JOHN WITHERSPOON
AND “THE FUNDAMENTAL DOCTRINES OF THE GOSPEL”:
THE SCOTTISH CAREER OF AN AMERICAN FOUNDING FATHER

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Thesis Abstract

*John Witherspoon and “The Fundamental Doctrines of the Gospel”: The Scottish Career of an American Founding Father*

By Kevin DeYoung

John Witherspoon is known for many things—a thorn in the side of the Moderate Party in the Scottish Kirk, a successful president at Princeton, an influential moral philosopher, and, most famously, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. What the Presbyterian pastor is not known for is being a particularly insightful, significant, or even consistent Reformed preacher and thinker.

This thesis explores the theology of John Witherspoon in his historical context, with special attention given to the Scottish half of his career. In particular, the thesis argues that Witherspoon cannot be properly understood until we see him not only engaged with the Scottish Enlightenment, but also firmly grounded in the Reformed tradition of High to Late Orthodoxy, embedded in the transatlantic Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century, and frustrated by the state of religion in the Scottish Kirk.

Alongside the titles of president, moral philosopher, and founding father should be a new category: John Witherspoon as Reformed apologist. Like Benedict Pictet (1655-1724), Witherspoon held firmly to the tenets of confessional Calvinism. And like Pictet, Witherspoon was eager to show that the truths of supernatural revelation could be squared with reason. Witherspoon lived in an age of transition where the tenets of orthodox Christianity were under assault. His aim as a minister was to defend and rearticulate traditional Scottish Presbyterian theology, without ever altering or disguising it. This is Witherspoon the Reformed apologist (on both sides of the Atlantic) and the Witherspoon largely unknown today.
Acknowledgements

After five years of hard work it is exciting to be at the point where I can write this brief Acknowledgements page. There are many people I get to thank, which is terrific. And also terrifying, because there are so many people I will forget to thank!

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A million thanks to my family for their love, laughter, and support. When I started the PhD program I already had five kids, now I have seven, with one more on the way. With so much going on at home, I do not have to convince anyone that I have an amazing wife. Trisha is the sweetest, kindest, loveliest person I know. She is much better than I deserve.

Finally, I give thanks to God for giving me this opportunity to learn and to grow and for his innumerable blessings to me in Christ.
Table of Contents

Introduction: Witherspoon as Reformed Apologist
   Method and Aims
   The Forgotten Witherspoon
   Literature Review
   Primary Source Material
   Structure and Argument

Chapter One: Witherspoon and Late Reformed Orthodoxy
   Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics
   Witherspoon and the Reformed Tradition
   Benedict Pictet and High/Late Reformed Orthodoxy
   Sin and Guilt
   A Free and Sovereign God
   Speculation and Scholasticism
   The Salvation of Sinners

Chapter Two: Witherspoon and the Rise of Evangelicalism
   Witherspoon among the Revivalists
   A New Sider from the Old World
   Justification by Imputation
   Unity in Essential Truths
   Putting Witherspoon in Place

Chapter Three: Witherspoon’s Ministry in the Church of Scotland
   Haddington, 1723-1745
   Beith, 1745-1757
   Paisley, 1757-1768
   The Snodgrass Affair
   Witherspoon’s Pastoral Ministry
   Witherspoon’s Preaching Ministry
   A Revival of Religion

Chapter Four: Witherspoon and the Enlightenment
   A Case of Conscience
   Reason in Service of Religion
   The Nature of True Virtue and True Religion
   “Remarks on an Essay on Human Liberty” (1753)
   Ecclesiastical Characteristics (1753)
   The History of a Corporation of Servants (1765)

Conclusion: Witherspoon’s Work in America
   A New Role in a New Place
   The Case for Continuity
   On Divinity and Moral Philosophy
   True Religion and Civil Liberty
Appendices
Appendix 1: Ashbel Green’s Biographies of Witherspoon
Appendix 2: Witherspoon’s List of Systematic Theologies
Appendix 3: Sermons: *Practical Discourses on the Leading Truths of the Gospel*
Appendix 4: Satirical Poem to the Presbytery of Paisley (c.1764)
Appendix 5: Witherspoon’s Connection to the Sheddens and James Montgomery

Bibliography
## Abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Haddington Minutes</td>
<td>National Records of Scotland. Minutes of the Presbytery of Haddington.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Irvine Minutes</td>
<td>National Records of Scotland. Minutes of the Presbytery of Irvine.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paisley Minutes</td>
<td>National Records of Scotland. Minutes of the Presbytery of Paisley.</td>
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**WCF** Westminster Confession of Faith


### Other Notes on Sources

In citing Witherspoon’s published writings, I reference the title of the piece and where it can be found in the 1802 edition of his *Works* edited by Ashbel Green (e.g., “Lectures on Divinity,” *Works*, 4:21). While some capitalization, italicization, and space between paragraphs may look different between the initial publication and Green’s edited volumes, the content is the same. I have chosen to cite the 1802 *Works* because they are more easily available online and because the 1802 edition has become the definitive source cited in Witherspoon scholarship.

*The Papers of John Witherspoon* are in the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.). The Papers contain two “Bundles” with numbered items. Most of the items listed are now lost.

All records noted with the CH2 prefix are from the *Records of Church of Scotland Synods, Presbyteries, and Kirk Sessions* in the National Records of Scotland (Edinburgh). Records with the prefix CS are Court of Session documents also from the NRS.

Benedict Pictet’s important work, *Theologia Christiana (Christian Theology)*, was first published in 1696 by Cramer and Perachon of Geneva. The title page has M.DC.CXVI for the publication date, which has led some scholars, including Klauber, to mistakenly assert that *Theologia Christiana* was published in 1716. But 1716 would be written as M.DCC.XVI. Since the *Epistola Dedicatoria* has the date M.DC.XCVI (1696), it is best
to assume the date on the title page inadvertently transposed the C and the X after the second period, making 96 look like 116, and turning the proper 1696 into an awkwardly rendered 1716. In 1721, Theologia Christiana was expanded and published in three French volumes under the title, La Théologie Chrétienne (Genève: Gabriel de Tournes et fils, 1721). An earlier two volume French edition was published in 1708. This is the edition recorded in Witherspoon’s library. The only English edition (Christian Theology) appeared in 1834 and is based on the Latin Theologia Christiana. Unfortunately, the translator excised passages he felt were repetitive, consisted of long quotations, or were “more curious than useful,” though he claims these instances “are altogether very rare” (p.iv). Reyroux omitted parts of the chapter on Reprobation because he thought them “too artificial in statement to be scriptural” (p.212). He also frequently combined smaller chapters under one heading (the original Latin text has 148 chapters in 14 books, while the English translation has 106 chapters in 11 books). For that reason, when referencing Christian Theology, the corresponding section in Theologia Christiana, given in Roman numerals, will be included in parentheses.

Wherever possible and practical, I have retained the original spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and typographical emphases (italics, bold, or underline) found in old sources. Occasionally, punctuation is removed (later editorial editions anyway, considering that Witherspoon himself used nothing but the period) in order to make sense of the quotation for contemporary readers. No other changes have been made unless explicitly stated.
Introduction

“The Truths of the Everlasting Gospel Are Agreeable to Sound Reason”
Witherspoon as Reformed Apologist

On January 2, 1758, John Witherspoon entered the High Kirk of Edinburgh ready to preach a sermon equal part evangelistic, apologetic, and polemical. Witherspoon, who was born in Yester Parish some 20 miles to the east, had been invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). Founded in 1701 as a benevolent society to promote the Protestant faith among the Scottish Highlanders, and later the North American Indians, the SSPCK gathered every year, usually in early January, at St Giles’ Cathedral—the beautiful old church known as High Kirk, whose crown steeple had been a point of reference on the Royal Mile since the fourteenth century.\(^1\)

Preaching before the SSPCK at the most important and most impressive church in all of Presbyterianism and in the pulpit John Knox once filled was an honor bestowed upon prominent ministers in the Church of Scotland. At 34 years old, Witherspoon’s reputation as a writer and preacher had been growing. His satirical (and at that point anonymous—but rumors were flying) attack on the Moderates, Ecclesiastical Characteristics (1753), was a sensation, going through five editions in two years.\(^2\) His Treatise on Justification (1756) had been very well received, and after the performance of John Home’s controversial play Douglas, Witherspoon showed himself to be the most effective anti-theater essayist with his Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage (1757). Clearly, the young pastor was not shy about entering into controversy. The summer before ascending into the pulpit at St Giles’, Witherspoon was in the same city leading a group of eight ministers in protesting a General Assembly vote which allowed a commission of elders to be seated even though they failed to meet the spiritual qualifications mandated by church law.\(^3\)

With so much swirling in the ecclesiastical air—from plays to patronage to dissenting presbyteries—we can safely assume that when the bushy-browed, somewhat

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2 PW, 1:39.

3 Annals 1752-1766, pp.102-8.
fleshy, newly installed parson at Laigh Kirk of Paisley came to his task in Edinburgh, he
did so with great intentionality. It was only three years earlier that William Robertson,
the leader of the burgeoning Moderate Party, had spoken at the same annual gathering
and less than six months before the celebrated Moderate preacher Hugh Blair would
assume the charge at the High Kirk. It would be too much to say Witherspoon came to
the SSPCK itching for a fight before a hostile crowd (after all, his friend and Popular
Party colleague John Erskine was the invited preacher the year after Robertson,
suggesting a deliberate attempt to balance their invitations between factions in the Kirk).
But neither was Witherspoon speaking in a contextual vacuum. When he decided to
preach from Acts 4:12 on “The Absolute Necessity of Salvation Through Christ,”
Witherspoon knew what he was doing.

The sermon begins with Witherspoon’s contention that, “It is not easy to conceive
any subject, at once more important in itself, more seasonable in this age, and more suited
to the design of the present meeting, than the absolute necessity of salvation through
CHRIST.” Then after briefly mentioning the threat from “infidel writers,” Witherspoon
argues that the “much greater reason to apprehend danger” comes from “that class of
men who, being nominal Christians, disguise or alter the gospel in order to defend it.”
Witherspoon was concerned that the “fundamental doctrines of the gospel”—doctrines
like inherited depravity, everlasting damnation, and the necessity of redemption—are
being “softened,” that “modern philosophy” is polluting “ancient Christianity,” and that
Christ is being put forward as a teacher and moral reformer rather than as a “Saviour”
and “our blessed Redeemer.” As we will see, Witherspoon was conversant with
contemporary philosophy and had no hesitation in showing how ancient Christianity
squared with sound reason, but he opposed any dissimulation of the gospel in general (or
the theology of the Westminster Confession specifically), which purported to render the
faith more palatable. In his mind, “The nearer Christianity is brought to the principles of
infidels to solicit their esteem, the less occasion will they see for it at all.”

Witherspoon’s sermon before the SSPCK is significant, not only because of
where and when it was preached, but because it provides a useful window into

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4 Ibid., p.416.
5 Hugh Blair, Sermons by Hugh Blair, To Which is Prefixed a Short Account of the Life and Character of
7 Ibid., 2:339-40.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid.
Witherspoon’s thought—what he wanted to safeguard, what he wanted to clarify, where he was uncompromising, where he was cautious, how he saw the lay of the land in the Kirk, and how he understood the Christian faith. We see here Witherspoon’s penchant for piling up Scripture verses to make his point—more than forty biblical references can be found in the first section alone.\(^\text{10}\) We see his eagerness to prove the sinfulness of man and the need for a substitutionary payment for sin.\(^\text{11}\) We see his concern that laying great stress upon believing the right thing is not a deterrent to doing the right thing, but actually the only way to produce the virtue so desired by polite society in Enlightenment Scotland.\(^\text{12}\) We see his caution in dealing with certain disputed questions that are not explicitly answered in Scripture.\(^\text{13}\) We see his conviction that the best way to work for the moral and social improvement among the downcast is by offering them the gospel.\(^\text{14}\) We see his objection to the idea that Christian charity means forbearing with error instead of being zealous to lead people to the truth.\(^\text{15}\) We see his willingness to use philosophical categories as he employs the popular distinction between natural and moral inability.\(^\text{16}\) We see his strong presumption that the Catholic faith was not true Christianity but instead a pernicious “Romish superstition.”\(^\text{17}\) We see his desire to promote “true religion” not only among “the highlands of Scotland,” but among the “unenlightened Heathen nations” (i.e., the Indians of North America).\(^\text{18}\) And perhaps most clearly and most centrally, we see his theological commitment to the task of an evangelical minister as he concludes his sermon with an “earnest” appeal “to believe in Jesus Christ,” for even in his “audience of professing Christians” he reckoned there could be many who “boast of the dignity of their nature, and the perfection of their virtue,” but are, in fact, “strangers to real faith in Christ.”\(^\text{19}\)


\(^{11}\) Ibid., 2:342, 349, 355, 359.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 2:348-50.

\(^{13}\) For example, Witherspoon asks whether explicit knowledge of Christ is necessary for salvation. At first, Witherspoon suggests that caution and “suspend[ing] the determination” might be the best answer, provided we do not deny the importance of “propagating the gospel among the nations that know not God.” But as Witherspoon proceeds, he finds it difficult to hold out much hope for those who have never heard the gospel, except that God would not frustrate the honest seeker and will judge the guilty in proportion to their knowledge. Ibid., 2:353-55.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 2:361-62.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 2:352-53. Witherspoon includes a lengthy footnote on the true meaning of charity, a footnote which was later expanded into a separate discourse and appended to the publication of the sermon (see 2:369-84).

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 2:357.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 2:364.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 2:363-64.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 2:365-66.
Method and Aims

In his magisterial biography of Jonathan Edwards, George Marsden explains that Enlightenment era thinkers and practitioners must be viewed in their eighteenth-century context and taken seriously on their own terms. We must “enter sympathetically into an earlier world and [try] to understand people.”20 In “seeing things their way,” the historian tries to avoid the ideological reductionism that can mar a Marxist reading of texts, the intellectual isolation that besets the “great thinkers” approach to ideas, and the anachronistic self-congratulation that marks the Whig interpretation of history.21 In dealing with people from the past, historians “need to do the hard work of learning their language, grasping their concepts, and describing their worldview.”22 Such objectivity is not the same as neutrality. Rather, it is meant to ensure that historical figures are presented, first of all, in a way they themselves would recognize, and only after that in a way that intersects with our contemporary concerns.

More specifically, my methodological approach is what Bradley and Muller call the synchronic or organic model.23 In this model the historian does more than interpret texts; a whole matrix of concerns must be kept in view. This means Witherspoon must be examined as one who interacts with church tradition, political concerns, ecclesiastical controversy, social changes, and a web of personal relationships and experiences. As Skinner puts it, “I attempt to interpret specific beliefs by placing them in the context of other beliefs, to interpret systems of belief by placing them in wider intellectual frameworks, and to understand those broader frameworks by viewing them in light of the longue durée.”24

My aim is to explore the theology of John Witherspoon in his historical context, with special attention given to the Scottish half of his career. In order to succeed in this focus, and in effort to handle his theology with historical sensitivity, most of

22 Coffey and Chapman, “Introduction,” p.12. See also Richard J. Evans, In Defense of History (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999) for a critique of the postmodern insistence that the pursuit of historical truth is impossible and misguided.
Witherspoon’s American career will be set aside until the last chapter. There the question will be, by necessity, a narrow one: Did Witherspoon undergo an intellectual sea change in leaving Scotland for America? I hope to show that there was considerable continuity of thought between the two halves of his career. The differences in emphasis that emerge were not because of capitulation to the Enlightenment but owing to two other factors: he was now a college president (with new ministry objectives), and he was now in America (which gave birth to a new optimism). In the chapters leading up to this conclusion, we will look at Witherspoon’s theology as shaped by four historical realities: the Reformed tradition, the Evangelical Awakening, the Scottish Kirk, and the Scottish Enlightenment. To be more precise I will argue that Witherspoon’s theology—and indeed Witherspoon himself—cannot be properly understood until we see him not only engaged with the Scottish Enlightenment, but also firmly grounded in the Reformed tradition of High to Late Orthodoxy, embedded in the transatlantic Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century, and frustrated by the state of religion in the Scottish Kirk.

**The Forgotten Witherspoon**

John Witherspoon is known for many things—a thorn in the side of the Moderate Party in the Scottish Kirk, a successful president at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), an influential moral philosopher, the conduit of Scottish Common Sense Realism into the civic and ecclesiastical life of the American colonies, an ardent supporter of the American Revolution, and, most famously, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

What the Presbyterian pastor is not known for is being a particularly insightful, significant, or even consistent Reformed preacher and thinker. Witherspoon’s fame, especially in America, is owing to the second half of his life, where he increasingly turned his attention to political matters and to the formation of a new nation in the New World. As Jeffry Morrison has argued, “By any fair measure [Witherspoon] deserves to be classed among the founders of this republic.” Witherspoon not only left his mark on the Declaration, he also signed the Articles of Confederation, helped ratify the Constitution in the state of New Jersey, served on 126 committees during six years in the Continental Congress, and had a hand in personally instructing an entire generation of

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educators, legislators, and statesmen. A list of his Princeton graduates include: twelve
members of the Continental Congress, five delegates to the Constitutional Convention,
one U.S. president (James Madison), one vice president (Aaron Burr), forty-nine
representatives, twenty-eight senators, three Supreme Court justices, eight district
judges, one secretary of state, three attorneys general, and two foreign ministers. The
fiery Scotsman is right to be remembered as a key figure in America in the years
surrounding the Revolution.

With all that has been written about Witherspoon the “animated son of liberty” in
the colonial cause or Witherspoon as the one who should be credited with “the
introduction of Scottish Realism to America,” comparatively little has been written
about what Witherspoon did for a living in Scotland, that is, pastor a local church and
teach the Bible. Commenting on Morrison’s fine monograph, Daniel Walker Howe
observes that the book nevertheless “ignores [Witherspoon’s] Scottish career, and its
treatment of Witherspoon’s philosophical and religious ideas are derivative and
somewhat dated.” Howe argues that Witherspoon cannot be understood except by
looking at his Scottish and American situations together. If we are to make sense of
Witherspoon the founding father and Princeton president, we must first understand
Witherspoon the pastor-theologian and ecclesiastical provocateur. It is telling of
Witherspoon’s legacy that in the standard biography by Varnum Lansing Collins, fewer
than seventy pages out of 500 deal with the Scottish portion of his life. Witherspoon has
been dismissed as eclectic, unoriginal, and confused—for historians of the Scottish
Enlightenment too beholden to an antiquated Calvinism and for Reformed theologians
too enamored with Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid. What is known about
Witherspoon as a thinker has been seen largely through the lens of three works:
Ecclesiastical Characteristics (1753) for those interested in his controversies with the
Kirk’s Moderate Party; his sermon The Dominion of Providence Over the Affairs of Men
(1776) for those interested in his political career; and his posthumously published
Lectures on Moral Philosophy for those wanting to dissect Witherspoon as an amateur
philosopher and conflicted theologian. Most scholars, in assessing Witherspoon’s ideas,

26 Morrison, John Witherspoon, p.4.
27 This oft quoted description comes from John Adams’ diary entry on September 3, 1774 in The Diary
of Harvard University, 1961), 2:121.
28 E. Brooks Holifield, Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil
29 Howe, p.68.
have largely overlooked his parish sermons, his treatises on justification and regeneration, his Lectures on Divinity, his student addresses at Princeton, his lifelong commitment to the Westminster Standards, and his work as a Presbyterian churchmen in the United States.

Alongside the titles of pastor, president, educator, philosopher, and founding father should be a new category: John Witherspoon as Reformed apologist. Like his theological mentor, the Genevan theologian Benedict Pictet (1655-1724), Witherspoon held firmly to the tenets of confessional Calvinism. And like Pictet, Witherspoon was eager to show that the truths of supernatural revelation (i.e., historic, orthodox, Reformed theology) could be squared with reason. While Witherspoon professed to “care very little what men of vain and carnal minds say of my sentiments” and was happy in his own mind to form his theological opinions “immediately and without challenge from the oracles of truth,” he also confessed a keen interest in showing “that the truths of the everlasting gospel are agreeable to sound reason,” and made it his “business” through his “whole life” to demonstrate that these truths were “founded upon the state of human nature.”

Witherspoon lived in an age of transition where the tenets of orthodox Christianity, to say nothing of the sharp edges of Reformed theology, were under assault. His aim as a minister was to defend and rearticulate the gospel, without ever altering or disguising it. This is Witherspoon the Reformed apologist (on both sides of the Atlantic) and the Witherspoon largely unknown today.

