irving Kull, “Presbyterian Attitudes toward Slavery,” *Church History* 7, no. 2 (1938): 103-104.

³⁷ Kull, “Presbyterian Attitudes toward Slavery,” 106.

³⁸ Theodore Dwight Bozeman, “Inductive and Deductive Politics: Science and Society in Antebellum Presbyterian Thought,” *The Journal of American History* 64, no. 3, (1977): 706-709.

³⁹ David B. Chesebrough, *Clergy Dissent in the Old South, 1830-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996), xi-xii.

nity in Monroe Country, Indiana, hailed largely from the South. As the history of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bloomington attests, the Reformed Presbyterians of South Carolina moved to Indiana because of their antislavery views.⁴⁰ So thorough was the exodus of southern Covenanters that by 1847 “the cause had become extinct,” with the last southern Reformed Presbyterian minister’s death.⁴¹

Conclusion:

The tribulation of religious dissenters in the antebellum South is well known and documented. That these same misfortunes befell the Covenanters of South Carolina only further emphasizes the stranglehold the southern slaveocracy had on the institutions of the South, both civil and religious. Their story offers further insight into antebellum religious resistance and the consequences of dissent in the pre-Civil War South. The Covenanters, drawing on their history of staunch independence, made earnest efforts to reform the institution of slavery in South Carolina, but in the end they found themselves unable to alter the rigid sociopolitical structures of the South and migrated west to Indiana in order to be free from the restraints of slaveholding southern society. As they had done for centuries, the Reformed Presbyterians separated themselves in an effort to preserve what they believed to be the pure truth of Jesus Christ.

⁴⁰ “History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church of Bloomington,” 1.

⁴¹ Glasgow, *History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America*, 393-394.