**Literature Review**

The earliest reflection on Witherspoon’s ministry and influence—the funeral sermon by Witherspoon’s friend, Rev. Dr. John Rodgers—was delivered on May 6, 1795, and subsequently put into print by request of the Board of Trustees of the College of New Jersey. The discourse, entitled *The Faithful Servant Rewarded*, contains a biographical section provided by Witherspoon’s successor and son-in-law Samuel Stanhope Smith. In the short sketch, Witherspoon is hailed as “a profound theologian, perspicuous and

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32 That Smith provided the “character or memoir of Dr. Witherspoon” at Rodgers’ request is related by Ashbel Green in Sprague, 3:297 and in his *Life*, p.254. Collins suggests Smith’s material must have originated from Witherspoon himself (*PW*, 1:8). A biographical sketch—“chiefly derived” from Rodgers’ funeral oration—was prefixed to an 1804 edition of Witherspoon’s treatises on justification and regeneration (Edinburgh: Ogle and Aikman).
simple in his manner.”33 A few years later, in a book describing the topography of Scotland, we read in a section on Beith: “Here the great Dr Witherspoon, who united the Christian, the Scholar, the Divine, and the Politician in one, spent the first of his years in the work of ministry, was removed from this place to Paisley, and from hence crossed the Atlantic, and spent the remainder of his days in high utility and respect, on the western Continent.”34 Similarly, Samuel Miller in his Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century (1803) lauded Witherspoon as a vigorous, enlightened, active, practical man who excelled as a divine, a statesman, and as the head of literary institution.35 Writing for The Edinburgh Christian Instructor in October 1829, Thomas Crichton of Paisley, who grew up at Laigh Kirk and knew “of the Doctor’s ministry in Scotland” firsthand, still maintained that too little had been written about his former pastor, even though “his writings have been much read, and generally admired by the religious world.”36 The entry for John Witherspoon in A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen (1841) is a distillation of the Instructor article from 1829 and John Rodgers’s funeral sermon.37

In the two centuries since his death, Witherspoon has only had two significant biographers. The first was Ashbel Green (1762-1848), Witherspoon’s former student and later president of Princeton (1812-1822). Green provided the material for the Witherspoon chapter in the Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence (1824),38 and after his death William Sprague included Green’s biographical sketch in his Annals of the American Pulpit (1857-1869).39 Both of these smaller works have been superseded by Green’s Life of the Rev. John Witherspoon—the first full length

34 Robert Heron, Scotland Described: A Topographical Description of all the Counties of Scotland (Edinburgh: John Moir, 1799), p.166.
36 Thomas Crichton, “Memos of the Life and Writings of John Witherspoon,” The Edinburgh Christian Instructor, 28 (1829), p.674. There is no name attached to the Instructor essay except for “A Presbyterian of the West,” but Green explains that the author was “Thomas Crichton Esqr., Governor of Town’s Hospital in Paisley” (Life, p.24). Crichton was born in Paisley in 1761 and was an active participant in the civic life of the town until his death in 1844, serving as a school master, Session-Clerk (High Church), Governor of Town’s Hospital, biographer, and poet. He wrote memoirs for several Paisley’s pastors: Findlay, Witherspoon, Snodgrass, Geddes, and Baine (Robert Brown, Paisley Poets, Paisley: J. & J. Cook, 1889 [pp.37-40]).
37 A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen was originally edited by Robert Chambers and published in four volumes in 1834 (Glasgow: Blackie and Son). The volumes would go through several new editions and reprints. Under the “Authorities” listed for the Witherspoon entry in the 1841 edition are the Christian Instructor article from 1829 and John Rodgers’s funeral sermon (4:544).
biography, which was prepared for a never to be completed third edition of Witherspoon’s Works. Green’s unpublished biography made its way to Scotland for a period of time before the Rev. Nicholas Murray accidentally discovered the manuscript and delivered it to the New Jersey Historical Society in 1861. The manuscript then lay in archival slumber for more than a century, accessible only to researchers interested in reading four hundred pages of handwritten scrawl, until it was edited by Henry Lyttleton Savage and finally published by Princeton University Press in 1973.

Although Green’s biography has been considered almost hagiographic by some, Savage makes a compelling argument that Green did not write a “eulogy of his master” and was in some instances even too severe and too quick to find fault. To be sure, Green is largely appreciative of his mentor, but his assessment is frank and disagreements are candid. The concluding chapter on “the character and talents of Dr. Witherspoon” is particularly helpful in beginning to understand Witherspoon’s legacy as a theologian and how those closest to him understood his doctrinal commitments.

The other indispensable biographer is Varnum Lansing Collins, whose two-volume biography is the most thorough and most respected scholarship to date on the life and significance of John Witherspoon. Although not yet published at the time, Collins made judicious use of Green’s manuscript, along with the best available primary and secondary sources. If there is a weakness in Collins’s President Witherspoon it is the relatively quick work he makes of the Scottish portion of Witherspoon’s life. In the closing chapter on “The Man and His Ideas,” which runs more than fifty pages, Collins devotes only one paragraph to Witherspoon as a theologian. Collins’s overarching assessment of his subject—like the assessment of many after him—is that Witherspoon wedded together the “older power of the Calvinistic religion” with “the newer political

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40 See the “Introduction” to Life, especially 18ff. Green’s important 1840 address “Dr. Witherspoon’s Administration at Princeton,” published in the Presbyterian Magazine (1854) has been incorporated into the full biography (Life, 122ff). Green seems to have completed the memoir by 1840 or early 1841. For more on this history of Green’s many biographical sketches, see my Appendix I.
44 According to Savage, Collins “does not squeeze all the juice from the orange” (“Introduction” to Life, p.9). Savage also faults Collins for doubting the claim that Witherspoon was a descendant of John Knox (see “Appendix A” in Life, p.275; cf. PW, 1:5-6).
45 PW, 2:200-1.
While this is a plausible thesis, more work needs to be done to explore where the older power of Witherspoon’s Calvinistic religion came from and what it looked like.

Other biographies of Witherspoon have proven either too short or too derivative. The published address John Witherspoon and His Times (1890) by James McCosh is intriguing, though (due to the constraints of the genre) underdeveloped. McCosh argues that Witherspoon’s political views can be traced to the Solemn League and Covenant, an often overlooked argument which suggests that Witherspoon’s thought even in the political realm was shaped more by the Reformed tradition than by Enlightenment thought. David Walker Woods’s biography (1906) is much more substantial, but his best material is appropriated by Collins two decades later. Martha Lou Lemmon Stohlman’s admiring biography John Witherspoon: Parson, Politician, Patriot was prepared for the American bicentennial and focuses, understandably, on Witherspoon’s America career. The recent work ‘An Animated Son of Liberty’: A Life of John Witherspoon by Church of Scotland minister J. Walter McGinty is wide in its scope, but too idiosyncratic to be used reliably. Much more useful is John Witherspoon Comes to

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46 PW, 2:182-83.

47 James McCosh, John Witherspoon and His Times (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication and Sabbath-School Work, 1890). McCosh argues that three streams came out of the Reformation: the Episcopalian, the Puritan, and the Presbyterian. Although the last two are often treated together, McCosh stressed that the two are not identical. Whereas the Puritans were content to act according to their own conscience, the Presbyterians—in their purest expression as Covenanters—sought to maintain fixed articles of belief and a firm moral standard, not just in the church but in the nation (pp.5-6, 9-11). McCosh sees Witherspoon as representative of the Covenanter stream and influential as one of those in the Middle States who established America on Presbyterian principles (p.24). The same comparison with the Solemn League and Covenant is made forcefully, and much more comprehensively, in two articles by Gideon Mailer: “Anglo-Scottish Union and John Witherspoon’s American Revolution,” William and Mary Quarterly, 77, no.4 (2010), pp.709-46, and “Nehemias (Scotus) Americanus: Enlightenment and Religion Between Scotland and America,” The Historical Journal, 54, no.1 (2011), pp.241-64.


50 J. Walter McGinty, ‘An Animated Son of Liberty’: A Life of John Witherspoon (Bury St. Edmunds, UK: Arena Books, 2012). McGinty’s chapter on Witherspoon’s theology covers most of the requisite material but is marked not by an attempt to understand Witherspoon on his own terms, but by a constant irritation that Witherspoon was an evangelical and a Calvinist. McGinty feels Witherspoon was too concerned “with the state of a person’s soul” and not concerned enough with “the human ministry of Jesus or the model of Jesus as an ethical figure” (p.36). McGinty is not interested in putting Witherspoon into the proper historical context as much as he interested in excoriating Witherspoon for a narrow concept of salvation (p.42), for his graceless theology (p.42), for accepting the Old Testament as literally true (p.47), for being out of touch with working people (p.55), for using “typical evangelical jargon” (p.56), for focusing too little on the life and teachings of Jesus (p.59), and for misunderstanding the gospel (p.60). One can sense McGinty’s disappointment and frustration when he writes about Witherspoon’s reformed theology: “the contrast between these beliefs, and the forward and positive thinking that Witherspoon displayed when in any of his roles as educationalist, an administrator of the college, a politician, or an entrepreneur in emigration schemes is difficult to reconcile” (p.43).
America by L.H. Butterfield. The book consists almost entirely of correspondence to and from Witherspoon in 1766-1768 as he made the transition from Scotland to America. As the title suggests, most of the letters were not published as a part of the 1802 Works.

Most of the recent scholarly literature looks at Witherspoon in his American context, focusing either on Witherspoon the American patriot and founding father or Witherspoon the Princeton educator and bridge to the Scottish enlightenment. Highlighting the presence of resistance theory in the Reformed tradition, the Calvinist accent on human sinfulness James Madison inherited from his college president while at Princeton, and the similarities between the Presbyterian constitution of 1787 and the federal Constitution of the same year, Jeffry Morrison argues convincingly that Witherspoon is one of the “forgotten founders” and the best representative among them of joining together religion and politics. Several recent books have linked Witherspoon to the development of religious liberty in America. Barry Shain sees in Witherspoon an example of an educated, highly respected president and founder who explicitly rejected the Enlightenment faith in human goodness and helped to root American political sensibilities in the soil of original sin.

Several dissertations explore Witherspoon’s political thought and influence in Revolutionary America. Gary Stewart’s dissertation on clerical support for the Revolution argues against the received scholarship of Noll and Marsden (see below) that Witherspoon “rejected secular ideas of human ability, human autonomy, and human virtue in general, and called for American independence in accordance with his own tradition and with his long-standing positions.” Ronald Crawford emphasizes Witherspoon as a Paisley emigrant who brought to America a Scottish philosophy of

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liberty. The older dissertations by Marvin Bergman and David Bartley cover many of the same themes.

Less common are dissertations concerned with Witherspoon the rhetorician. Miles Bradbury’s dissertation “Adventure in Persuasion: John Witherspoon, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and Ashbel Green” presents the successive presidents of Princeton as all attempting, in different ways, to wed together piety and reason. Bradbury’s thesis, while certainly true as a general point, does not adequately explore the antecedents to Witherspoon’s thought in the Reformed tradition. Thomas Miller’s introduction to The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon is an excellent short synopsis of Witherspoon’s career, focusing primarily on his rhetoric and political influence.

Not surprisingly, Witherspoon is a common character in the telling of American Presbyterian history. The standard textbook, A Brief History of the Presbyterians by James Smylie has been surpassed by two recent volumes: Seeking a Better Country by D.G. Hart and John R. Meuther, and Presbyterians and American Culture by Bradley J. Longstreet. In both volumes Witherspoon is considered something of a religious-civic-educational amalgamation, especially so by Longstreet who emphasizes Witherspoon’s transmission of Hutcheson’s moral sense and Reid’s Common Sense Realism. Concerning Witherspoon and Princeton in particular, Princeton 1756-1896 by Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker is an older work (1946), but still contains a useful section on

61 Longstreet, Presbyterians and American Culture, pp.36-37, 50. For a more positive account of Witherspoon’s contribution to Presbyterian history, see Iain H. Murray, Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism 1750-1858 (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1994), pp.41-47.
Witherspoon, as do the newer histories on Princeton Seminary by David B. Calhoun and James H. Moorhead.62

No one has written more deeply (and often critically) about Witherspoon’s influence on the theological development at Princeton, and in American Christianity more broadly, than Mark Noll. In The Search for Christian America, Noll’s chapter on the American Revolution faults Witherspoon for being a “spokesman for the Enlightenment” and forming his “deficient” political philosophy on a “frankly naturalistic basis.”63 Writing in the chapter as an evangelical Christian to other evangelicals, Noll cautions modern-day Christians from ever using Witherspoon—whose moral philosophy he considered bereft of the Bible and utterly humanistic in approach—as a model for Christian political thought. This early essay anticipates the themes found in Noll’s subsequent work. He sees Witherspoon as trading in a robust Reformed epistemology for Scottish Common Sense Realism and an increasingly optimistic anthropology which, according to Noll, compares unfavorably to the more theocentric and Augustinian approach found in Jonathan Edwards. This negative assessment comes through most forcefully in Princeton and the Republic 1768-1822 where Noll maintains that Witherspoon—whom, he grants, never formally deviated from traditional Presbyterian dogma—experienced “a sea change” in coming to America, eventually bringing together under his imposing personality a series of theological and philosophical commitments which, in the end, did not cohere and could not hold.64

The connection between Witherspoon and Reid’s Common Sense Realism is not a new one. According to Ashbel Green, Witherspoon not only drove the Berkeleyean idealists out of Princeton, he also espoused the same principles as Thomas Reid and

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63 Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, George M. Marsden, The Search for Christian America (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989), pp.88-95, quotations are from 90-91. The impetus behind the volume, originally published by Crossway Books in 1983, is a concern that the burgeoning involvement of evangelicals in the public square—prompted by Roe v. Wade (1973) and the American bicentennial (1976)—often drew inspiration from a dubious reading of history. Moral Majority leaders like Jerry Falwell and Tim LaHaye are clearly in view (p.141). The popular apologist Francis Schaeffer is also a target of criticism, especially for seeing Reformed influence in Revolutionary thought (pp.141-43).

James Beattie before they had published their writings on Common Sense.  
Samuel Miller mentions Green’s anecdote (about Witherspoon’s Common Sense ideas predating Reid) in a footnote in his *Retrospect on the Eighteenth Century* (1803), which was in turn relayed by Crichton (1829). The Witherspoon-Reid connection was then further expounded in McCosh’s *Scottish Philosophy* (1875) and later expanded by Woodbridge Riley, whose analysis in *American Thought* (1915) informed Collins’s two-volume biography (1925). Witherspoon continues to receive attention as an American philosopher.

For most of the nineteenth century Witherspoon’s ties to Common Sense were viewed positively, but once the Reidian tradition starting losing its luster toward the end of the century, Witherspoon’s intellectual contribution became more suspect. In 1955, Sydney Ahlstrom set the tone for the next two generations when he argued in his seminal article “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology” that Witherspoon introduced into American Christianity (and into Old Princeton in particular) a Baconian and Common Sense strain of thinking which, in time, undercut authentic Calvinism, hurled American theology toward rationalism, and produced such a lifeless and static faith that dogmatic departures to liberal romanticism, evolutionary idealism, and social gospel activism were inevitable. This basic argument has been followed by a host of historians over the last sixty years, including George Marsden, Henry May, Andrew Hook,

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65 Life, p.132.
66 Miller relates that Witherspoon, “once informed a friend that the first publication in Great Britain in which Reid’s leading doctrine was suggested, and in a degree developed, was an Essay written by himself, and published in a Scottish magazine, some years before Dr. Reid wrote on the subject” (A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century [New York: T. and J. Swords, 1803], 2:184).
70 PW, 2:199.
Theodore Dwight Bozeman, Fred Hood, and E. Brooks Holifield. Many newer works continue to argue (or simply assume) that Witherspoon’s chief contribution in America was establishing a beachhead for an enlightened moral sense philosophy that could undergird republican political convictions.

Several dissertations explore Witherspoon’s relationship to and transmission of the philosophy of Common Sense. Scott Segrest argues that Witherspoon’s epistemology was “inductive, realist, pragmatic, and balanced, and anchored in the moral sense.” He considers Witherspoon’s fully developed conscience-based theory of ethics and politics to be his great contribution to American thought. More negatively, John Nelson Oliver in his 1935 Yale thesis paints a picture of Witherspoon so dedicated to Reidian epistemology that he deviated from Calvinist orthodoxy, could not withstand the spirit of the age, and veered closer to rationalism than any of his predecessors at Princeton.

The older dissertations by George Rich and Roger Fechner cover similar territory, working methodologically (and without a great deal of interaction with primary sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) through Witherspoon’s writings in an attempt to elucidate the philosophical and theological underpinning for his political thought.

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81 Ibid., p.94.


More recently, scholars have begun to question the grip of Common Sense Realism on Witherspoon and his theological descendants. Paul Kjoss Helseth has been working backward from Princeton Seminary into the history of the College of New Jersey, arguing that the theologians at Old Princeton, and their intellectual forefathers, were more intellectually sophisticated than to jettison their Calvinist convictions and evangelical piety for new Scottish philosophy. Gordon Graham does not present any definitive conclusions but is right to suggest that Ahlstrom’s thesis deserves more careful scrutiny. Similarly, Daniel Robinson concludes that there is only one Witherspoon (but a Witherspoon who is pulled in different directions in different contexts). 

Two recent works deserve special mention. The first is Stephen Wolfe’s chapter “Reformed Natural Law Theory and the American Founding: A Critique of Recent Scholarship” in which he argues that Witherspoon did not have to build upon Hutcheson and Reid for his ideas about reason, the right use of philosophy, and natural law; Witherspoon had all of these at his disposal from Calvin, Turretin, and the broader Reformed tradition. What Wolfe does in a few pages, I hope to develop more thoroughly in this dissertation. The second, Gideon Mailer’s book John Witherspoon’s American Revolution, is a superbly researched work and may be the most important


piece of intellectual history on Witherspoon in decades. While Mailer recognizes “theological ambiguity” and “remaining tensions in Witherspoon’s moral and political philosophy,” he questions “Witherspoon’s role as a simple conduit for enlightened sensibility in America.” As impressive as Mailer’s project is (and complementary to my own), it focuses largely on Witherspoon’s American career and suffers at times from conceptual imprecision and confusion over the technical aspects of Reformed theology.

When it comes to the Scottish half of his career, there are many good resources for understanding the general cultural, ecclesiastical, and intellectual context, but with the exception of Witherspoon’s relationship to the Scottish Enlightenment, there are few works which connect Witherspoon to the wider constellation of ideas, figures, and movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Peter Gay’s two major volumes on the Enlightenment (The Rise of Modern Paganism and The Science of Freedom) have become standards in the field, as has Paul Hazard’s The Crisis of the European Mind. Henry May’s work on The Enlightenment in America is less hostile to traditional religion than Gay (but here, too, Witherspoon is seen chiefly as a convert to Thomas Reid). More recently, The Creation of the Modern World by Roy Porter provides analysis on the crucial ideas to come out of the British Isles in the eighteenth century.

Gay’s understanding of the Enlightenment as “the rise of modern paganism” and the heroic enemy of religion has not gone unchallenged. The collection of essays in The Enlightenment in National Context (edited by Porter and Teich) argues for a more diverse intellectual movement which no longer gave primacy to French expressions of the

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89 Ibid., pp.34-36.
90 For example, Mailer explains “federal theology” not in terms of Adam’s headship over the human race but as a way “to transcend local boundaries without threatening more specific local identities among its constituent peoples, towns, and nations” (p.48). Sometimes, it is hard to tell if Mailer understands Reformed theology or if his cumbersome language is simply getting in the way, like when he says the “Confession made the encouragement of immediate salvation through grace the central duty of all Presbyterians” or when he says that Augustine “often declared the state of theological uncertainty to be an appropriate response to the mystery of predestination” (p.53) or when he claims that “too great an emphasis on local works always threatened to undermine the importance of faith and the universal primacy of grace in the Second Covenant emphasized by the Westminster Confession of Faith” (p.69).
While readily admitting that the French dominated model should be discarded, Jonathan Israel, in his massive trilogy, disagrees with those who stress plurality and diversity in the Enlightenment, especially those who adopt an essentially national approach to the topic (e.g., an American Enlightenment, British Enlightenment, French Enlightenment). Instead, Israel has argued for two Enlightenments, a moderate mainstream Enlightenment which often reinforced conservative traditions and institutions but which revised traditional theology—the Enlightenment of Locke, Leibnitz, and the Scottish Moderates—and a Radical Enlightenment which found clearest expression in Baruch Spinoza and led to the emergence of liberal modernity and the rejection of religious authority. Caroline Winterer, likely with Israel in her sights, insists that words like “radical,” “conservative,” “moderate,” “democratic,” and “revolutionary” are too often used by scholars in anachronistic ways and that we should understand what enlightenment meant to those in the middle of the eighteenth century; namely, that their ideas were a break from the dark past and filled with light for the up-to-date present.

Although there is still considerable debate on the “Which Enlightenment?” question—Dale Van Kley, for example, discounts the “revenge of the metanarratives” from Israel and others and insists on seven Enlightenments—there is a growing consensus that the relationship between religion and the Enlightenment needs to be reexamined. Several recent books highlight Christian engagement with the Enlightenment. Nigel Aston looks at what changed and what remained the same in Europe’s religious culture during the years of revolution. David Sorkin analyzes six religious figures from different cities in Europe and argues that they often found a middle

97 Winterer, American Enlightenments, pp.7-9. Given the title’s use of the plural, one can tell where Winterer stands on the issue of diversity in the Enlightenment.
99 Nigel Aston, Christianity and Revolutionary Europe, c. 1750-1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
way between traditional religion and the intellectual challenges to faith which arose during the Enlightenment. Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England by B. W. Young is an impressive study of the century’s ecclesiastical and philosophical debates, arguing that the most pervasive intellectual controversies took place within clerical culture as opposed to between clergy and freethinkers. Ruth Savage’s volume Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain contains a number of useful chapters for understanding Witherspoon’s context, in particular Isabel Rivers’s chapter on Henry Scougal and Aaron Garrett’s essay on moral reasoning. More recently, Simon Grote has produced an outstanding review of the historiographical literature dealing with religion and the Enlightenment, making a strong case for recognizing the contributions theologians made to the Enlightenment and understanding the ecclesiastical context in which many of the Enlightenment discussions took place. Not surprisingly, Israel’s new book on the American Revolution sees the rebellions in North America as overturning established religious norms. By contrast, Kloppenberg “explores underappreciated aspects of North Atlantic democracy, its religious origins and its ethical dimensions.”

Outside of Mark Noll’s scholarship on Princeton and American Christianity, the most significant scholarship on Witherspoon’s thought has come from those working on the intellectual and sociological history of the Scottish Enlightenment. Chief among

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104 Israel, The Expanding Blaze, pp.15-16.

105 Kloppenberg, Toward Democracy, p.6.

these scholars has been Richard Sher, whose two volumes *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* and *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (edited by Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten) provide a careful multidimensional analysis of the Scottish Enlightenment in general and the Moderate Party in particular.107 Ned Landsman’s chapter in the latter volume is especially helpful in articulating “das Witherspoon problem,” that is, how the man who made a name for himself in Scotland satirizing his Moderate opponents could become famous in America for incorporating the rhetoric, literature, and moral philosophy from these same Moderates.108 Douglas Sloan answers the question by arguing that Witherspoon was an inconsistent, exceedingly eclectic thinker who developed new priorities as a college president and baptized Enlightenment ideas in evangelical language.109

Not all scholars agree with the typical assessment of Witherspoon and the Scottish Enlightenment. Thomas Ahnert offers a revisionist account of the Scottish Enlightenment, arguing that it was the orthodox party who gave a large role to reason (for apologetic purposes) while the enlightened clergy were less interested in natural theology.110 Daniel Walker Howe argues in an important essay that modern assessments of Witherspoon have focused too narrowly on his relationship to Common Sense Realism and paid too little attention to his theological roots in the Calvinism of Benedict Pictet.111

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109 Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971), pp.103-45. Admittedly, Sloan wrote his work in 1971 before Landsman articulated the question in 1990, but Sloan’s assessment of Witherspoon is still one answer to the issue that has concerned scholars since at least Ahlstrom’s article in 1955.

110 Thomas Ahnert, *The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment 1690-1805* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014). While agreeing with Ahnert’s argument that the moral culture of the Scottish Enlightenment was shaped by Christian theology (and Reformed theology in particular), Stewart J. Brown is right to insist that the teachings of the Westminster Confession were more fundamentally opposed to the moral cultural of Enlightenment Scotland than Ahnert suggests. See Stewart J. Brown, “Moral Culture and Historical Progress in the Scottish Enlightenment,” *Modern Intellectual History* (2018), pp. 1-13 (especially pp.7-8).

111 Howe, pp.61-79.
Howe raises issues with many elements of the received assessment in Witherspoon scholarship. He criticizes Morrison’s monograph for ignoring Witherspoon’s Scottish career and relying on derivative and dated scholarship.112 He chides Garry Wills (and he may also have had Jack Scott in mind) for jumping to the conclusion that the American Witherspoon shared Hutcheson’s opinions just because he borrowed his sequence of topics (which was itself borrowed from Samuel Pufendorf).113 Howe also maintains that Witherspoon did not modify the Calvinist doctrine of human depravity and that his apparent sea change is best understood in light of the different ecclesiastical situations in Scotland and America.114 Many of the points Howe quickly raises in his brief chapter I hope to develop and substantiate in this dissertation.

There is much that is helpful in the historiography of the Scottish Kirk in the eighteenth century, even if the attention paid to Witherspoon’s theology is comparatively small. Ronald Crawford’s unravelling of the Snodgrass Affair is a groundbreaking work on the legal and ecclesiastical conflict that may have contributed to Witherspoon’s departure for America.115 Despite its brilliance as a piece of historical reconstruction, however, theological considerations are somewhat alien to the author’s interests.116 The best volume to deal with Witherspoon in his ecclesiastical context is John McIntosh’s book on the Popular Party.117 He presents Witherspoon as one of the key leaders in a doctrinally diverse Popular Party which was held together (if you can use such an organizational term) by its disdain for patronage, its emphasis on evangelical preaching, and its insistence on the necessity of saving faith. Luke Brekke’s dissertation on folk Calvinism in the western Lowlands paints a striking picture of popular religion—evangelical, confessional, devotional, supernatural, and often anti-clerical—in Enlightenment Scotland.118 Colin Kidd has written perceptively, and somewhat sympathetically, about subscription controversies in the eighteenth-century Kirk and why

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112 Ibid., p.68.
113 Ibid., p.71.
114 Ibid., pp.62, 78-79.
116 It is telling, for example, that Crawford describes Witherspoon’s popular work on regeneration as “impenetrable” (p.33).
the Moderates had few scruples about continuing to give allegiance to the Westminster Standards. A good introduction to the Moderate-Popular split in the 1750s and onward comes from Ian Clark’s chapter on “The Moderate Regime in the Church of Scotland, 1752-1805” in a volume of essays edited by N.T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison. In addition to standard textbooks on Scottish church history, three recent biographies (Jonathan Yeager on John Erskine, Roger Emerson on the Duke of Argyll, and Jeffrey Smitten on William Robertson) fill in important details about the religious and cultural context in which Witherspoon ministered, as does William VanDoodewaard’s recent book on the Marrow controversy and Seceder tradition and Anne Skoczylas’ oft-cited work on John Simson’s heresy trial. Stewart Brown’s edited volume of essays on William Robertson is especially good at situating the historical thought of the Moderate Party leader. Also noteworthy is Kenneth Roxburgh’s work on Thomas Gillespie—the Scottish pastor whose ministry overlapped considerably with Witherspoon, not only temporally through their years in the Kirk together, but also intellectually as both were staunchly committed to the Westminster Confession, conversant with Enlightenment thought, and influenced by the English non-conformist Philip Doddridge. For background on the training Witherspoon would have received


126 Anne Skoczylas, Mr. Simson’s Knotty Case: Divinity, Politics, and Due Process in Early 18th-Century Scotland (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001).


at Edinburgh, Jack Whytock’s recent volume on Scottish theological education is invaluable.\footnote{Jack C. Whytock, “An Educated Clergy”: Scottish Theological Education and Training in the Kirk and Session, 1560-1850 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001).}

Little has been done to put Witherspoon’s ministry in the context of the Great Awakening or understand his theology as a part of Reformed Scholasticism in the time of Late Orthodoxy, though a flood of excellent materials have been published in both areas in the past few decades. On the Great Awakening and the broader Evangelical movement, three books stand out: David Bebbington’s \textit{Evangelicalism in Modern Britain} for its famous “quadrilateral” which continues to be the most widely accepted definition of an evangelical, W. R. Ward’s \textit{The Protestant Evangelical Awakening} for highlighting the continental antecedents and Europe-wide experience of the Awakening, and Mark Noll’s \textit{The Rise of Evangelicalism} for insightful analysis of the Awakening in the English speaking world during the middle part of the eighteenth century.\footnote{D.W. Bebbington, \textit{Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s} (London: Routledge, 1989); W.R. Ward, \textit{The Protestant Evangelical Awakening} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Mark Noll, \textit{The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield and the Wesleys} (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003).} Thomas Kidd has also written an excellent history of the Great Awakening, though the spotlight is on New England.\footnote{Thomas S. Kidd, \textit{The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).} Kidd’s biography of George Whitefield does more to cover both sides of the Atlantic, but still focuses on America.\footnote{Thomas S. Kidd, \textit{George Whitefield: America’s Spiritual Founding Father} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).} G.M. Ditchfield’s is a much briefer history, but still useful, especially on the growth of Methodism.\footnote{G. M. Ditchfield, \textit{The Evangelical Revival} (London: Routledge, 1998).} Most of the historiography of Evangelicalism in the eighteenth century has focused, understandably, on Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesley brothers.\footnote{See, for example, with Hindmarsh’s important new work on evangelical devotion (D. Bruce Hindmarsh, \textit{The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism: True Religion in the Modern World} [Oxford: OUP, 2018], p.5). Hindmarsh focuses on Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys, but goes far beyond them in his analysis. He does not, however, mention Witherspoon.} Less has been written about the Awakening in Scotland, though Arthur Fawcett’s history of the Cambuslang Revival is a notable exception.\footnote{Arthur Fawcett, \textit{The Cambuslang Revival: The Scottish Evangelical Revival of the Eighteenth Century} (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971). See also Ned Landsman, “Evangelists and Their Hearers: Popular Interpretation of Revivalist Preaching in Eighteenth-Century Scotland”, \textit{Journal of British Studies}, 28 (1989), pp.120-49.} Leigh Eric Schmidt’s work has been influential in showing that many of the “innovations” associated with the eighteenth-century Awakening had their beginning...
in earlier Scottish communion traditions. For a detailed look at Scottish piety and the Kirk-centered Scottish culture of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, Margo Todd’s scholarship is unsurpassed and indispensable.

If little has been done to put Witherspoon in the context of the Great Awakening, even less has been done to explore the connection between his theology and Reformed Orthodoxy. The one exception is *The Piety of John Witherspoon* by L. Gordon Tait. This is most comprehensive analysis we have of Witherspoon’s theology to date, and one of the few which connects the dots between Witherspoon and Pictet. Yet, even here the Reformed tradition is not explored in depth and is sometimes misunderstood. Most conspicuously, there is no mention of Richard Muller and no reference to his groundbreaking work on *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*. The secondary literature on Witherspoon’s theology routinely fails to take into account (or came before) Muller’s insights on the breadth of the Reformed tradition and the nature of Reformed Scholasticism. The old “Calvin against the Calvinists” model—which found its most articulate expression in Brian Armstrong’s seminal book, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy*—is apparent in previous assessments of Witherspoon’s theology. Too often scholars have approached Witherspoon by looking backward through the lens of his posthumously published *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, and often by scholars with more expertise in the Scottish Enlightenment and less interest in trying to understand Witherspoon as a Reformed theologian.

Only a handful of dissertations have set out to examine Witherspoon’s theology. William Bracket’s 1935 dissertation on Witherspoon’s Scottish ministry is heavy on examining pastoral practice, but lighter on theological investigation, which is why Wayne Witte could say in his 1954 thesis that “except for brief summaries of his views

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138 Tait, *The Piety of John Witherspoon*.
139 For example, Tait finds it hard to believe that Witherspoon could believe in limited atonement and freely offer the gospel without apology (Ibid., p.56).
140 See *PRRD* in the Abbreviations.
nothing has been written of John Witherspoon’s theology.”143 Witte’s work, however, is less a full-blown theological analysis and, by his own admission, largely an attempt to demonstrate that Witherspoon’s public career was rooted in his Calvinist convictions. The burden of Witte’s thesis is to show that Witherspoon’s theology was “Calvinism geared for liberty.”144 Daryl Cornett makes the case that Witherspoon never walked away from a Reformed understanding of human corruption and original sin, but with a scant four and a half page bibliography Cornett’s work lacks the depth and fluency with primary sources to be the definitive word on this perennial problem.145 Moreover, Cornett’s subsequent writing, in which he claims that Scottish philosophy sometimes trumped the Bible in Witherspoon’s thought, makes one wonder how convinced he is of his earlier thesis.146 Daniel Norman’s master thesis “John Witherspoon, Common Sense, and Original Sin” does a fine job detailing Witherspoon’s theology of the fall and his assumptions about the noetic effects of sin.147 But Norman paints with a very broad brush when talking about Scottish Common Sense Realism, without noting the significant differences between Hutcheson and Reid or demonstrating that Witherspoon’s ideas were indebted to either of them. Norman tries to find a middle ground, arguing that Witherspoon was more orthodox than contemporary critics think, but that in the end he compromised his earlier views in order to incorporate Enlightenment ideas for an increasingly rationalist audience. While Witherspoon was certainly influenced by his intellectual surroundings, Norman fails to consider how Witherspoon’s understanding of reason and revelation was already present in Pictet and Turretin. Though not as thoroughly negative, Norman largely follows the Noll sea change thesis in making Edwards the plumb line for Reformed theology and depicting Witherspoon as a compromised and confused intellectual cautionary tale.148

144 Ibid., p.74.
Robert Null’s 2011 doctoral dissertation is longer and more impressive. Using the notes of former Princeton students, Null has provided a critical edition of Witherspoon’s lost Lectures on History and Chronology. About a third of the dissertation consists of the lost lectures and a detailed timeline of Witherspoon’s career. In the body of the dissertation, Null makes two main arguments: 1) We should not force Witherspoon into artificial categories of either philosophy or piety. 2) Witherspoon’s theology was profoundly shaped by his use of history. Despite the dissertation’s length, Null only sparsely interacts with the Enlightenment and barely touches revivalism or Protestant Scholasticism. In fact, in Null’s second to last sentence he observes: “Further areas for Witherspoon research would incorporate a more detailed and comparative study of his theology with the divines most likely to have influenced him, such as Benedict Pictet and Francis Turretin.”

One of the main undertakings in this dissertation is to find Witherspoon’s place in the context of a Reformed tradition which has been so helpfully explored in recent years by the likes of Muller, Willem Van Asselt, and Martin Klauber.

Back in 1954, Wayne Witte recognized the need for a more careful analysis of John Witherspoon’s theology. And yet, by his own admission, he did not provide all that was necessary. After him have come a handful of dissertations, chapters, and articles, but nothing approaching a scholarly examination of Witherspoon’s thought as grounded in the Reformed tradition and responding to the ecclesiastical and intellectual trends of his day. Almost every academic endeavor related to Witherspoon’s theology has analyzed his theology as a means to some other end, usually political or philosophical ends. The goal has too often been to move through his theology to see how it fits or does not fit

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150 Ibid., p.326.


with the principles of a founding father or the pedagogy of a college president. And when scholars have worked carefully through the requisite theological texts, the results have lacked sufficient historical synthesis and intellectual evaluation to make a lasting contribution to the field of Witherspoon research. Several recent authors—from Null to Tait to Howe—have highlighted the need to connect the dots between Witherspoon and his theological influences. Likewise, there are still vexing questions about Witherspoon’s relationship to the Scottish Enlightenment and avenues to explore related to his theological leadership in the Kirk and his place in the transatlantic awakening. By focusing on Witherspoon’s theology in the Scottish half of his career, we can approach a subject that has yet to be understood with the breadth and depth it deserves.

**Primary Source Material**

As for reading Witherspoon himself, it is regrettable that so much has been lost to vandalism or neglect. Witherspoon showed little concern for his place in history—he never kept a journal, was not fastidious in retaining correspondence, and even ordered “a large collection of his papers . . . to be burned a little before his death.” Many years earlier, portions of Witherspoon’s library were destroyed by British occupying forces before the Battle of Princeton. In working on the third edition of the Works, Green compiled new materials for publication, but we do not know what happened to them, whether they could have been the letters in the Butterfield volume, the few other miscellaneous items scattered across various archives, or other Witherspoon documents that have been lost. David Walker Woods, writing in 1906, noted his “own collection of [Witherspoon] manuscripts,” but those too are unknown to us.

Almost all of the extant material can be found in *The Works of Rev. John Witherspoon*. The first edition of the *Works* was published by William Woodward in Philadelphia in 1800-1801. A second edition appeared in 1802. Both editions were edited by Ashbel Green, who also prepared an expanded third edition that was to be published

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154 On January 2, 1777, Thomas Nelson wrote to Thomas Jefferson: “Old Weatherspoon has not escap’d their fury. They have burnt his Library. It grieves him much that he has lost his controversial Tracts. He would lay aside the Cloth to take revenge of them. I believe he would send them to the Devil if he could, I am sure I would” (*The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Volume 2: 1777 to 18 June 1779, Julian P. Boyd (ed.) [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950], pp.3-4).
155 See *Life of Ashbel Green*, pp.147, 483. According to Savage, “By 1832 Green had collected a great number of Witherspoon’s unpublished manuscripts as well as a ‘large number of letters addressed to him by correspondents in Europe and America,’ and a publisher had been selected” (*Life*, 19).
(but never was) along with his biography of Witherspoon. In 1803, Woodward released *The Miscellaneous Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, virtually a reprint (with different ordering) of the fourth volume of the 1802 *Works*. The material found in the four-volume American *Works* was later reissued in a nine-volume Scottish edition.

Although there is no modern, scholarly collection of Witherspoon’s *Works*, Sprinkle Publications recently issued a nine volume edition of *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon* edited by H. Rondel Rumburg and based on the revised and corrected 1802 edition. These attractive hardbound volumes provide easy, cost-effective access to Witherspoon’s writings—and, in the last volume, to Savage’s edition of Ashbel Green’s *Life of the Rev. John Witherspoon*. The introductory essays and footnotes, however, are not always reliable and should be read with caution. For example, Rumberg consistently confuses Witherspoon’s references to Frances Hutcheson of Scotland with John Hutchinson of England. Unless otherwise noted, my use of *Works* refers to the second edition of the four volumes published in 1802 in Philadelphia.

Special mention should be made of Jack Scott’s annotated edition of *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*. Though not without flaws—namely, a less than nuanced understanding of the Reformed tradition—Scott has provided the sort of critical and contextual analysis for Witherspoon’s most famous work that remains to be done for the rest of the Witherspoon corpus. The *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, along with his other best-known works, can also be found in *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon* (1990). As was stated earlier, the Butterfield volume contains many previously unpublished letters from 1766 to 1768. The manuscript collections at the Library of Congress, Princeton University, and the New Jersey Historical Society are not extensive, but there are two sermon notebooks, several pages of sermon diaries (i.e., calendars), and a few miscellaneous ecclesiastical papers that have been useful in this study. The National Records of Scotland contain the relevant Presbytery records from Haddington,

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157 “The two editions of his works which have been published in this country were both edited by me; and I have prepared for press a third edition, much more complete than any that has yet appeared. I have also written his life at large, intermingling it with a brief review of his various publications. But there is, I fear, little prospect that his works and life, which I wished should accompany each other, will be published before my death; as all my endeavors to bring them before the public have hitherto proved abortive” (*Life of Ashbel Green*, p.147).


Irvine, and Paisley, as well as minutes from the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr. Session minutes from Witherspoon’s time in Beith were also consulted, though unfortunately the session minutes from Paisley for Witherspoon’s ministry are not extant. Together this Scottish archival material helps to round out the picture of Witherspoon, not just as writer or president but as a committed pastor and churchman.

**Structure and Argument**

In the chapters that follow I examine John Witherspoon’s Scottish ministry as it intersects with four overlapping categories: Late Reformed Orthodoxy, the rise of Evangelicalism, controversies in the eighteenth-century Kirk, and the challenge of the Enlightenment. In the concluding chapter, I look at Witherspoon in his American context and address the question whether the Princeton President underwent an intellectual sea change in crossing the Atlantic from one British province to another.

Chapter One builds on the groundbreaking work of Richard Muller as I place Witherspoon in the broader context of Late Reformed Orthodoxy. The theological education in the Kirk during Witherspoon’s era was dominated by Benedict Pictet’s *Christian Theology* (1696). I argue that Witherspoon’s theology showed remarkable continuity, both in form and in content, with Pictet and (more in content than in form) with Turretin.

Chapter Two seeks to understand Witherspoon within the rise of Evangelicalism. Witherspoon was on friendly terms with the growing movement of transatlantic renewal, but he was not in the thick of the Awakenings or their foremost champion. This is not because Witherspoon was indifferent to the new happenings around him, but because he had already been shaped by older streams of Scottish and Reformed thought. Few people have looked at the strong ecumenical streak in Witherspoon, which is on display in his 1756 *Essay on Justification*. While his ecumenism certainly did not stretch as far as Catholicism or even the Wesleyan branch of the Awakening, he was an ardent proponent of unity among evangelical Calvinists across different denominations.

In Chapter Three I examine Witherspoon’s frustrations with, and controversies within, the Church of Scotland. Witherspoon saw his beloved Kirk as compromised by a weak form of confessionalism, a pretentious elitism of manners, and a disregard for the rules of the church. Relying on archival material from Princeton, the Library of Congress, and session and presbytery minutes housed in Edinburgh, I argue that Witherspoon was a man caught between two times: beloved in his local context for sticking to the old
Presbyterian paths and lambasted by the Moderate wing of the church for the same reason. For Witherspoon, the glory days of Scotland were long past and the whole country was in desperate need of revival.

In Chapter Four we turn our attention to Witherspoon and the Enlightenment. Here Witherspoon’s aims were apologetic. Almost all of Witherspoon’s direct interaction with Enlightenment ideas focused on three men he did not like: the Earl of Shaftesbury (for his philosophy of ridicule and manners), Lord Kames (for his undermining of the Kirk’s integrity), and Hume (for his rank infidelity). Witherspoon singled out these men because they were celebrated (or at least protected) by the Moderate clergy and thus threatened to undermine the Reformed orthodoxy of the Kirk. There is no evidence that Witherspoon was a serious disciple of Thomas Reid. Special attention will be given to Witherspoon’s early essay in the Scots Magazine (1753) criticizing Kames’ theories of perception and delusion. I will also look at Witherspoon’s little-known satire The History of a Corporation of Servants (1765) in which he lampoons William Robertson and savages his opponents in the Church of Scotland.

In the concluding chapter I address “das Witherspoon problem” head on and argue for continuity in Witherspoon’s thought between his Scottish and American career. To be sure, Witherspoon was not exactly the same. Upon arriving in New Jersey, he found himself with a new role and in a new place (with a new national optimism). Despite new emphases and responsibilities, Witherspoon’s theology did not change. By looking at his Lectures on Moral Philosophy and his Lectures on Divinity, as well as sermons preached in both halves of his career, I argue there is nothing in his views on reason, human nature, and true virtue that were not present in his Scottish ministry. Witherspoon is best understood not as a conduit of Reidian Common Sense, but as a Presbyterian clergyman and a traditional Reformed theologian who found ways to make his old school views preach in a new day.
Chapter One

“The Sound, Calvinistic, Reformation Divinity”
Witherspoon and Late Reformed Orthodoxy

Even among the best scholarship, previous assessments of Witherspoon’s theology have often been marred by a superficial—and usually unsympathetic—understanding of the Reformed tradition. Calvinism is presented as something dark and mysterious, oppressive and unbending. For example, Jack Scott, in his annotated edition of Witherspoon’s Lectures on Moral Philosophy, claims that covenant theologians of the seventeenth century like William Ames did away with “the austere, unknowable Almighty” of earlier Calvinism in favor of a God who contracts with his people.¹ Likewise, Scott sees Witherspoon as maintaining the “façade” of orthodox Calvinism but undermining the original article because he rejects “the arbitrary Deity portrayed by ultra-Calvinists” and goes against “Pure Calvinism” in teaching, for example, the efficacy of prayer.² All this despite the fact that Calvin emphasized God’s covenant relationship with his people, rejected the notion of “absolute might” and a “lawless god who is a law unto himself,” and opposed any notion that personal pleading in prayer and a high view of divine providence were incompatible.³ Scott works with a caricatured Calvinism such that any perceived doctrinal ambiguity or finely tuned nuance must be explained as an Enlightenment modification.

Similarly, Anne Skoczylas describes the trial of Glasgow professor John Simson as a conflict between middle-of-the-road, enlightened Calvinists and their “ultra-conservative opponents” from the “ultra-orthodox evangelical wing” of the Kirk, who sought to take “extremist action” against those who espoused a broader and more inclusive from of Calvinism.⁴ While this is certainly one way to view the Simson affair, Skoczylas’s assessment not only relies on an outdated “Calvin against the Calvinists” paradigm, it also suffers from fundamental misunderstandings about doctrinal

³ Inst., II.x.1-23; III.xxiii.2; III.xx.2.
⁴ Anne Skoczylas, Mr Simson’s Knotty Case: Divinity, Politics, and Due Process in Early 18th-Century Scotland (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2001), pp.10-12, 92.
controversies in the Reformed tradition.\(^5\) She sees the development of Scottish theology in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as a self-absorbed faith marked by sterile logic and rigid inflexibility: “Such a theology had fewer doctrinal ambiguities and less of the inner fire of the first Reformers: it appealed to the mind rather than the emotions. Where Calvin had focused on how a biblical God revealed himself to mankind, Calvinist scholastics speculated on the nature of God, on predestination, and on the exercise of the divine will.” \(^6\) With such a harsh view of Calvinism, it is not surprising that many scholars would do little to explore the fine intricacies and careful distinctions so important to the Reformed tradition.

For those concerned about Witherspoon’s place in the Reformed tradition, three interpretive approaches have been typical. Some, like Scott, see Witherspoon as having enough Enlightenment sensibilities to profitably deviate from the starker realities of “Pure Calvinism.” Other scholars like Mark Noll view Witherspoon’s alleged departures from Calvinist orthodoxy more negatively, arguing that Witherspoon imbibed an implicit naturalism and unwittingly compromised the robust Augustinian tradition that other Calvinists theologians (read: Jonathan Edwards) were right to maintain.\(^7\) In the third category are those like L. Gordon Tait who are more sympathetic to Witherspoon and want to believe that Witherspoon could not have been as bad as a full-blooded Calvinist.\(^8\) None of these approaches does justice to Witherspoon’s theology, because all fail to recognize its deep continuity with the Reformed tradition he inherited and meant to promote. When historians do venture a more sympathetic account of Witherspoon’s Calvinism, they are often more intent on connecting Witherspoon forward to Old Princeton than looking backward to see his dependence on the theologians of High to Late Reformed Orthodoxy.

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5 Ibid., pp.70-99. For example, Calvinists saw no contradiction in limiting the extent of the atonement while still insisting on a universal external gospel call.
6 Ibid., p.75.
8 L. Gordon Tait, *The Piety of John Witherspoon: Pew, Pulpit, and Public Forum* (Louisville, KY: Geneva Press, 2001). Tait admits that Witherspoon spoke of human depravity and “excessive depravation,” but is relieved to find that Witherspoon does not use the term “total depravity” or speak as colorfully about sin as Calvin (p.44). Tait is also encouraged that Witherspoon affirms human response and effort, and believes the gospel should be preached to all—ideas which are have a long history in the Reformed tradition (pp.56-57).
Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics

In the last thirty years, thanks in large part to the pioneering work of Richard Muller, there has been a profound reassessment of the post-Reformation Reformed tradition. Muller has labored tirelessly to overturn the “Calvin against the Calvinists” approach to Reformed historiography which blames the followers of Calvin for distorting and compromising their founder’s vision and emphases.9 This older methodology found articulate expression in Brian Armstrong’s influential work Calvin and the Amyraut Heresy (1969).10 Armstrong argued for essential discontinuity between Calvin’s thought and that of his followers. Owing in large part to Calvin’s successor in Geneva, Theodore Beza, Reformed theology lost its Christocentric moorings, wed itself to Aristotelian philosophy, became fixated on predestination, and devolved into a soul-less scholasticism. According to Armstrong, Beza’s whole theological program—with its supralapsarianism, limited atonement, and immediate imputation of Adam’s sin—represented a distortion of Calvin’s teaching, leading to the rigid and speculative theology that would dominate international Calvinism in the seventeenth century.11

Against this view, Muller has made a number of convincing points.12 (1) We must not make John Calvin the benchmark or the sole fountainhead for the whole Reformed tradition. Undoubtedly, he exerted profound influence through his writings and the informal power he exercised in and through Geneva, but the Reformed tradition was also shaped by an impressive list of Calvin’s contemporaries, including Huldrych Zwingli,

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Martin Bucer, Heinrich Bullinger, Peter Vermigli, Wolfgang Musculus, Zacharias Ursinus, and Girolamo Zanchius. And this is to say nothing of the early confessions and catechisms, only some of which had explicit antecedents in the work of John Calvin. Although the term “Calvinism” was nearly synonymous with Reformed theology by the middle of the eighteenth century, the Reformed tradition has always been broader than just one man. So to judge the “purity” of one’s Reformed credentials—be it from Beza, Perkins, Turretin, or Witherspoon—by comparing and contrasting with Calvin’s *Institutes* is methodologically lazy and historically reductionistic.

(2) The search for “central dogmas” in Calvin and his followers has been a fruitless exercise. The theological systems of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries were organized around standard topics (*loci*) rooted in a common exegetical tradition. While different theologians, given different contexts and different controversies, may have stressed different points, to claim that one theology was Christocentric, another theocentric, and another decretal in structure, is to read these theological systems anachronistically rather than contextually.

(3) Scholasticism by itself does not require Aristotelian philosophy or metaphysical speculation, let alone lifeless rigidity. The term scholastic refers to method, without direct implications for content.13 Since the twelfth century, theologians and philosophers from a wide diversity of perspectives have relied on scholastic methodology in making clear distinctions concerning parts and divisions of topics.14 Even Calvin—who had nothing kind to say about the scholastic sophistry he saw from the Sorbonne

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frequently made use of Scholastic distinctions.\textsuperscript{15} In short, scholastic indicates “an academic style and method of discourse, not a particular theology or philosophy.”\textsuperscript{16}

(4) While there are important differences between the early Reformers and later Reformed theologians (as we would expect in any multi-national movement spread across multiple centuries), there is much more continuity than the older “Calvin against the Calvinists” school, with its primitivist assumptions, allowed. At the very least there is a shared confessional and exegetical tradition that can be traced throughout the development of Reformed dogmatics from the second half of the sixteenth century well into the eighteenth century. Once these contours and continuities are better understood, we will see that Witherspoon did not depart—either for good or for ill—from some “purer” form of Calvinism; in fact, his method and content were remarkably similar to those of his theological mentors.

A few words about definitions are in order.\textsuperscript{17} Although the term “orthodox” most generically means “right teaching” or adherence to correct doctrine, as an historical term it can also refer to the time following the Protestant Reformation in which doctrinal formulations developed and were codified in the Lutheran and Reformed traditions. Reformed orthodoxy speaks of the theology and theologians connected to the Reformed confessions in the period from the sixteenth century into the eighteenth century. Scholasticism, as we have seen, can be used negatively (and often has been in the Reformed tradition) as a reference to the speculative content of late medieval theology.

\textsuperscript{15} Calvin’s used of dialectical reasons was owing, at least in part, to scholasticism (Cf. Serene Jones, \textit{Calvin and the Rhetoric of Piety} [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995], pp.33-35.). Calvin accepted the scholastic distinction between absolute and relative necessity, or between consequent necessity and necessity of the consequence, and while he rejected the distinction between God’s determinative and permissive will, he often appropriated the distinction between the revealed and hidden will of God. Cf. \textit{The Bondage and Liberation of the Will: A Defence of the Orthodox Doctrine of Human Choice against Pighius}, A.N.S. Lane (ed.), G.I. Davies (trans.) (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1996), pp.xxviii, 28, 35-36; \textit{Calvin’s Calvinism: Treatises on the Eternal Predestination of God and the Secret Providence of God}, Henry Cole (trans.) (Grandville, MI: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1987). pp.234-35; \textit{Inst. I.xvi.9}; 2.12.1. See also Richard A. Muller, \textit{The Unaccommodated Calvin: Studies in the Foundation of a Theological Tradition} (Oxford: OUP, 2000), pp.39-61. Calvin employed the Aristotelian categories of substance, accident, and habit (Cf. \textit{Bondage and Liberation}, pp.xxv-xxvi, 46-48, 213), and although he distanced himself more from the “recent Sophists” (\textit{Inst.}, 2.2.6), one can find in Calvin elements of Scotist and Ockhamist thinking. Calvin’s attacks on scholasticism were almost certainly directed at the Sorbonne, “not on the older scholastic tradition but on a strain of contemporary scholastic theology viewed by Calvin as especially problematic in view of its extreme nominalism” (Muller, \textit{Unaccommodated Calvin}, p.52; cf. David C. Steinmetz, “The Scholastic Calvin” in Trueman and Clark [eds], \textit{Protestant Scholasticism}, pp.16-30). Likewise, T.H.L. Parker maintains that the “later sophists” Calvin particularly detested were “no doubt the Pelagians or semi-Pelagians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries” (T.H.L. Parker, \textit{Calvin: An Introduction to His Thought} [Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1995], p.53.).

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{PRRD}, 1:30.

\textsuperscript{17} Here I will be closely following Van Asselt, \textit{Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism}, pp.5-9.
but can more accurately be considered a method of teaching and investigation which employs a recurring system of distinctions, definitions, and disputational questions. Reformed Scholasticism, then, refers to the theology practiced in the period of orthodoxy, whose method is scholastic and whose content is bound (sometimes closely, sometimes more loosely) to the doctrine of the Reformed confessions. Although the term “Calvinism” is not, from the historian’s perspective, the best shorthand description for a broad movement of theologians and centuries of theological development, it became virtually synonymous with the Reformed confessional tradition by the eighteenth century, and thus will be used in this work interchangeably with the word “Reformed.”

The two centuries of Reformed orthodoxy are typically divided into three time periods.¹⁸

**Early Orthodoxy (1565-1640)** is the era of confessional solidification. By 1565, many of the second generation Reformed theologians had passed away (e.g., Calvin, Musculus, Vermigli), marking the beginning of a new phase in Reformed thought. The time period is marked by codification, as well as elaborations and developments in covenant theology. Important theologians include Zacharias Ursinus, Caspar Olevianus, Giorlamo Zanchi, Theodore Beza, William Perkins, Amandus Polanus, and Willam Ames. Van Asselt considers Franciscus Junius the representative example of this period.

**High Orthodoxy (1640-1725)** is the era of confessional summation. Theology in this time period—enmeshed in controversies surrounding Amyraldianism, Cocceian federal theology, Arminianism, Socianism, and the Hebrew vowel points—is often marked by increased precision, internecine debates, and detailed polemics. Important theologians in the first half of period include Johannes Cocceius, Gisbertus Voetius, John Owen, Stephen Charnock, and Francis Turretin. If one has a later phase to High Orthodoxy—Van Asselt ends the period at 1700—a diverse list of theologians like Benedict Pictet, Wilhelmus à Brakel, Louis Tronchin, Petrus Van Mastricht, Herman Witsius, Johannes à Marck, Thomas Boston, and Jean-Alphonse Turretin can be mentioned. According to Van Asselt, Francis Turretin is the representative example of High Orthodoxy.

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¹⁸ In dividing and describing these time periods I am relying on *PRRD*, 1:3-32, 60-84 and Van Asselt, *Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism*, pp.103-93. The time periods, of course, are not exact. Denlinger’s volume on *Reformed Orthodoxy in Scotland* has Early Orthodoxy going from the Reformation until 1640, High Orthodoxy from 1640-1690, and Late Orthodoxy from 1690 onwards. See Carl Trueman, “Introduction,” in Aaron Clay Denlinger (ed), *Reformed Orthodoxy in Scotland: Essays on Scottish Theology 1569-1775* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2015), p.3.
Late Orthodoxy (after 1725) is the era of confessional stagnation. It is also the era we know the least about, with fewer heavyweight theologians and with more of the historiography concentrated on the Enlightenment. Muller describes Reformed theology post-1725 as having less secure philosophical foundations, being less willing to combat deviations from historic Christianity, and wanting to be less bound by the confessional norms of the Reformation. Van Asselt—who has Late Orthodoxy spanning most of the eighteenth century, from 1700 to 1790—describes the period as a transitional era in which the old formulas were coming under disrepute. There is less interest in the scholastic method and more interest in finding pan-Protestant unity around the fundamental articles of the faith. In this period can be found everything from fiery Seceders like Ralph and Ebenezer Erskine in Scotland, to fairly traditional systematicians like Daniel Wyttenbach at Marburg, to staunch Calvinists like John Gill in England, to liberals like Jacob Vernet in Geneva. With a different chronological schema than Muller, Van Asselt labels Benedict Pictet as the representative example of Late Orthodoxy. Given Pictet’s defense of the Formula Consensus Helvetica, however, it would seem (as Muller suggests) that the Genevan successor to Francis Turretin fits better in the second phase of High Orthodoxy.

As useful as these time periods are as a heuristic device they should not be pressed into an exact science. The key is to place Witherspoon within the context of the larger Reformed tradition he inherited and inhabited. Most scholars interested in Witherspoon the thinker have looked at his theology through the lens of his Moral Philosophy—a work he never edited and was not made available until after his death. The standard reading of Witherspoon as an eclectic and compromised theologian who never bothered to figure out how Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid mesh with John Calvin has become so entrenched that the Reformed theology espoused in the Scottish half of his career has become little more than a necessary foil to all the interesting philosophical thoughts he had upon arriving in America. Explicit connections between the Scottish Witherspoon and the American Witherspoon will have to wait until later. What I hope to show in this chapter is that as a writer, preacher, and polemicist in Scotland, Witherspoon (1) never strayed from the basic contours of Reformed theology found in High to Late Orthodoxy, and (2) drew upon important themes and distinctions from this theological tradition in

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19 *PRRD*, 1:32.
approaching the controversies and intellectual challenges which confronted Christianity in the middle of the eighteenth century.

**Witherspoon and the Reformed Tradition**

The history of the Scottish Kirk has often been told as its own tale, instead of as part of the larger story of the growth of international Calvinism. Witherspoon could not have received ministerial calls (which he ultimately declined) to Dublin and Rotterdam if an established network of Reformed churches, theologians, and academies did not exist across Western Europe. Although Scots were not major players in the development of Reformed scholasticism (though, note John Cameron’s influence on the Samur school), they were extremely conversant with the theological tradition—“users rather than dealers” is how Philip Ryken puts it.20 By looking at the personal libraries of Scottish clergy and the prevalence of Scottish pastors training in Germany, France, and especially Holland, Ryken makes a strong case that “the Scottish divines of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had a keen appetite for Reformed scholastic theology.”21 John MacLeod notes that during the Marrow controversy of the 1720s and 1730’s, the Marrowmen appealed to an impressive array of scholastic Reformed divines from Great Britain and the Continent.22 In the “List of Books of Character as Collected by Dr. Witherspoon” (transcribed by William Beekman, Jr. in 1773), the first section, labeled “Systems” of theology, is dominated by scholastic Reformed works from the seventeenth century and eighteenth century, including Ludovici Le Blanc’s *Theses Theologicae* (1675), Herman Witsius’s *De OEconomia Foederum* (1677), Benedict Pictet’s *La Theologie Chretienne* (1696), and Daniel Wyttenbach’s *Tentamen Theologia Dogmaticae* (1747-1749).23

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20 P. G. Ryken, “Scottish Reformed Scholasticism” in Trueman and Clark (eds), *Protestant Scholasticism*, p.200. Esther Mijers presents a somewhat different picture, at least in the first half of the seventeenth century, arguing that the Dutch in particular leaned on Scottish philosophy and looked up to Scotland as “an example of heroic and pure Protestantism” (p.76). Mijers is certainly correct to see a close theological and philosophical relationship between the two North Atlantic nations. See Esther Mijers, “‘Addicted to Puritanism’: Philosophical and Theological Relations between Scotland the United Provinces in the First Half of the Seventeenth Century,” in *History of Universities*, Volume XXIX/2 (Oxford, OUP, 2017), pp.69-95.


22 MacLeod, *Scottish Theology In Relation to Church History* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1943), pp.152-153.

23 As found in Appendix B in Tait, *The Piety of John Witherspoon*, 195. The inventory—which represents the books Witherspoon owned at his death in 1794 and were still in Samuel Stanhope-Smith’s possession in 1812—can be found in the Witherspoon Collection at the Princeton University Library. See my Appendix 2 for more information on the “Systems” included in Witherspoon’s list.
Of particular importance from this list is the French speaking, Genevan professor Benedict Pictet (1655-1724). While at the University of Edinburgh, Witherspoon’s lecturer in theology was John Gowdie, the professor who had been Moderator of the General Assembly in 1733, and in 1734 as Moderator of the Assembly’s Commission cast the deciding vote to depose Ebenezer Erskine and the other Seceders. Like Robert Hamilton who succeeded him in the Chair of Divinity, and like Andrew Hunter who succeeded Hamilton, Gowdie’s theology lectures were based on Pictet’s *Theologia Christiana* (1696). From 1733 to 1809, through three consecutive professors, there was a remarkable unity of theological education at Edinburgh: every student was instructed from the same Latin textbook—Pictet’s. In fact, as Jack Whytock has shown, from 1690-1825 across all Scottish universities, theological education was dominated by two works: Johannes à Marck’s *Compendium Theologiae Christianae* (1686) and Benedict Pictet’s *Theologia Christiana* (1696). Similarly, prospective ministers studying at Divinity Hall in Edinburgh—which is where Witherspoon went (or rather, stayed) after completing his Master of Arts—spent their days listening to theological discourses on Pictet and Turretin, read in Latin by Gowdie and Patrick Cuming.

Witherspoon’s Edinburgh classmate, Alexander Carlyle, famously described Gowdie as “dull, and Dutch, and prolix.” But however much the future Moderate clergyman found the lectures through Pictet to be “tedious” and with “no attractions,” there is no indication the future Popular Party minister shared Carlyle’s assessment. For starters, Witherspoon was a passionate Francophile. Easily speaking and reading French for most of his life, as president of the College of New Jersey Witherspoon offered French as a graduate study and was often employed as an interpreter when French dignitaries came to Congress. He picked up from his father (also a pastor) a love for the writings of the French Calvinists. When it came time to give his own theological lectures, Witherspoon recommended the French language, partly for its “purity,

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27 Ibid., p.63.
simplicity, and precision,” but “chiefly” so that his students could read for themselves in French “the sound, Calvinistic, reformation divinity.”

It is little wonder that Witherspoon listed the French edition (La Theologie Chretienne) of Pictet in his “Books of Character,” although he would have been familiar with the Latin text from his days as a student. Later in life Witherspoon still treasured his copy of Pictet in French, a love that was passed down to Witherspoon’s protégé, Ashbel Green, who counted it a good day when he could read and translate Pictet’s Christian Theology.

Witherspoon rarely quoted directly from sources, and the only writers he refers to with regularity are those he finds most infuriating like Hume, Kames, and Shaftesbury. One searches in vain to find many explicit references to Pictet, or to almost any other writer he likes. For Witherspoon, Pictet was not a sparring partner but a plumb line, not a theologian in need of finessing but a foundation to build upon. Rejection of Pictet’s Theologia Christiana—or, more likely, indifference to its fine-tuned dogmatics—was one of the defining marks of the Moderate minister. In a revealing comment in Ecclesiastical Characteristics (1753), Witherspoon says tongue-in-cheek that Scotland’s professors of divinity ought to lecture on the system of moderation instead of “the antiquated systems of divinity, as Pictet or Turretine”

A decade later in A Serious Apology for the Ecclesiastical Characteristics (1763), Witherspoon imagined that if someone had written against the ministers of the Church of Scotland from the opposite perspective (i.e., as a Moderate), they would have “represented them as having arrived to such a degree of bigotry, as to believe, that no person could be saved who had the least doubt of anything contained in the large systems of Pictet and Turretine.” For Witherspoon, Turretin and especially Pictet—and the High/Late Reformed Orthodoxy they represented—provided the basic theology that should be shared by all Scottish ministers, because it was the basic theology they almost all received. Even the Moderate minister and mathematician Robert Wallace (1696-1771) is said to have referenced “St

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30 “Lectures on Divinity,” Works, 4.21. The most frequent name (by far) in Witherspoon’s personal library is Jean La Placette (1639-1718), a French Hugenot pastor who later ministered in Copenhagen. There are twelve titles from La Placette recorded in the list of books owned by Witherspoon at his death.

31 Howe, p.69; Ashbel Green, Jones Joseph Huntington, The Life of Ashbel Green, V.D.M., Begun to Be Written By Himself in His Eighty-Second Year and Continued to His Eighty-Fourth (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1849), pp.439, 450, 451.

32 “Ecclesiastical Characteristics,” Works, 3:260. At the end of the sentence he mentions Johannes à Marck in a similar vein.

Augustine, Calvin, Turretine, Pictet, etc.” to Lord Kames as “the greatest and soundest divines of the Christian church.”  

Benedict Pictet and High/Late Reformed Orthodoxy

Pictet was born on May 30, 1655 to one of Geneva’s leading families. He studied theology under his uncle, Francis Turretin, and then completed his education in Paris and Leiden, where he studied under the conservative German Calvinist, Friedrich Spanheim (the younger). After a short time in England, Pictet returned to Geneva where, in 1686, he was made an assistant to Turretin and Philippe Mestrezat in the theology department. Pictet acquitted himself well, succeeding his uncle to the chair of theology and eventually being sought after as Spanheim’s successor in Leiden. As a professor and pastor in Geneva, Pictet was widely regarded not only for his erudition but for his skillful preaching, his hymnwriting, and his elegant French revision of the Psalms. His two most important theological works were *Christian Morals* (1692) and *Christian Theology* (1696). Pictet died June 10, 1724, crying out in his final moments, “O, death, where is thy sting.”

Pictet is sometimes lumped together with Jean-Alphonse Turretin and Jacob Vernet as an Enlightenment liberalizer who ditched the doctrines of original sin and predestination, striving to make Calvinism a softer, more optimistic religion. But this is to profoundly misunderstand Pictet’s legacy. Although he worked with the younger Turretin and adopted a different style than the older Turretin, Pictet was more doctrinally aligned with the latter than the former. Case in point: Pictet strongly opposed removing the Formula Consensus Helvetica as a confessional standard in Switzerland. For most of the seventeenth-century Reformed theology was embroiled in controversies surrounding

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34 Sir Henry Moncreiff-Wellwood, *Account of the Life and Writings of John Erskine* (Edinburgh: George Ramsay and Company, 1818). Moncreiff relates the line from Wallace in the context of Wallace reassuring Kames that the doctrine of necessity, for which Kames had been under assault, was held by others before him. It says something about the theological reference points in Scotland that Kames cites Calvin, Turretin, Pictet, and Edwards in defense of his views. See Kames’ *Objections against the Essays on Morality and Natural Religion Examined* (1756), which he included as an appendix in the third edition of his *Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005), pp.131-39.


the Academy at Saumur in France, as the leading men of Saumur—Moïse Amyraut (1596-1664), Louis Cappel (1585-1658), and Josue de la Place (1596-1665)—lobbied for a more ecumenical Reformed faith and one less corrupted (as they saw it) by Theodore Beza. As early as 1637, Amyraut was brought before the French Reformed Church to account for his views on the universal extent of the atonement and hypothetical redemption.37 When it became clear over the next decades that Amyraut would not be removed from his post or pastorate at Saumur—and in fact that the influence of Amyraldianism was spreading—the leading lights in Switzerland started planning for a more definitive response. In 1669, Francis Turretin (1623-1687) initiated the idea with Johann Henry Heidegger (1633-1698) of a Swiss Consensus that would address the errors of Saumur: namely, Cappel’s undermining of the inspiration of the Hebrew text of the Old Testament, de la Place’s rejection of the immediate imputation of Adam’s sin, and Amyraut’s insistence that God intended Christ’s death to be for all (upon the condition that they believe). A draft of the Consensus was composed by Heidegger in Zurich, with Turretin of Geneva and Lucas Gernler (1625-1675) of Basel assisting. The Formula Consensus Helvetica was approved by the Swiss Evangelical Diet in 1675 and endorsed by the Genevan Company of Pastors in 1678 and by the Council in 1679.38

A generation later Geneva was ready to be done with the Consensus. In one of the ironic twists of theological history, the push to remove the Consensus was led by Turretin’s son, Jean-Alphone Turretin (1671-1737), whose main opponent defending the Consensus was his older cousin (Francis’s nephew), Benedict Pictet. Francis Turretin married later in life and his son Jean-Alphonse was not born until his father was forty-nine. Pictet and Francis Turretin had a close relationship: Turretin taught Pictet theology; Pictet succeeded Turretin as professor of theology at the Academy; Pictet was called to Turretin’s bedside in his dying days, and on November 3, 1687 it was Pictet (not the 16

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year-old Jean-Alphonse) who delivered a hagiographical funeral oration in Turretin’s honor. Toward the close of the oration Pictet prayed that the death of his beloved uncle would not “portend anything for our church” and that God would keep Geneva “safe and tranquil, an invincible theater of your power and virtue.”

But it was not to be. Despite the protestations of Pictet and Benedict Calandrini (1639-1720), in 1706 the Council in Geneva removed the requirement for ordinands to sign the Formula. Even a mediating measure requiring ministerial candidates to agree not to teach anything against the Formula could not be approved. On September 6, 1706, the Council adopted a new ordination service which abrogated the Formula, only requiring ministers to subscribe to the Old and New Testaments and not to teach against the confessions and catechism of the church. Unlike the younger Turretin and the majority of the Company of Pastors, Pictet did not believe the Formula was a hindrance to unity with the Dutch, or even that it hampered the projected reunion with the Lutherans. He maintained instead that if Geneva lost the Formula, they would lose Dort and the confession of faith, and that eventually Arminianism would be established, or something worse. “I fear the spirits of this century are extremely given to novelties,” he said in defense of the Formula. Pictet’s fear proved to be prescient. In 1725, a year after Pictet’s death, the subscription formula of 1706 was set aside in favor of a still looser policy which required ministers only to subscribe to the Bible and to Calvin’s Catechism as a faithful summary of Scripture. There were no requirements to subscribe to—not even a requirement not to teach against—the Consensus, the Second Helvetic Confession, or

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39 For this history see Klauber, “Family Loyalty,” pp.57-60; see also, by Klauber, Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism: Jean-Alphonse Turretin (1671-1737) and Enlightened Orthodoxy in the Academy of Geneva (London: Associated University Presses, 1994), pp.143-164. D.G. Hart wrongly states that Pictet, like Jean-Alphonse, “favored revoking the doctrinal oath” (Calvinism: A History [New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013], 137). Hart also has 1726 as the year the Formula Consensus Helvetica was abrogated, when, in fact, the Formula was removed in 1706 and the subscription requirements were further watered down in 1725. There are other errors too. He mistakenly gives 1724 (the year Pictet died) as the date of Francis Turretin’s death (which was 1687). And he claims Turretin was the “architect” of the Helvetic Consensus and calls it “Turretini’s formula of orthodoxy” when J.H. Heidegger was the principal author.

40 “Funeral Oration of Benedict Pictet Concerning the Life and Death of Francis Turretin” translated by David Lillegard in Elenctic, 3:676.

41 Klauber, Between Reformed Scholasticism and Pan-Protestantism, pp.146-148, Good, History of the Swiss Reformed Church, pp.177-78.

42 Budé, Vie de Bénédict Pictet, p.43.

the Canons of Dort. It is no wonder that Robert Wodrow, writing from Scotland in 1730, passed along with great dismay the news that “Turretin, the son, had quite overturned everything in Geneva,” further lamenting that “subscription to Confessions were [sic] no more required in that city.” Calvin’s Geneva was effectively confessionless. Reformed Orthodoxy was in decline.

Pictet defended Reformed confessional theology in his day, but he also understood that his age was not the same one in which Francis Turretin ministered. James Good calls Pictet “a polite French courtier and a true Christian gentleman,” a “genuine Calvinist, but of an irenic liberal spirit.” Budé paints a picture of Pictet as a man strict on the fundamentals of the faith, but on secondary points quite tolerant—a “true Christian tolerance, spoken with charity but not with weakness.” For Klauber and Van Asselt, Pictet is a part of Hazard’s crisis generation. He is a transitional figure who defended the content of Francis Turretin’s theology, while rejecting significant elements of his scholastic methodology and working with Jean-Alphonse Turretin (even after the Formula’s abrogation) on a number of projects, including the development of a new catechism, liturgical revisions, and the pursuit of a pan-Protestant unity. More recently, however, Stephen Wolfe has challenged this assessment from Klauber and Van Asselt, arguing instead that Pictet’s theology was the same in substance with Francis Turretin. Wolfe makes a convincing case that “at least with regard to the relationship of faith and reason and natural theology,” Pictet’s theology did not represent small steps toward rationalism and only differed with Turretin in “the model of presentation.”

Whether Pictet belongs to High Orthodoxy (Muller) or Late Orthodoxy (Van Asselt) or had aspects of enlightened orthodoxy (Klauber) is less important for our purposes than recognizing that Witherspoon shared with Pictet not only a strong commitment to the same confessional Reformed theology, but many of Pictet’s key concerns: a dislike for speculative methodology, a disdain for confessional slippage, and

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46 Ibid., pp.176-77.
47 Budé, *Vie de Bénédict Pictet*, p.50.
50 Ibid., p.221.
a desire to see Protestants united around the fundamentals of the faith. In fact, on a host of important and contested issues, Witherspoon’s theology evidences a deeper affinity with the High/Late Orthodoxy of Benedict Pictet, and more broadly of Francis Turretin, than has been previously realized. This claim can be tested by looking at Witherspoon’s theology in four broad categories: sin, sovereignty, scholasticism, and salvation.

**Sin and Guilt**

For Witherspoon, proper theology beings with an understanding of human depravity. In 1768, just as he was leaving for America, Witherspoon published a collection of thirteen sermons under the title *Practical Discourses on the Leading Truths of the Gospel*. The first line of the first sermon—*All Mankind By Nature Under Sin* based on Romans 3:23—announced, “The whole revelation of the will of God to mankind, both in the Old and the New, proceeds upon the supposition that they are sinners.”

“What is the history of the past ages,” Witherspoon asks, “but the history of human guilt?” Considering that the acclaimed histories being written by William Robertson at the time stressed the growing dynamism and modernization of Europe (and of Scotland in particular), Witherspoon’s sense of history made for more pessimistic reading. He acknowledges that many like to talk of “the dignity of human nature, and the beauty of moral virtue,” but unless one is talking about Adam and Eve before the Fall, there is “very little” reason “to ascribe much goodness to the human heart.”

In fact, human nature looks best at a distance. The more closely we examine it, the more it loses its luster as we see its manifold blemishes and imperfections. The same is true when the natural man looks at his own state: “the more real and thorough his acquaintance with his own heart is, the more he finds that not the least ray of hope can arise from that quarter.”

Although Gordon Tait takes comfort in the fact that Witherspoon “never described humans as being in a state of ‘total depravity’ as some Calvinists have done,” there is no material difference between Witherspoon and the Reformed tradition he inherited. In keeping with Pictet’s *Theologia Christiana*—and with the Formula Consensus Helvetica before it—Witherspoon recognized not only man’s actual sin, but

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52 Ibid., 1:274.
53 Ibid., 1:277.
54 Ibid., 1:278.
55 “Hope of Forgiveness with God,” *Works*, 1:299.
56 Tait, *The Piety of John Witherspoon*, p.44.
the original sin he inherited from Adam as his federal head. Over and over, especially in his sermons, Witherspoon reiterates that “all men, indeed, by nature, are enemies to God himself,” being “in a state of sin and misery, under the bondage to corruption, and liable to the wrath of God.” The language of “total depravity” does not mean that man is as bad as he possibly can be, but that he is completely unable to contribute to his deliverance and that every part of him has been tainted by sin’s corruption. Regeneration, therefore, must be of the whole man. According to Witherspoon, we need a new direction and a new principle for the will, the understanding, and the affections. Despite influential objections to Reformed notions of human depravity—from, say, Jeremy Taylor in the previous century, or John Taylor of Norwich in Witherspoon’s day—Witherspoon did not worry about being too pessimistic in his assessment of man’s natural spiritual state. “The scheme of redemption by free grace” Witherspoon boasted, “gives less to man and more to God than any other plan.” Unless the lost state of man is well established, the beauty and meaning of salvation by Christ will disappear.

A Free and Sovereign God

When necessary, Witherspoon was not afraid to write with bold Calvinistic strokes, even in an age where the confessional edges of Reformed theology were often ignored or softened. He not only affirmed “the salvation of every child of Adam is of free, absolute, sovereign grace,” he wanted the Reformed doctrine of election explicitly taught. Witherspoon was no doctrinal minimalist. “There is a preciousness in every truth that hath the stamp of divine authority upon it” he said in his farewell sermon at Paisley. Witherspoon wanted ministers in general, and the next minister at Paisley in particular, to be faithful in declaring the whole counsel of God. This meant speaking openly of “the

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59 Although “total depravity” was used throughout the eighteenth century, the earliest known use of the acronym TULIP (Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Limited Atonement, Irresistible Grace, Perseverance of the Saints) as a summary of the five points of Calvinism dates only as far back as 1913. See Kenneth J. Stewart, Ten Myths about Calvinism: Recovering the Breadth of the Reformed Tradition (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011), pp.78-86. The five points are themselves a somewhat clumsy distillation of the Synod of Dort’s five heads of doctrine.
62 “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 2:517.
64 “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 2:513. The sermon was delivered May 1768. According to Collins, the sermon was preached in two parts, the first on April 16 and the second on May 15 (PW, 1:94-95). April 16 fell on a Saturday in 1768, so it is likely Collins meant April 17.
sovereignty of God, his eternal purpose and the freeness of his grace.” To conceal these truths just because they could be abused by perverse and corrupt minds was “arrogance” and “impiety.” “No,” Witherspoon declared in his last Scottish sermon, “I would preach them openly; I would preach them fully; I would endeavor to guard them against abuse.”

In an earlier sermon on the love of Christ in redemption, Witherspoon was just as bold in his insistence that the doctrine of election must be taught: “I despise the wisdom of those persons who would conceal this truth as dangerous, which it hath pleased God distinctly to reveal.” Far from being a distraction or a danger, teaching on the sovereignty of God in salvation was an antidote to human pride and a means of extolling the glory of God. “Of all the works of God,” Witherspoon once announced from the pulpit, “there is none in which his perfections are so originally displayed as in the redemption of an elect world through Jesus Christ.”

If Witherspoon was unafraid to speak of election, he was even more acutely attentive to the doctrine of providence. Tait claims that when Witherspoon came to America his thinking about how God acts in history changed: “In America, Witherspoon’s doctrine of God expanded to encompass a vital belief in God as Providence as well as Redeemer.” But one only has to read Witherspoon’s sermons to see there was hardly anything he talked about more as a Scottish minister than the providence of God. The references to “providence” in Witherspoon’s forty-two published sermons from his Scottish ministry easily number into the hundreds. God, for Witherspoon, is the “great disposer of all things.”

There is nothing that has not been fixed in the eternal purpose of God before the foundation of the world. “Our possessions and enjoyments of every kind,” he says in a sermon on the cross of Christ, “are under the immediate and constant direction of Divine Providence.” In his Treatise on Regeneration (1764), he goes even further, affirming that “the constant over-ruling

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65 “Ministerial Fidelity Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 2:514. Similarly, in his chapter on the right use of election and reprobation, Pictet first admonishes “two classes of men who abuse these doctrines,” but later concludes that the doctrines ought to be preached: “So far, then, is the doctrine of predestination from encouraging men to sin, that it furnishes a variety of cogent motives to the practice of holiness” (CT, pp.217-18 [VII.v]).


67 Ibid., 1:353.


69 Tait, Piety of John Witherspoon, 143.

70 There are 47 sermons in the Works. The last sermon is numbered 46, but the number 44 is used twice.

71 “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 1:522.

72 “Hope of Forgiveness with God,” Works, 2:303.

providence of God . . . extends to the disposal and direction of the most minute circumstances in the course of nature.”

Although Moderate preachers like William Robertson and Hugh Blair also extolled the virtues of providence, their doctrine of divine intervention was more attuned to the ordering of the universe and the progress of history. For Witherspoon, God’s sovereignty was personal and absolute, but never arbitrary. He was not afraid to see particular providences in the ordering of current events and individual trials. Divine providence is what helps the believer make sense of the world, which is why Witherspoon came back to the doctrine time and again in the midst of personal difficulties and in the midst of national tragedy. It was the basis of the Christian’s hope and an open book for all the world to investigate. Just like his theological mentor Benedict Pictet—and just like Turretin and Calvin before him—Witherspoon knew of no way to look at the world except through the lens of divine providence.

Speculation and Scholasticism

Witherspoon’s allegiance to the Reformed tradition, however, did not mean he thought every theological hill was a hill to die on. Witherspoon was quite happy to leave some controversial questions unanswered or, more likely, to try to find the good points made on all sides of the debate and harmonize them. So, for example, he did not want to parse out the exact nature of saving faith or come to blows trying to figure whether faith or repentance must come first in the new birth. He thought the question “whether special and common grace differed essentially in their nature, or if they differ only in degree” was “unnecessary, or even hurtful,” and “impossible to resolve.” Witherspoon preferred to stick with the language of Scripture and avoid the debate altogether. At issue was whether it was impossible for unbelievers to love God, or if it was acceptable to say they loved God less than they loved created things. Witherspoon was “very willing to affirm

74 “Treatise on Regeneration,” Works, 1:182.
76 Ibid., 1:189.
77 Pictet’s Theologia Christiana and Turretin’s Elenctic Theology both have entire sections on providence. Likewise, the last three chapters in Book I of Calvin’s Institutes are on providence. And of course, the influence of the doctrine cannot be limited to the official section or sections in which it is covered.
both sides of the above question,” maintaining that we can observe good actions and
good dispositions in unregenerate persons, but that ultimately the unregenerate person
cannot have true love for God or neighbor because any love which does not put God first
cannot be accepted as sincere.79

For a pastor engaged in his share of polemics, Witherspoon often warned against
the “danger of going too much into controversy.”80 The justification for Witherspoon’s
own involvement in controversy is that in his mind he was fighting for the things that
really mattered: the essentials of faith, the integrity of the ministry, and the wellbeing of
the Kirk. But some Christians “when they had attained a considerable degree of
knowledge” gave themselves over to “litigious and wrangling disposition.”81
Witherspoon had no patience for “barren speculative knowledge,” the kind of theology
which asked unanswerable questions and stirred up conflict with esoteric quandaries.82
“It is an approved maxim in every science,” he preached in a sermon on ministerial duty
and character, “that practical and experimental knowledge far exceeds that which is
merely speculative.”83

In casting his lot with practical and experimental knowledge over against
speculative knowledge, Witherspoon was entering into a theological dispute with a long
history. The Medieval Scholastics debated among themselves whether theology was
speculative (concerned with knowledge and the contemplation of God), practical
(concerned with the operations of worship and obedience), or both. After summarizing
the debate and the distinctions, Francis Turretin argued that theology was mixed, but
more practical than speculative because the ultimate end of saving faith is practice.84
Witherspoon’s view was similar: true knowledge of God certainly involves
contemplation of the “amiableness and excellence of [God’s] moral perfections,” but this
knowledge is not the sort that comes from reasoning about God as you would any other
object of science.85 The aim of theology is to know God with a real and personal
conviction upon the heart so that this experimental knowledge might bear fruit in the
everyday practice of life.86

80 “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” *Works*, 2:547.
81 Ibid.
Witherspoon’s non-speculative, non-polemical approach to theology bears a striking resemblance to the approach practiced by Benedict Pictet who chartered a different methodological course from his esteemed uncle. Whereas Turretin’s theology embraced a complex scholastic methodology and was, by definition, a polemical (i.e., elenctic) theology, Pictet sought to provide a simpler, less polemical system.\(^87\) Pictet wanted to make sure his theology had nothing of the impious questions and intellectual distractions that led Christians away from the text of Scripture. In Pictet’s mind, scholasticism was filled with the “curious” and “vain” theology of medieval schoolmen like Peter Abelard (1079-1142) and Peter Lombard (1096-1164).\(^88\) Pictet wanted nothing to do with these pointless controversies.

This does not mean Pictet disregarded older theological systems like the one Turretin produced. As long as the theology was sound, he saw the two approaches as complementary. Pictet had nothing but praise for “the excellent system of controversial theology drawn up by my revered uncle and most beloved father in Christ, the illustrious Turretine,” but he wanted to give the youth of Geneva “a system of didactic theology in which controversies were left out and the truth simply and plainly taught.”\(^89\) By design and with “a particular regard to peace,” Pictet eschewed a “finely-polished and highly-wrought style” and left out “innumerable questions discussed in larger common places of divinity.”\(^90\) Pictet wanted a positive, productive theology that majored on the essential matters of the faith, avoided obscure controversies, and built theological bridges wherever possible. This was the same approach Witherspoon took to theology, as he explained in the preface to the treatises on justification and regeneration:

These reflections are only designed to procure a candid unprejudiced hearing to what is offered in the following pages, in defence of what appears to me the fundamental doctrines of the gospel, which are now so greatly neglected, or so openly despised . . . In the Treatise on Regeneration, now first published, the same general design is pursued, but in a way more directly practical; and indeed I am fully convinced, that it is not only of much greater moment to make experimental than speculative Christians, but that to explain and enforce the doctrines of the gospel is a better way to produce an unshaken persuasion of their truth, than to collect and refute the cavils of adversaries, which, though they are often trifling, are notwithstanding innumerable.\(^91\)

\(^87\) *CT*, pp.v-iix (Praefatio).
\(^88\) *CT*, p.vi (Praefatio).
\(^89\) *CT*, p.vii (Praefatio).
\(^90\) *CT*, pp.vii-viii (Praefatio).
\(^91\) *Works*, 1.n.p.
Both Pictet and Witherspoon were unabashedly Reformed, but neither was interested in bashing their fellow Protestants, provided they were sincere and did not stray from the confessional symbols of the Reformation (notably the Second Helvetic Confession, the Canons of Dort, and the Formula Consensus Helvetica for Pictet, and the Westminster Standards for Witherspoon).

As much as Pictet disliked the theology of some medieval scholastics, he had no problem following “the example of the schoolmen” as to their method. Speaking of those who teach the arts and sciences, he wrote, “they were willing to reduce Theology to certain rules, and that with the greatest propriety; but then the divinity which they taught was not derived from Aristotle and Plato, but from those purer sources—the sacred writings.”

The distinction between scholasticism as theology and scholasticism as method is made explicitly by Pictet who references in the same passage “the method (methodum) of those who teach the arts and sciences.” In other words, scholasticism was pointless as a medieval system stuffed with ancient philosophy and irrelevant curiosities, but the rules of discourse and the categories of thought were useful.

Though not stated as explicitly, we see this same approach in Witherspoon’s theology, especially when it comes to reconciling divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Witherspoon plots his course with familiar distinctions between means and ends, primary and secondary causes, permission and action. God’s absolute predetermination of every event does not take away the guilt of our voluntary actions, nor does it take away the Christian’s need to plead and pray. Witherspoon saw no inconsistency in juxtaposing an all-controlling Creator with always-responsible creatures. The two truths were taught in the Bible and even though Witherspoon dared not fully explain how they fit together, scholastic categories helped explain how they might.

The scholastic distinction Witherspoon employed most robustly is one with a long and convoluted history. Since at least the time of Augustine (354-430), Christian

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92 CT, p.vi (Praefatio).
93 Ibid.
95 “On this, as on the former branch of this head, it may be observed that we must not presume to penetrate into the unsearchable depth of the divine counsels; but at the same time it must be remembered that we are not permitted, and cannot pretend, to find the reasons of preference in ourselves; for no flesh may glory in his presence” (“The Love of Christ in Redemption,” Works, 1.358).
theologians argued about the nature of the fallen human will: is it free or is it bound? In order to make sense of this question, medieval scholastics like Peter Lombard and Bernard of Clairvaux (1090-1153) made distinctions among different types of necessity, distinctions Calvin used to explain how man could be enslaved to sin and at the same time responsible for his sin. Our sin, which the fallen will chooses by necessity, is also voluntary because the choice is owing to our own corruption.96 There is no external coercion, no outside compulsion which makes us sin. The will, however bound to wickedness it may be, is still self determined.97 Turretin argued to the same effect by postulating six different types of necessity. The will can be said to be free even if it is bound by a moral necessity (along with the necessity of dependence upon God, rational necessity, and necessity of event) so long as it is free from physical necessity and the necessity of coaction. That is to say, if the intellect has the power of choice (freedom from physical necessity) and the will can be exercised without external compulsion (freedom from the necessity of coaction) then our sins can be called voluntary and we can be held responsible for them.98

Not surprisingly, Witherspoon held to the same basic distinction, though with far less scholastic nuance. On several occasions Witherspoon defended the necessary yet voluntary nature of our sin by explaining the difference between natural and moral inability. Here, for example, is Witherspoon discussing the matter at some length in his *Treatise on Regeneration*:

Again the sinner will perhaps say, “But why should the sentence by so severe? The law may be right in itself, but it is hard, or even impossible for me. I have no strength: I cannot love the Lord with all my heart. I am altogether insufficient for that which is good.” Oh that you would but consider what sort of inability you are under to keep the commandments of God. Is it natural, or is it moral? Is it really want of ability, or is it only want of will? Is it anything more than the depravity and corruption of your hearts, which is itself criminal, and the source of all actual transgressions? Have you not natural faculties, and understanding, will, and affections, a wonderful frame of body, and a variety of members? What is it that hinders them all from being consecrated to God?99

96 Calvin quotes Bernard—in concert with Augustine but in opposition to Lombard—to this end in *Inst. II.iii.5* Cf. *Inst. II.v.1; Bondage and Liberation*, pp.143-44; *Comm. Rom. 7:14.*
In using this simpler distinction between natural and moral inability, Witherspoon was in line with Pictet who argued that the “impotence of the sinner does not excuse him in sinning, since it is not involuntary and merely physical, arising from a defect of natural power, but voluntary and moral, arising from a depraved nature.”100

The distinction has been controversial in the Reformed tradition, with some theologians defining natural ability in such a way as to give unregenerate man the power within himself to repent and believe. This is what the Swiss triumvirate heard in the doctrine coming out of Saumur and why the Formula Consensus Helvetica argued for an inability that was moral and natural (Canons XXI-XXII). The Consensus was not rejecting the distinction outright—after all, the document was Turretin’s idea and Pictet supported it. The Swiss theologians wanted to guard against any crypto-Arminian notions that faith was in some way self-originated (Canon XXII) or that it could be exercised apart from “the omnipotent heart-turning grace of the Holy Spirit” (Canon XXI). This seventeenth-century European controversy is not unlike the controversy that embroiled Reformed theology in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in America. In Witherspoon’s time, the most famous theologian to speak of natural versus moral inability was Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), who used the familiar distinction as an important part of his attack on Arminianism in Freedom of the Will (1754).101 In the years that would follow, New Divinity theologians inspired by Edwards would make the notion of natural ability the centerpiece of their thought, arguing for greater volitional power in unregenerate man and, in some cases, arguing against the doctrine of the imputation of Adam’s sin. This was a step Edwards did not take and would not have encouraged.102

So great was the controversy throughout the next century that Lyman Beecher was brought up on charges (and later acquitted) before the Presbytery of Cincinnati in

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101 See WJE, 1:156-62. There is no indication that Witherspoon was borrowing from Edwards in using the distinction. Although Witherspoon’s Popular Party colleague John Erskine was personally close to Edwards, the latter is never mentioned by Witherspoon and the only Edwards’ volume recorded in his library is the devotional work The Life of David Brainerd.

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1835 for his views on unregenerate man’s capacity for obedience.\textsuperscript{103} In the course of his trial, Beecher cited numerous Reformed theologians in his defense, including Princeton Presidents Edwards, Davies, and Witherspoon.\textsuperscript{104} Beecher’s controversial views on the subject were published the next year. Overlooking important nuances in the Reformed tradition, he claimed to find support for his position, not just in Edwards and Witherspoon, but in everyone from Reformers like Luther and Calvin to revered systematians like Turretin to New Divinity men like Bellamy and Hopkins.\textsuperscript{105} It is clear from Beecher’s trial that even forty years after his death Witherspoon loomed large over the national Presbyterian church. It was important to both sides (New School and Old School) to have Witherspoon on their side. Not surprisingly, then, Ashbel Green—Witherspoon’s protégé and already an outspoken critic of Beecher’s theology—responded to the claim “publicly asserted in print, that Dr. W. favoured the idea, that unsanctified men possess natural ability to love God and keep his commandments.” Green argued (with Beecher clearly in his sights) that Witherspoon’s statements on natural ability and moral inability did not differ “from the creed of any well informed Calvinistic divine of the Old School, namely; that in regeneration no new faculties are imported, but only that there is a renewal and sanctification of those which are possessed from nature; and also, that every unregenerate man is justly answerable for any act of disobedience to the divine requisitions, and every omission of commanded duty, because, in all, he acts voluntarily and of choice.”\textsuperscript{106} Lyman Atwater made the same point in 1863, taking to the pages of Charles Hodge’s \textit{Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review} to explain that when Witherspoon spoke of natural ability and moral inability he did so in the old school, orthodox, Turretin sense of the terms.\textsuperscript{107}

\textbf{The Salvation of Sinners}

The doctrine of salvation was hotly disputed in the Reformed world of the eighteenth century. Questions about the atonement, the call of the gospel, and the nature of saving faith took on added importance as developments in science, philosophy, and natural

\textsuperscript{104} Ibid., pp.17, 53, 76, 77.
\textsuperscript{106} \textit{Life}, pp.265-66.
\textsuperscript{107} Lyman Hotchkiss Atwater, “Witherspoon’s Theology,” \textit{The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review} (1863), pp.596-610. Atwater was critiquing George Duffield’s claim that New School Presbyterians were simply following Witherspoon with their views on natural ability.
history called into question conventional formulations of Christian belief. And yet, on issue after issue Witherspoon showed himself to be a thoroughly traditional Presbyterian, using many of the same categories, and invariably coming to the same conclusions, as the older systems of Pictet and Turretin.

**Nature of the Atonement**

In keeping with the theology of the Reformed tradition, and in line with the doctrinal concerns of the Evangelical Awakening, Witherspoon understood the death of Christ chiefly as a substitutionary sacrifice for sin. “The true and proper meaning of Christ’s death being a propitiation,” Witherspoon preached during one of his Communion sermons, “is to be taken from the sacrifices in general, and particularly points at his undertaking the office of mediator or peace-maker between God and man, and in that capacity suffering the wrath of God in the room of sinners.”¹⁰⁸ Witherspoon waxed even more eloquent about penal substitutionary atonement in a sermon entitled “The Glory of Christ in His Humiliation”:

> Without all question, every part of his humiliation was satisfactory to the divine justice, and contributed to appease the wrath of God. This cup was put to his mouth so soon as he assumed our nature; he continued to drink of it daily, and was therefore justly stiled [sic] a man of sorrows; but in the close of life, he came to drink of the very bitterest dregs of it. The waves of divine wrath went over him; and he waded still deeper and deeper in this troubled ocean, till he was well nigh overwhelmed.¹⁰⁹

This dramatic presentation of Christ the divine wrath-bearer was not original to Witherspoon. The understanding of the atonement as a “sacrifice” and a “propitiation” was one of the hallmarks of preaching in the Popular party.¹¹⁰ Not surprisingly, we find the same emphasis on wrath-bearing in Pictet, and even the same point about Christ satisfying the justice of God through his lifelong humiliation.¹¹¹ Pictet and Witherspoon also exegete the cry of dereliction on the cross—“My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me!” (Matt. 27:46)—in strikingly similar terms.¹¹²

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¹¹¹ *CT*, pp.248-59, 274-77 (VIII.xii-xv; VIII.xxii).
Extent of the Atonement

From the beginning of the seventeenth century to the middle of the eighteenth century there may not have been a doctrinal dispute which raged more fiercely in Reformed circles than the question about the extent of the atonement.\textsuperscript{113} The issue was not whether Christ’s death was sufficiently capable of saving all men, but whether God’s intention was to put forth Christ as an atoning sacrifice for every person. The “sufficient for all, efficient for the elect” distinction had been around since Peter Lombard, but the formula had proved too ambiguous to be satisfy everyone. Dort maintained that the decisive factor in making the death of Christ efficacious for only some was not the human will, but God’s will. The issue was not sufficiency versus efficiency, but sufficiency versus intentionality.\textsuperscript{114} This was the precise point made by the Synod of Dort, the Formula Consensus Helvetica, Turretin, and (more obliquely) by Pictet.\textsuperscript{115}

Witherspoon stood squarely in the same tradition, making three propositions on the extent of the atonement. (1) The death of Christ is “of value sufficient to expiate the guilt of all the sins of every individual that ever lived or ever shall live on earth.” (2) Nevertheless, “every individual of the human race is not in fact partaker of the blessings of his purchase; but many die in their sins and perish for ever.” Witherspoon goes on to say that “it can never be true, in his eternal counsels,” that Christ died to save those who, in end, will not be saved. (3) “There is in the death of Christ a sufficient foundation laid for preaching the gospel indefinitely to all without exception.” To be fair, Witherspoon was reluctant to state his mind on the issue, worrying that the debate had been “carried a

\textsuperscript{113} See Jonathan D. Moore, \textit{English Hypothetical Universalism: John Preston and the Softening of Reformed Theology} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007).

\textsuperscript{114} See Lee Gatiss, “The Synod of Dort and Definitive Atonement” in Gibson and Gibson (eds), \textit{From Heaven He Came and Sought Her}, pp.143-63; \textit{For Us and For Our Salvation} (London: The Latimer Trust, 2012), pp.75-90.

\textsuperscript{115} Canons of Dort II.3, 8 in \textit{Ecumenical Creeds and Reformed Confessions} (Grand Rapids, MI: Faith Alive Christian Resources, 1988); Formula Consensus Helvetica Canon XVI; \textit{Elenctic}, XIV.xiv.9; \textit{CT}, pp.275-76 (VIII.xxii). The danger for Turretin and the defenders of the Consensus was not just from Arminianism but from the hypothetical universalism coming out of Samur. Although John Davenant had argued for a version of hypothetical universalism as a member of the British delegation at Dort, Amyraut’s view, which additionally affected the order of the decrees, was a bridge too far for the drafters of the Consensus. Amyraut argued that God first decreed a conditional, universal atonement (according to his revealed will), but then, upon realizing that none would be saved by that decree alone, he decreed (according to this secret will) that a group of sinners would be efficaciously enabled to believe. Although Pitcet supported the carefully worded statement in the Consensus, he was less precise in his \textit{Christian Theology} about the extent of the atonement, emphasizing the infinite value of Christ’s mediatorial work without speaking explicitly about the application of it.
far greater length than the interest of truth and piety requires.” 116 His reticence to enter into intramural polemics made him more like Pictet than Turretin. But when he finally explains his position, it is very much in keeping with the majority opinion of Reformed Orthodoxy and in line with the confessional tradition.

Witherspoon’s third statement above deserves further comment. Historians have often assumed that any insistence on the universal extent of the gospel call cannot be consistent with any limitation in the extent of the atonement. An interest in missions and evangelism, or even a personal appeal for sinners to come to Christ, is therefore seen as a softening of traditional Reformed theology, probably owing to Enlightenment forces.117 The confessional documents most responsible for codifying a belief in particular redemption (i.e., limited atonement)—the Canons of the Dort and the Formula Consensus Helvetica—make clear that because God saves his elect through the means of preaching, the gospel “promise, together with the command to repent and believe, ought to be announced and declared without differentiation or discrimination to all nations and people, to whom God in his good pleasure sends the gospel.”118 Pictet did not believe God’s hidden purposes were the same for all people, but he still insisted that God wanted the gospel proclaimed to the non-elect.119 Likewise, Turretin argued that because pastors do not have the omniscient knowledge of the divine decrees, preachers “are bound from the order of God to invite all their hearers promiscuously to repentance and faith as the

117 See, for example, Tait, Piety of John Witherspoon, pp.56-57; Jonathan M. Yeager, Enlightened Evangelicalism: The Life and Thought of John Erskine (Oxford: OUP, 2011), pp.75, 201; Skoczylas, Mr. Simson’s Knotty Case, pp.85-86, 89. Skoczylas also misunderstands infralapsarianism and supralapsarianism as a debate about whether the fall came before or after the decree of salvation for the elect (p.80). Both positions, however, teach that the decrees took place in eternity, before the creation of the world. The debate is whether within the logical order of the decrees themselves the decree of election came before or after the decree that there be a fall. Torrance’s use of Witherspoon is particularly misleading (Scottish Theology from John Knox to John McLeod Campbell/ [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996], pp.228-29). Not only does he juxtapose Witherspoon’s supposedly novel inclusivity against “the narrow view that prevailed in the Kirk,” he maintains that Witherspoon “insisted on the evangelical truth that ‘Christ died for all men, even for those who perish.’” While it is true that Witherspoon said these words in his sermon on 1 John 2:2, Torrance fails to quote from the beginning of the sentence where Witherspoon says “there is a sense in which Christ died for all men . . .” (“Christ’s Death a Proper Atonement for Sin,” Works 1:343, emphasis added). Clearly, this caveat is added so as to avoid any seeming contradiction with his earlier statement that “it can never be true, that, in his eternal counsels, Christ died to save those, who after all that he hath done, shall be miserable for ever” (Ibid., 1:342). It seems that Witherspoon—who is mistakenly listed as the minister of Paisley Abbey instead of Laigh Kirk—is not as “enlightened” as Torrance wishes him to be.
118 Canons of Dort II.5; cp. Formula Consensus Helvetica which, while acknowledging that “the elect alone believe in the external call” of the gospel, still expects the gospel to be “universally offered” and that God issues this external call “earnestly and sincerely” (Canon XIX).
119 CT, pp.291-92 (IX.ii).
only way of salvation.” For his part, Witherspoon often stressed the importance of propagating the gospel among the nations that had not received Christ. He did not know how much God might be at work secretly in the lost, except that “it is not such to take away the guilt of sin or destroy the efficacy of means.” There was a duty to preach the gospel to all people because all people were in need of salvation through the gospel. Whatever the extent of the atonement, he considered the commission to “Go ye into all the world and preach the GOSPEL” to be “unlimited.”

**Nature of Faith**
Witherspoon’s fourth message in *Practical Discourses on the Leading Truths of the Gospel* is a Lord’s Supper Sermon on 1 John 3:23 entitled “The Nature of Faith.” Near the beginning of the address Witherspoon makes a familiar sounding, yet curious, comment:

In the first place, then, I am to explain what it is to believe on the name of Jesus Christ the Son of God. Many have been the controversies raised and agitated on this subject, most of them unprofitable, and some of them very hurtful, as tending to disquiet and perplex the minds of serious persons, and sometimes even to furnish an objection to the enemies of the gospel. I shall therefore avoid every thing of this kind as in general undesirable, and at this time highly unseasonable; and endeavor to lay it down in such a manner as I hope may be understood by the meanest real Christian, and may afford to every exercised soul inward consolation and peace with God.

The desire to avoid wrangling over theological niceties is not unusual for Witherspoon. But what does he have in mind when he warns against these unprofitable controversies surrounding the nature of faith? Later in the sermon Witherspoon argues that it is “much more proper to direct you to the object of faith in God’s revealed will, to explain it in all its extent, and to press it with all the evidence that attends it, than to examine curiously into, and distinguish nicely upon the nature of faith, as it is an act of the human mind.” For Witherspoon, Scripture is less concerned with “the act of believing” than with “what we ought to believe.”

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120 *Elentic*, XV.ii.22.
123 Ibid., 1:256.
125 Ibid., 1:322.
Clearly, Witherspoon was bothered by what he perceived to be excessive speculation into faith as a mental act, but it is hard to be sure which work or works Witherspoon had in mind when registering his admonition. He may have been thinking of John MacLaurin’s “Essay on Christian Piety” in the Glasgow minister’s posthumously published *Sermons and Essays* (1755). MacLaurin was a well-regarded evangelical theologian and preacher whose work on the nature of faith drew on Enlightenment perceptions of the human mind. More likely, if somewhat surprisingly, Witherspoon was responding to the dissertation on *The Nature of Christian Faith* by his friend John Erskine. Originally preached as a sermon around 1748, Erskine included *The Nature of Christian Faith* as one of five essays in his innovative work *Theological Dissertations* (1765). Witherspoon’s sermon *The Nature of Faith*, though published in 1768, was an Action sermon from Laigh Kirk delivered on July 27, 1766, or just a matter of months after the release of Erskine’s *Theological Dissertations.*

For the most part, Erskine’s understanding of faith was consistent with mainstream Popular thought. What made the dissertation unique was Erskine’s willingness to incorporate ideas popularized by John Locke’s *Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). With Lockean empiricism and Enlightenment ideas about the operation of the understanding pressed into the service of orthodox Christianity, Erskine concluded that faith was a revelation of truth in the mind, a notion which brought him close to the controversial views of John Glas (1695-1773) and Robert Sandeman (1718-1771) who thought of faith strictly as an intellectual exercise.

If this is the background for Witherspoon’s statements about unprofitable controversies and overly curious examinations into the nature of faith as an act of the mind, it is striking that his own theology of saving faith falls back on the familiar categories of Reformed scholasticism. Just like Pictet, Witherspoon considers faith from two angles: “the objects of faith” and

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126 *Sermons and Essays by the Late Reverend Mr. John McLaurin, One of the Ministers of Glasgow, Published by the Author’s Manuscripts by John Gillies, One of the Ministers of Glasgow* (Glasgow: James Knox, 1755). Witherspoon had this volume in his library at the time of his death.


129 The date for Witherspoon’s sermon can be found at Princeton University Library, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, “C0199 John Witherspoon Diary and Accounts 1768.” The diary, entered in *The Edinburgh Almanack for the Year M,DCC,LXVII*, includes no prose reflections from Witherspoon, but consists mostly of a record of (select) sermons preached over several years.

130 For an insightful discussion on Erkine’s views on the nature of faith, see Yeager, *Enlightened Evangelicalism*, pp.99-102; cf. McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, pp.166-75.
“the actings of faith.” The objects of faith have to do with the truths a Christian must believe. Witherspoon summarizes these truths with four points: (1) We are sinners by nature, alienated from God, and liable to his wrath. (2) There is no recovery from this fallen state but by Christ. (3) Pardon for sin and peace with God are freely offered through Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God and our propitiatory substitute. (4) Christ has power not only to redeem us from sin but to renew our nature and bring us into the glorious liberty enjoyed by God’s children.

If the objects of faith are concerned with the what of believing, the actings of faith are concerned with the how. Although Witherspoon warned against excessive speculation into the act of faith, he recognized “there have been questions upon this subject” and felt compelled to enter the fray. He divides the actings of faith into three particulars: assent, approbation, and personal application. This list is nearly identical in substance to the common formulation of faith as notia (knowledge), assensus (assent), and fiducia (trust), which is how Turretin described the essential acts of faith. Pictet mentions three direct acts of faith—assent, persuasion, and personal repentance and pleading—followed by a fourth justifying act whereby we become convinced that Christ died for us and his benefits are ours. Witherspoon is either heavily leaning on Pictet, or at least drawing from the same common tradition. Whatever the specific controversies and whatever the ground for Witherspoon’s frustrations, it is clear he resorted to the familiar formulations of Reformed Orthodoxy in giving his own explanation on the nature of saving faith.

Time and again, on disputed matters of soteriology, Witherspoon took pains to be unoriginal. Although he professed agnosticism about how exactly God might be at work clandestinely in the unevangelized peoples of the world, he concluded that the light of nature was not enough to rescue the perishing; it was necessary for the lost to hear of Christ and put explicit faith in him in order to be saved—notably, a position more restrictive than evangelicals like Doddridge and Wesley would have espoused, but firmly

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131 “The Nature of Faith,” Works, 1:3:16, CT, pp.299-301 (IX.iv.8-11). Turretin makes the same distinction, though characteristically with a few more layers of nuance (Elenctic, XV.viii.1-14; x.6-7; xi.1-22; xv.6-7).
133 Ibid., 1:323-26. Witherspoon argues, “The testimony of faith is opposed to the testimony of sense” (p.323). And later; “It is not enough then to give a cold and general assent to the truths of religion when they are not contradicted, but to believe the testimony of faith, in opposition to the suggestions of sense” (p.324).
134 Elenctic, XV.xv.6.
135 CT, 300-301 (IX.iv.11).
grounded in the Presbyterian tradition. And although he acknowledged that hope could not be separated from saving faith, he was not willing to go along with the minority opinion of the Marrow Men who reckoned assurance to be of the essence of faith. In both of these positions—as he did in so many others—Witherspoon was sticking closely to the Westminster Confession of Faith and the traditional side of Reformed Orthodoxy.

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137 “Essay on Justification,” Works, 1:62; “Treatise on Regeneration,” Works, 1:183-84. In 1720 the General Assembly, against the perceived errors of the Marrow theology, stated that both the Confession and the Catechisms, “show that assurance is not of the essence of faith.” On the complexity of Marrow theology in this regard, see William VanDoodewaard, The Marrow Controversy and Seceder Tradition: Atonement, Saving Faith, and the Gospel Offer in Scotland (1718-1799) (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011), pp.107-8. Ryken observes about Thomas Boston (1676-1732): “Particularly striking is his commitment to assurance as ‘the essence’ of faith, a position Bebbington considers unique to post-1730 evangelicals” (Thomas Boston as Preach of the Fourfold State, p.300). Bebbington’s understanding of the doctrine of assurance has not been without its critics, most recently A.T.B. McGowan who argues that there was no change in the doctrine of assurance in the eighteenth century but that assurance was always seen as being of the essence of faith and as a reflex act (“Evangelicalism in Scotland from Knox to Cunningham” in Michael A.G. Haykin and Kenneth J. Stewart (eds), The Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring Historical Continuities (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2008), pp.63-83. As a general rule, Witherspoon was more like the Marrow Men on the free offer of the gospel and less like them on assurance (see VanDoodewaard, The Marrow Controversy, pp.104-10; David C. Lachman, The Marrow Controversy, 1718-1723: An Historical and Theological Analysis, Rutherford Series One: Historical Theology (Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 1988). Witherspoon also considered the Auchterarder Creed—the statement (“it is not sound and orthodox to teach, that we must forsake sin in order to our coming to Christ”) which ignited the Marrow Controversy—a “harsh and unscriptural expression,” arguing that while it may be true in a sense that we do not have to forsake the disease before going to the physician, still, it is necessary to hate it and desire deliverance from it (Works, 1:251). In this, Witherspoon echoed the concerns expressed by evangelical ministers like Robert Wodrow who appreciated Thomas Boston and believed the Marrow had some things that were “precious,” but on the whole thought it tended toward antinomianism (The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow who appreciated Thomas Boston and believed the Marrow had some things that were “precious,” but on the whole thought it tended toward antinomianism (The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow, 3 vols. [Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1843], 2:551-55, 584-85, 596-97, 638-39).

138 For example, WCF 10.4 teaches that those not professing the Christian religion cannot be saved except by putting explicit faith in Christ, no matter how diligent they are “to frame their lives according to the light of nature, and the laws of that religion they do profess.” Likewise, WCF 18.8 makes clear that “infallible assurance doth not so belong to the essence of faith.” See also Pictet who maintains that “confidence or full persuasion is not an essential act of faith” CT, 301 (IX.iv.12).
Chapter Two
“A Little Tinctured with Fanaticism”
Witherspoon and the Rise of Evangelicalism

The review of Witherspoon’s famous sermon “The Dominion of Providence over the Affairs of Men” was as surprising as it was short. In 1778, the London literary journal *Monthly Review* had mostly good things to say about the 1776 fast day sermon which proved to be an important precursor to the revolutionary events that would transpire in the American colonies later that summer. The British reviewer found that except for a few passages that encouraged the Americans in their scheme for independence, Witherspoon’s sermon was an “animated and pious discourse” that could be delivered “with good acceptance” and “good effect” anywhere in the kingdom. If the favorable reception of such a message in London might seem surprising, it is no more surprising than the reviewer’s mixed estimation of Witherspoon’s character. “Dr. Witherspoon is a character well known,” the review begins. “He is a man of considerable abilities, a little tinctured with fanaticism, of the Whitefieldian complexion.” While we do not know what exactly the reviewer had in mind, clearly there was something about Witherspoon—and something well known enough to be mentioned with little fanfare in the first two sentences of a one paragraph review—that struck this man as too close to evangelical enthusiasm for comfort. Is Witherspoon also among the revivalists?

The story of the Protestant evangelical awakening is normally told with little reference to John Witherspoon. The rise of evangelicalism has first of all been the history of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesley brothers. In the most widely respected studies of eighteenth-century evangelicalism and the Great Awakening, Witherspoon barely registers a blip on the historian’s radar screen. Thomas Kidd goes so far as to wonder

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1 *Monthly Review* 58 (March 1778), pp.246-47. The review mistakenly notes that the sermon was preached at Princeton on May 17, 1775. The year was 1776.
2 By contrast, a 1777 letter to the editor in London’s *General Evening Post* accused Witherspoon of being ungrateful for the hard work of English patriots and considered his support for revolution to be based on “malicious innuendos” (June 10-12, 1777; issue 6779).
whether Witherspoon can even be called an “evangelical,” for, according to Kidd, “he had little sympathy for revivalism or the devotees of Jonathan Edwards.” While it would be a stretch to depict the Scottish pastor and Princeton president as a central figure in the “advent of evangelicalism,” this does not mean Witherspoon had no role to play in the evangelical awakening, let alone that Witherspoon was not himself an evangelical. On closer inspection we will find that Witherspoon was not only sympathetic toward the leading figures of the evangelical awakening (at least the Calvinist ones), he expressed the same longings that marked so much of evangelical preaching and writing in the eighteenth century: justification by faith alone, the new birth, practical holiness, unity around the fundamental doctrines of the faith, and a revival of biblical fidelity and piety.

If Witherspoon’s evangelicalism was unique it was unique in the way most Kirk ministers would have been “unique.” The Scottish strand of evangelicalism evidenced great respect for historic Protestant doctrines and defended classic creedal formulations. Witherspoon’s evangelicalism was by and large the same evangelicalism we see in older divines like Turretin and Pictet, especially as mediated through Scottish piety. At the same time, evangelical ministers in the Kirk—perhaps feeling threatened by the rise of the Moderates or perhaps just grieved to see the glory days (as they reckoned them) so far in the rearview mirror—tended to view revival in terms more national and ecclesiastical than merely personal and existential. In other words, what I hope to show in this chapter is that while Witherspoon was certainly comfortable with, and a respected voice in, evangelical circles, his contribution can be easy to overlook because it was of an older confessional hue, it was expressed in terms of national Scottish renewal, and it was decidedly not Edwardsean.

**Witherspoon among the Revivalists**

Finding Witherspoon’s place in the transatlantic network of evangelical ministers and promoters of revivalist evangelicalism is made more difficult because the Princeton President left behind little in the way of personal correspondence and kept no personal journal (that we know of) of his inner thoughts and almost no accounting of his external

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connections. Susan O’Brien has argued convincingly that the letter-writing network of Calvinist evangelicals in the eighteenth-century consisted chiefly of ten ministers: Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758), Benjamin Colman (1673-1747), and Thomas Prince, Sr. (1687-1758) of New England; James Robe (1688-1753), William McCulloch (1691-1771), John MacLaurin (1693-1754), and John Erskine (1721-1803) of Scotland, and Isaac Watts (1674-1748), George Whitefield (1714-1770), and Philip Doddridge (1702-1751) of England.7 Although Witherspoon almost certainly knew of all these pastors, and knew some of them personally, there is no indication that he was a major player in this network of pro-revival churchmen. There is, however, evidence that he was sympathetic to the revivals in Scotland and that several key evangelicals of the eighteenth century were sympathetic to him. Erskine and Witherspoon, for example, were contemporaries and allies in the Kirk. Early in their ministry, Erskine wrote one of Edwards’s disciples, Joseph Bellamy, to recommend Witherspoon’s “truly judicious remarks” criticizing Lord Kames in an April 1753 issue of Scots Magazine.8 Fifteen years later when Witherspoon was leaving for Princeton, Erskine loaded his friend up with books—a going-away present for the Paisley pastor and as a gift for the College of New Jersey.9 Decades into his American career, Witherspoon and Erskine remained friends and correspondents.10 Witherspoon, for his part, considered Doddridge “eminent and useful,”11 while John Newton later recommended Doddridge’s fellow Dissenting minister, Isaac Watts, along with Witherspoon, as “good models among writers of divinity.”12

More significantly, in addition to being accused of having a “Whitefieldian complexion,” we know that Whitefield’s encouragement played a role in getting Witherspoon to New Jersey. Early in his Lectures on Divinity, Witherspoon told the story of how “one of great zeal and discernment expressed himself to me in Britain” to the effect that even though he (Witherspoon) would be leaving a large city congregation in Scotland for the small country society of America, “if you be instrumental in sending out

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8 Erskine, writing from Culross (March 2, 1754), also designates Witherspoon “a valuable young minister” (New Jersey Historical Society Proceedings, Vol. 6, p.170).
10 See, for example, the 1784 letter from Erskine welcoming Witherspoon to visit Britain, but advising against soliciting funds for Princeton (Life, pp.200-1).
ministers of the New Testament, it will be a still more important station, for every
gownsmen is a legion.”

Ashbel Green later disclosed that this man of great zeal and
discernment who had counseled Witherspoon was none other than George Whitefield.

Since there is no record of letters passing between the two of them, the incident of
Whitefield expressing himself to Witherspoon in Britain must have taken place in person,
almost certainly during Witherspoon’s visit to London in March 1768. Although Collins
thought the two had never met, we now know from Witherspoon’s own Edinburgh
Almanack (1768) that he had two separate “engagements” with Whitefield in London,
the first on March 7 and the second on March 9 at Moorfields. At least part of the reason
for the engagement with Whitefield (as it was with almost everyone Witherspoon made
a point to visit on this particular trip) was to solicit funds for the College of New Jersey.

In a March 9 letter, Witherspoon informed Benjamin Rush that he met with Whitefield
on Monday morning, and that while he was “very friendly,” he had his own “Colledge”
(i.e., the controversial orphanage kept afloat by slave labor) in Georgia to attend to. It
was undoubtedly during these visits that Whitefield confirmed and commended
Witherspoon for leaving the comforts of Britain to take up his new ministerial challenge
in America. Moreover, it is hard to imagine the two preachers had not met years earlier
when Whitefield attended the Kirk’s entire 1757 General Assembly, during which
Witherspoon, along with John Erskine and six other ministers, registered a vigorous
dissent against the Assembly’s decision to receive the commissions of several unattested
elders.

It is also likely that Witherspoon was influenced by Whitefield in taking up a
negative assessment of Count Zinzendorf and the Moravians. In a long footnote in his
Essay on Justification (1756), Witherspoon deals with the objection that those who
believe in the imputed righteousness of Christ are apt to be lawless antinomians, and that
the Moravians are a contemporary example of such extravagance. Witherspoon grants

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14 Ashbel Green, Jones Joseph Huntington, The Life of Ashbel Green, V.D.M., Begun to Be Written By
Himself in His Eighty-Second Year and Continued to His Eighty-Fourth (New York: Robert Carter and
15 PW, 1:98.
16 Princeton University, Firestone Ms. CO199, number 1140, “Diary and Accounts 1768.” See Ronald
Lyndsay Crawford, The Lost World of John Witherspoon: Unravelling the Snodgrass Affair, 1762-1776
(Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 2014), pp.208-211. A photograph of the page in question, which
also indicates that Witherspoon visited Benjamin Franklin in London, can be found in Crawford (p.270).
17 Butterfield, pp.71-72
that the accusations against the Moravians may be groundless, just as the apostles were falsely charged with eating human sacrifices, but considering that “unsuspected accusers have appeared whom none can imagine prejudiced against them for embracing the doctrine of imputed righteousness,” he hesitates to rush to their defense. Soon after the Moravians were granted official recognition by an act of Parliament, public opinion in England began to change as tracts from Europe accused the Moravians of heresy and ethical irregularities. Not only had Doddridge denounced Zinzendorf as a man “whose enormous errors and enthusiasm have filled the whole Protestant world with wonder and with horror,” Whitefield charged the Moravians with spiritual and financial impropriety in his stinging *Expostulatory Letter*. Witherspoon confesses to have “little acquaintance with those Hernhutters” and cannot say whether the charges against them are true of the Moravians as a whole, but argues that in the end it does not matter because the Moravians do not believe in the same doctrine of imputation, using a language “peculiar to themselves” that does not belong to Scripture or any other sect of Christians. “Besides,” Witherspoon concludes, “as Count Zinzendorf, their leader, takes upon himself to be a prophet, it is probable, they are just as sect of deluded people, drawn away by his art, who may much more properly be said to believe in him, than in Christ.” Interestingly, the editor of Witherspoon’s *Works* (1802), Ashbel Green, tries to correct his mentor with a follow-up note suggesting that a “more perfect knowledge” has demonstrated that the Moravians “powerfully illustrate and confirm” the doctrine of justification Witherspoon wished to defend. Green’s more positive assessment of the Moravians is in keeping with Paul Peucker’s argument that the Moravian Church was marked by antinomianism and sexual scandal in the late 1740s and that their rehabilitation as a mainstream, Evangelical denomination only came about after the death of Zinzendorf in 1760.

Throughout the eighteenth century, Whitefield and other evangelicals were often accused of “enthusiasm”—a catchall phrase used to disparage strange, unruly, or overly passionate religious sentiment, what John Locke described as substituting “reason and

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23 Ibid.
revelation” with “the ungrounded fancies of man’s own brain.” Likewise, Shaftesbury begins his *Characteristicks of Men, Manner, Opinions, Times* (1711) with a “Letter Concerning Enthusiasm” in which he concludes that “Inspiration is a real feeling of the Divine Presence, and Enthusiasm a false one.” Without wanting to own everything under the category of enthusiasm, Witherspoon challenged the anti-revival use of the term. Just a few years after George Lavington, the bishop of Exeter, issued a blistering attack against Whitefield entitled *The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists, Compared* (1749), Witherspoon—deliberately playing off Shaftesbury’s title—published *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753), in part to lampoon the moderates in Scotland for their allergic reaction to “the high flights of evangelic enthusiasm” and their opposition to “raising the passions” with their preaching. The only time the moderate preacher might dare to speak in “Whitefield’s style,” Witherspoon wrote in full satiric stride, is “when his settlement has the misfortune to depend upon the people.” Witherspoon had no patience for the sort of piety that left little room for the heartfelt affections that should be stirred up by strong evangelical preaching. It was not “enthusiasm” for the biblical writers to be “warmed and elevated above their ordinary measure” in celebrating salvation, neither was it a sign of enthusiasm to wrestle with God in prayer or be concerned to have communion with God. Even more pointedly, Witherspoon argued that only after conversion will “all the truths, relating to the person, character, and office of a Mediator” be considered “precious” instead of “hated as absurdities, or despised as enthusiasm.” In the debates over revival in eighteenth-century Britain, Witherspoon was on Whitefield’s side because he considered Whitefield’s preaching was on the side of the gospel. Decades later, while lecturing at Princeton about the rhetorical talents of

27 Lavington savaged “pernicious Enthusiasm” as a spirit of embarrassing and ridiculous fanaticism that can turn ordinary people into “Extravagant freaks of Methodism” (*The Enthusiasm of Methodists and Papists, Compared* [London: J. and P. Knapton, 1749], Preface).
29 Ibid., 3:226.
the “late Mr. Whitefield,” Witherspoon noted in passing—but significantly for our purposes—that the itinerant preacher’s incredible popularity was a blessing because of “the happy ends that were promoted by this in providence.”

If this depiction of Witherspoon is accurate, we are still left with a large nagging question: what about Cambuslang? Arguably, no revival left more of an impression on Scotland during the eighteenth century than the “wark” that began in the village of Cambuslang and spread to Kilsyth, Calder, Kirkintilloch, and many other parishes surrounding Glasgow and even into Edinburgh. By the time Whitefield arrived in Scotland in June 1742, the revival was already well under way. The local Kirk minister in Cambuslang, William McCulloch, had been preaching on regeneration for over a year. Sensing an unusual blessing was afoot—he reported that during a three-month period, 300 souls had been awakened and 200 converted—McCulloch invited Whitefield, who had been in Scotland the previous year, to return for another preaching tour. The celebrated evangelist joined with local Kirk ministers to lead the July 11 communion service in Cambuslang. The meeting lasted fourteen hours and as many as 30,000 were in attendance, dwarfing the normal population of the tiny parish and equaling almost twice the population of Glasgow. When an unprecedented second communion Sunday was held on August 15, the attendance swelled to as many 50,000. Even though the “wark” eventually subsided from this high water mark, the effects of the revival were felt throughout Scotland as word spread of the awakening and as other parishes experienced similar (if smaller-scale) phenomena. In the years that followed, Cambuslang continued to serve as an important milestone in Kirk history, as conversion stories were disseminated, and as it later became clear that the events of 1742 drew future leaders like John Erskine and George Muir to the ministry.

Given the significance of Cambuslang and the parish’s relative proximity to Witherspoon’s first charge (Beith is about 25 miles away), we might look at the paucity

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33 “Lectures on Eloquence” Works, 3:574.
35 Shortly after the commencement of revival activity in 1742, McCulloch began collecting narrative accounts from those who had been affected by the awakening. Keith Edward Bebee has recently published the first critical edition of the McCulloch Examinations. The two volumes include a valuable overview of the Cambuslang Revival as well as an explanation of the editing, redacting, and publishing process for the 109 personal accounts. See Bebee, The McCulloch Examinations of the Cambuslang Revival (1742), 2 vols. (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Scottish History Society, 2013).
of references to Cambuslang in the Witherspoon corpus and conclude that he was indifferent to revival or perhaps even suspicious of it. But a closer look at Witherspoon’s ministry reveals clues which point in the opposite direction. For starters, Witherspoon was a 19-year-old divinity student in Edinburgh when the revival reached its zenith. He would not be examined before the Presbytery of Haddington until the next year and would not receive a ministerial call until 1745. By the time Witherspoon arrived in Beith in the summer of 1745, the commotion in Scotland was not about a revival outside of Glasgow but about the Young Pretender and his army approaching Edinburgh. Witherspoon, who organized a militia of volunteers from Beith in hopes of joining the royal forces at Stirling, was understandably preoccupied at the outset of his ministry with circumstances far different from the revival at Cambuslang three years earlier.36

There is, however, more to suggest Witherspoon was sympathetic to the Cambuslang Wark than just an argument from silence. In Ecclesiastical Characteristics, Witherspoon notes sarcastically that when the Apostle Paul made Felix tremble and raised “the passion of terror” in the Roman governor (Acts 24:25), one could have concluded “he was little better than a Cambuslang convict” (i.e., one under conviction for sin). But thankfully, Witherspoon continues, a well known Moderate minister was able to seize on the word “reason” at the beginning of the verse and use it to prove “that ministers ought not to raise the passions of their hearers.”37 Clearly, when it came to his assessment of good gospel preaching, Witherspoon was on the side of passion and Cambuslang.

Also telling is Witherspoon’s close relationship to George Muir, who from 1766 to 1771 pastored the High Church in Paisley. In 1742, Muir travelled to Cambuslang curious about the reports coming from the tiny village. Through the ministry at Cambuslang, Muir was converted and called to the ministry. After pursuing theological education in Edinburgh, where he was instrumental in erecting and encouraging prayer societies, Muir taught at the parish school in Carnock (sitting under the teaching of Thomas Gillespie) and then became the minister at Old Cumnook, before settling in Paisley in 1766. According to The Evangelical Magazine (1812), as many as 3000 people

36 During the controversy over Cambuslang in 1742, students at the University of Edinburgh took up the issue in their debating society, with William Robertson taking the anti-Cambuslang side and John Erskine defending the revival. See Sher, Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985), p.31.
came to hear Muir each Sunday.  

Similarly, the *Edinburgh Christian Instruction* (1838) recollected that during his five years at Paisley—Muir died from complications related to cancer in his foot in 1771—his ministry was attended with “a remarkable outpouring of the Spirit of God.”

Muir was remembered as a revivalist minister in the preaching mold and historical lineage of Cambuslang.

Muir and Witherspoon were not only colleagues in Paisley, but by all appearances, Muir was one of Witherspoon’s best friends. In 1787, long after Muir’s death, Witherspoon reflected that “the late reverend doctor George Muir, of Paisley, with whom I lived many years as co-pastor, in the strictest bonds of friendship” was a man “eminently characterized” by a “spirit of sincere piety and fervent love to the souls of men.”

Years earlier, in a letter written a month after landing in America, Witherspoon informed Benjamin Rush that he could talk to Mr. Muir for all the details of his voyage and arrival. Before that, when Witherspoon had just boarded the *Peggy* and was about to sail for the colonies, he wrote his “dear brother” George Muir (who was Moderator of the Presbytery of Paisley at the time) with final instructions for looking after the Laigh Kirk in his absence. Not surprisingly, Muir was one of the first to be awarded an honorary doctorate after Witherspoon took the helm at Princeton.

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40 For more on Muir, who, like Witherspoon, opposed patronage, sided with the Popular Party, and was connected with James Hervey, see “Memoir of the Rev. George Muir,” pp.201-5.

41 From Witherspoon’s preface (dated “Princeton, October 25, 1787”) to *Sermons by James Muir, A.M. Minister of the Presbyterian Church, Bermuda*. Quoted in Crawford, *Lost World of John Witherspoon*, p.77.

42 The letter, dated “Sepr 8. 1768” and sent from New York can be found in Butterfield, p.77. The close friendship of Witherspoon and Muir is also suggested by the earlier letter (November 5, 1767) from Richard Stockton in which he closes by writing, “My respects to your worthy Colleague Mr Muir, to Mrs. Witherspoon, your daughter & other branches of your family” (p.61).

43 The Presbytery minutes from June 22, 1768 list Mr. George Muir as Moderator and record the following: “The moderator produced a Letter from Doctor Witherspoon which was read the tenor whereof follows: From on board The Peggy in Greenock Road, May 18, 1768. My Dear Brother, We are just getting under Sail therefore please to intimate this to the Presbytery at their next meeting according to the tenor of their Minute and tell them I am Sensible of their Civility and kindness in the manner of expressing their Sentence, and hope they will not without delay find the Vacancy that steps may be taken for its supply. I shall remember you daily before God. I expect the same from you and that you will give orders as to the publick prayers the first Lord’s day in your own Church and the first day there is Sermon in the Laigh church; after that let any minister do as he pleases. Let brother Alice know I think of him and all other friends. I am dear sir your affn. brother &c. Signed, Jno. Witherspoon” (Paisley Minutes CH2/294/10/296; cf. *PW*, 1:95).

44 N.R. Needham mistakenly says Muir received the D.D. from the College of New Jersey in 1768 (in Nigel M. de S. Cameron et al. (eds), *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* [Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993]) when the actual year was 1770 (*General Catalogue of Princeton University 1746-1906*, [Princeton: Princeton University, 1908], p.398).
Over the ensuing decades, Witherspoon also developed a close relationship with George’s son, James Muir, pastor of the Presbyterian Church in Bermuda. In Sprague’s *Annals*, it is said that sometime in 1785 or 1786 the younger Muir made a “visit to his friend and his father’s friend, the Rev. Dr. Witherspoon.”45 In 1787, a collection of James Muir’s sermons were published, with Witherspoon editing the volume, providing an introduction for the volume, and (possibly) funding the volume.46 In 1791, the younger Muir received an honorary doctorate from Yale at Witherspoon’s suggestion.47

If Witherspoon was suspicious of Cambuslang or indifferent toward revival, he would not have been such a strong supporter of the Muir family, nor would he have been so favorably disposed to a host of ministers invested in the evangelical awakenings. In 1763—the other year besides 1768 for which we have primary source documentation of his calendar—we get a glimpse of Witherspoon’s wider connections.48 He lectured at College Church (Blackfriars) in Glasgow where John Gillies pastored (1742-1796). Gillies, who in 1768 preached for Witherspoon in Paisley, was well known as one of the leading proponents of the awakening, not only writing an influential history of revival (1754) and the first account of Whitefield’s life (1772), but famously opening his pulpit to both John Wesley and Whitefield.49 We also see Witherspoon in 1763 preaching at New Greyfriar’s for John Erskine, in Dundonald for his fiery uncle Thomas Walker,50 and at Edinburgh’s Tolbooth Church for Alexander Webster, the former General Assembly Moderator (1753), Popular Party leader, and strong defender of the Cambuslang Wark.51 Clearly, this is not a picture of a minister unconnected or uninvolved in the broader network of pro-revival ministers and ministries.

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45 Sprague, 3:516.
46 The volume of sermons was printed at Princeton by James Tod and includes a section entitled “To the Reader” signed by Dr. Witherspoon, whom Collins speculates also financed the venture (*PW*, 2:257).
47 Sprague, 3:517.
48 The information on Witherspoon’s pulpit supply and pulpit exchanges in 1763 can found in Princeton University, Firestone Ms. CO199, number 1141, “Manuscript 1763.” It has also been conveniently transcribed with many useful footnotes in Crawford, *Lost World*, pp.144-50.
51 See J.R. McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800* (East Lothian, Tuckwell Press, 1998), pp.40, 56, 60, 63, 243. It is also worth noticing that on at least two occasions (in Kilbride and in Dundonald), Witherspoon records preaching “at the Tent” rather than in a church building, though this need not be a sign of pro-revival sympathies. The use of a “tent” was common in the Scottish communion tradition where large crowds would gather from neighboring towns for a long
A New Sider from the Old World

If Witherspoon’s sympathies for revivalist evangelicalism require some detective work two hundred and fifty years later, his place in the theological landscape of the mid-eighteenth century was not lost on his contemporaries. It is easy to forget that the College of New Jersey was a decidedly New Side institution. Although the Old Side and New Side synods in America had officially reunited in 1758, suspicions still ran deep in both factions. New Side Presbyterians like William and Gilbert Tennent supported the Great Awakening and emphasized personal experience, conversion, and passionate piety, while Old Side Presbyterians like Francis Alison, John Thomson, and John Ewing worried that the revivals were disorderly and un-Presbyterian, and that Whitefield’s ministry was doing more harm than good. As the institutional heir to William Tennent’s pro-revival Log College, the College of New Jersey had been run by a succession of New Side pastors, capable men whose chief weakness was a penchant for dying after assuming the role of president. Jonathan Edwards served only two months (1758), Samuel Davies less than two years (1759-1761), and Samuel Finley not much longer than that (1761-1766). It was not entirely surprising that the New Side trustees would approach the Paisley pastor about their presidential vacancy. More than a decade earlier in a 1754 journal entry, Samuel Davies, touring Scotland with Gilbert Tennent to raise funds for the College of New Jersey, noted with great appreciation a new work called *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* “ascribed to one Mr. Weatherspoon.” And in another sign of New Side connection, Princeton’s next president, Samuel Finley (whom Witherspoon later called “the eminently pious Dr. Finlay”), thanked William Hogg in 1764 for “introducing me into a correspondence” with “the Dear & Revd Mr Witherspoon.”

The New Side majority at Princeton sought out Witherspoon as Finley’s successor because they saw him as one of their own. In a letter to Ezra Stiles (December 4, 1766), Francis Alison reported that a plan to make him or John Ewing president and bring in several new professors “met with a cold reception” from the college’s trustees who had already “chosen one Wetherspoons, a minister in Paisley in Scotland” to be the next president. Alison, the intellectual leader of the Old Side who had once been a student of Francis Hutcheson’s at Glasgow, lamented that the trustees knew nothing of weekend of preaching, praying, and singing from Thursday through Monday. See William D. Maxwell, *A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland*, (London: OUP, 1955), pp.141-45.

52 Butterfield, p.12.
53 “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” *Works*, 2:554.
54 Butterfield, p.88.
Witherspoon’s academic abilities and noted that “whether he can teach any thing but Divinity is hard to say.” If in the end Witherspoon was acceptable to the Old Side, it was because as one removed from the partisan sniping that had marked American Presbyterianism for almost thirty years, Witherspoon was about the best they could hope for once the New Side trustees scuttled their 1766 takeover plan.

For the pro-revival wing, however, Witherspoon was exactly what they were looking for. Benjamin Rush thought Witherspoon “to be Mr. Davies and Dr. Finley revived in one man,” equal in genius to Davies and superior in knowledge to Finley. In a revealing letter from Edinburgh dated February 6, 1767, Archibald Wallace advised Witherspoon to take the call to Princeton, despite the negative reports he may receive from the Old Side faction:

Perhaps Some of what they all they call the old Side may write to you, in terms not so encouraging; for both sides seem to have centered in you, which is a Circumstance which should also have weight. If you refuse their Invitation, it is not likely that they will so soon center so unanimously on another. It is true the Trustees are all of the New side. But then they have others to please beside themselves; and as the Governour presides in their meetings, no doubt he must have weight, as appears in the Case of Mr Duffeld & the old side, which are the Robertsons & Carlisles of that side of the watter.

It is no wonder, then, that when Witherspoon initially declined the offer, Rush—with typical energy—wrote to him pleading Princeton’s case: “And must poor Nassau-Hall be ruined? Must that school of the prophets . . . become a prey to faction, bigotry, and party spirit?” Witherspoon had the personal connections, the evangelical theology, and the reviverist sympathies the New Side wanted, with no factional baggage, a British education, and enough name recognition for the Old Side to accept.

Justification by Imputation

It is impossible to understand Witherspoon’s place among the transatlantic network of evangelicals in the eighteenth century without looking carefully at his first explicitly

55 Ibid., pp.13-14.
56 Ibid., p.33.
57 Ibid., p.25. In a similar vein, John Lathrop, a Congregational minister from Boston, wrote in a letter dated June 28, 1768 that in Ecclesiastical Characteristics could be found “many characters in this part of the world, painted out very exactly” (Sprague, 8:71). He went on to say, “This little pamphlet I value at a high price, and wish that every minister on the Continent would read it once a month.”
58 Butterfield, p.40.
theological work, *Essay on the Connection between the Doctrine of Justification by the Imputed Righteousness of Christ, and Holiness of Life*. First published in 1756, the short book which began as two sermons would go through three editions in the next twelve months. In 1764, the essay was published with a new and longer piece from Witherspoon on regeneration, a work John Newton regarded as “the best I have seen upon this important subject.”

Prefixed to the *Essay on Justification* is a letter to Rev. James Hervey, an Anglican Rector in Northamptonshire and a friend of Witherspoon. In the prior year (1755), Hervey published his magnum opus, *Theron and Aspasio*, a ponderously titled, massive three-volume work which, through a series of dialogues between two men (Theron and Aspasio), promoted and defended a strongly Reformed understanding of justification by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness. Whereas Whitefield and Wesley pitched their message for the masses, Hervey wrote self-consciously for the elite, developing an ornate and polished style in the vein of the Earl of Shaftesbury. Years earlier, before becoming a Calvinist, Hervey had been a part of the Holy Club at Oxford and a disciple of John Wesley. Up until 1755 Hervey and Wesley appear to have had a collegial relationship. This quickly changed with the arrival of *Theron and Aspasio*. Before the book went to press, Hervey had sent a draft to Wesley asking for comments. Wesley offered several criticisms which Hervey, hurting from the wounds of his friend, did not incorporate. Whether Hervey was being overly sensitive or Wesley was being

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61 James Hervey, *Theron and Aspasio*, 3rd ed. (London: John and James Rivington, 1755). The most comprehensive edition, included later additions, is *Theron and Aspasio; Or, a Series of Dialogues and Letters Upon the Most Interesting and Important Subjects: To Which is Added, Aspasio Vindicated, in Eleven Letters from Mr. Hervey to the Rev. John Wesley* (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1837). See also John Wesley, *A Sufficient Answer to Letters to the Author of Theron and Aspasio; In a Letter to the Author* (York: A. Ward, 1763).
overly pedantic (or both) is hard to say, but Wesley clearly got under Hervey’s skin. On January 9, 1755 Hervey wrote to Lady Frances Shirley expressing his concern that Wesley may have “some sinister Design” in attacking Theron and Aspasio. “Put the Wolf’s Skin on the Sheep, and the Flock will shun Him, the Dogs will worry Him” mused Hervey about the Methodist leader. “I do not charge such an Artifice, but sometimes I cannot help forming a Suspicion.” Already by the beginning of 1755 the relationship had soured to such a degree that there was obviously a story to tell: Hervey informed Lady Frances he hoped in future correspondence “to relate the whole Affair, as it stands between Mr. Wesley and myself.”

After publication, Wesley continued to write Hervey, and Hervey continued to ignore his one-time mentor’s advice. The worst blow came in a letter on October 15, 1756, in which Wesley wrote to Hervey with a cranky and tedious point-by-point rebuttal of specific lines from Theron and Aspasio. For the next two years the men did not talk to each other. When Wesley decided to publish the October 15 letter in A Preservative against Unsettled Notions in Religion (1758) it provoked the ailing Hervey to muster a response. Wesley got wind of the impending rejoinder and renewed his communication with Hervey, insisting in a November 29 letter that Hervey send him a copy of the reply before making it public. Sadly, Hervey died on Christmas Day 1758, still fretting over a response to his former friend.

Wesley’s main objection to Theron and Aspasio was that it taught justification by imputed righteousness, a doctrine Wesley believed would inexorably lead to antinomianism. It is clear that even before the book was published in 1755, and certainly before Witherspoon’s essay came out in 1756, Hervey was aware of Wesley’s disdain for imputation and the charge of antinomianism. The fallout between Hervey and Wesley severely hampered the progress of Wesleyan Methodism in Scotland, especially once John Erskine entered the fray with an uncharacteristically stinging assault on

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66 Included in the 1837 edition of Theron and Aspasio, pp.467-79.
67 For more on Hervey, including his strained relationship with Wesley, see Tyerman, Oxford Methodists, pp.285-333, especially pp.289-307.
68 For more on Wesley’s suspicious and complicated views toward imputation, see Woodrow W. Whidden, Wesley on Imputation: A Truly Reckoned Reality or Antinomian Polemical Wreckage,” The Asbury Theological Journal, 52, no. 2 (1997), pp.63-70.
Wesley.\textsuperscript{69} Witherspoon’s \textit{Essay on Justification}, published nearly a decade before Erskine came to Hervey’s defense did not help the cause of Wesleyan Methodism either. Given the dedicatory preface to Hervey, Witherspoon’s reference to the “enemies of the doctrine” of justification may have had Wesley in mind (although mainstream Anglican and Moderate theology was also hostile to imputation).\textsuperscript{70}

Despite its almost complete obscurity today, \textit{Theron and Aspasio} was one of the most controversial books among evangelicals in the middle part of the eighteenth century, which is why Witherspoon’s dedicatory letter to James Hervey is significant. It was, according to Witherspoon, “a public declaration of my espousing the same sentiments as to the terms of our acceptance with God.” The Scotsman was coming to the defense of his English friend, the man he once described as a “very eminent writer and champion for the cross.”\textsuperscript{71} On November 7, 1758—while “reduced to a State of Infant Weakness” and understanding that “This probably is the last Time you will ever hear from me”—Hervey wrote to Witherspoon to thank him for sending the \textit{Essay on Justification} “and for the many obliging Things you are pleased to say of me and my Writings in your valuable Letter.”\textsuperscript{72} No doubt Witherspoon shared Hervey’s (nearly) dying wish that the \textit{Essay} and the accompanying letter would be “successful Advocates for the Furtherance of the Gospel.”\textsuperscript{73} Witherspoon acknowledged in the letter to Hervey that the “most specious and plausible objection” and the one “most frequently made against the doctrine of justification by imputed righteousness” was that “it loosens the obligations to practice.”\textsuperscript{74} Whether Witherspoon thought the criticism was entirely unfair in relationship to \textit{Theron and Aspasio} or whether he thought Hervey had left himself vulnerable to the charge of antinomianism is unclear. What is clear is that Witherspoon wrote his \textit{Essay on Justification} to stand in the gap and answer the objections that men like Wesley were raising against a Reformed doctrine of justification.

The central concern for Witherspoon was to answer the accusation that “the obligation to holiness of life” is weakened “by making our justification before God depend entirely upon the righteousness and merit of another.”\textsuperscript{75} He felt the need to defend

\textsuperscript{70} “Essay on Justification,” \textit{Works}, 1:46.
\textsuperscript{71} Witherspoon made this remark in the July 24, 1763 Action (Communion) sermon “Glorying in the Cross,” later published in 1768 as one of the \textit{Sermons on the Leading Truths of the Gospel} (\textit{Works}, 1:391).
\textsuperscript{73} Ibid., 2:269.
\textsuperscript{74} “Essay on Justification,” \textit{Works}, 1:44.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 1:46.
justification “at full length” because the doctrine was too often despised by enemies and promoted poorly by friends. The bulk of Witherspoon’s essay consists of six reasons the doctrine of justification by the imputed righteousness of Christ strengthens rather than weakens our obligation to holiness. Reformed evangelicals were often making this point in the middle of the eighteenth century, not only to silence Arminian critics but also to counter Enlightenment clergy who worried about the antinomian and anti-ethical potential of sola fide.76

Witherspoon also defended the doctrine because he believed it was essential to the gospel. At the end of the essay he encourages the reader not to “despair of success” no matter how many enemies oppose the truth. The best defense of justification by imputation, Witherspoon urges, is “zealous assiduous preaching the great and fundamental truths of the gospel, the lost condemned state of man by nature, and the necessity of pardon through the righteousness [of Christ], and the renovation by the Spirit of Christ.”77 For Witherspoon, what the world needs in its sin, and the church in all its weakness, is for this “everlasting gospel” to be preached in all its purity and simplicity.78

Unity in Essential Truths
The Essay on Justification provides a convenient window into Witherspoon’s thinking as it relates to drawing theological boundaries. Not surprisingly, we see how important the doctrine of justification was to Witherspoon as a confessional Calvinist. In a preface to his Essays on Important Subjects (1765)—a later collection of treatises which included the Essay on Justification—Witherspoon states that he hopes “in the following pages” to defend “the fundamental doctrines of the gospel, which are now so greatly neglected, or so openly despised.”79 He also doubles down on the importance of “imputed righteousness,” arguing that though several letters have urged him to drop the phrase he will not do so because he finds the language “fully warranted by Rom. iv.6 and many other passages.”80 To dilute the doctrine of justification would not only be un-Presbyterian, it would be demonstrably unhealthy for the church: “Justification by the free grace of God, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, was the doctrine taught

78 Ibid., 1:92.
79 John Witherspoon, Essays on Important Subjects: Intended to Establish the Doctrine of Salvation by Grace, and to Point Out its Influence on Holiness of Life (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1765), iv.
80 Ibid., v.
among Christians, in the earliest and purest ages of the church. And their departure from it was the prelude to that universal corruption of faith and worship, that relaxation of discipline, and dissolution of manners, which took place in the ages following.”81 This was simply a fuller way of restating Calvin’s famous line that justification is “the main hinge on which religion turns.”82

The doctrine of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness was shorthand in Witherspoon’s thinking for an entire summary of the gospel, as understood through the lens of the federal headship of Adam and Christ in covenant theology.

The doctrine asserted in the above and other passages of scripture may be thus paraphrased: that every intelligible creature is under an unchangeable obligation, perfectly to obey the whole law of God: that all men proceeding from Adam by ordinary generation, are the children of polluted parents, alienated in heart from God, transgressors of his holy law, inexcusable in this transgression, and therefore exposed to the dreadful consequences of his displeasure; that it was not agreeable to the dictates of his wisdom, holiness and justice, to forgive their sins without an atonement or satisfaction: and therefore he raised up for them a Saviour, Jesus Christ, who, as the second Adam, perfectly fulfilled the whole law, and offered himself up a sacrifice upon the cross in their stead: that this his righteousness is imputed to them, as the sole foundation of their justification in the sight of a holy God, and their reception into his favor: that the means of their being interested in this salvation, is a deep humiliation of mind, confession of guilt and wretchedness, denial of themselves, and acceptance of pardon and peace through Christ Jesus, which they neither have contributed to the procuring, nor can contribute to the continuance of, by their own merit; but expect the renovation of their natures, to be inclined and enabled to keep the commandments of God as the work of the Spirit, and a part of the purchase of their Redeemer.83

This long summary is Witherspoon’s attempt to articulate— in “general terms” so as to “reconcile” rather than “widen” the differences that may exist among certain authors—the gospel plan of salvation. While Witherspoon employs, at times, more typical eighteenth-century language (e.g., the “dissolution of manners” quoted above), the substance of his gospel summary could have been affirmed by Turretin or Pictet or by

82 Inst. I.xi.1.
any Scottish minister who took seriously his subscription to the Westminster
Confession.84

Still, the Essay was not to everyone’s liking. In 1764, the Critical Review panned
the piece, suggesting that Witherspoon’s arguments would have been more convincing
if he “had adopted the contrary supposition” with respect to holiness and justification
instead of insisting that God “will place the righteousness of one to the account of
another.”85 William Wilberforce, the famous abolitionist, harbored similar suspicions.
According to the biography written by his sons, Wilberforce, who eagerly penned a
complimentary preface for Witherspoon’s Treatise on Regeneration (a work he had
recommended and gifted to friends over the years), was unhappy to learn that this work
had been published alongside the Essay on Justification, a work he had not read, but had
been told was “decidedly Calvinistic.”86 Clearly, justification by imputation was not
everyone’s cup of tea.

But it was essential for Witherspoon, not just as a matter of Scriptural correctness
but as a principle of heartfelt piety. Witherspoon refused to budge on imputation, no
matter the accusations of antinomianism (which he tried to answer), because he
considered the “scheme of redemption by free grace” the best accounting of salvation
because it “gives less to man and more to God, than any other plan.”87 If the doctrine was
unacceptable to the world, that was only one more indication that the truth was from God
himself.88 The Reformed understanding of justification attacked the pride of man and
made him entirely dependent upon the mercy of God. To make any other plea before
God, other than the imputed righteousness of Christ, was to trust in ourselves and rob
God of his glory as our all-sufficient redeemer.

Witherspoon understood that such a stout defense of justification might be
offensive to some. In an important and lengthy footnote, he addressed head on the
objection that he was making “a very severe and uncharitable condemnation of many

84 For commendation of Witherspoon’s Essay as a whole, see John Erskine, Theological Dissertations
86 Wilberforce went on to add, “every year that I live I become more impressed with the unscriptural
character of the Calvinistic system.” Robert Isaac Wilberforce and Samuel Wilberforce, The Life of
William Wilberforce, Volume 5 (London: John Murray, 1839), p.162. In his introductory essay from 1830,
Wilberforce maintained that “few publications are likely to be more useful than the Treatises of the late
Dr. John Witherspoon. . . . I am conscious, indeed, that the excellence of that Work is far too well
established to render necessary any eulogium of mine” (John Witherspoon, Treatises on Justification and
88 Ibid., 1:83.
Christians, who differ in judgment upon the point of justification.” Witherspoon refused to accept the notion that what a man believed did not matter so long as the man’s life was ethically upright. In fact, Witherspoon questioned whether a man could be truly good without believing the truth about justification. More broadly, Witherspoon doubted whether some opponents of imputation were Christians at all. Socinians and Pelagians could be dismissed quickly, Witherspoon averred, because “I never did esteem them to be Christians at all.” What to do with Arminians, however, was a more complicated question. Witherspoon was hesitant to say they could not be Christians, but he insisted that if they rejected the righteousness of Christ as the only ground of justification they were in great danger. In the end, Witherspoon concluded that for many Arminians “their hearts are better than their understandings.” Their sermons, their prayers, and their private religious exercises evidenced a greater appreciation for “free grace” than Arminians were willing to admit in their theological writings.89 This was Witherspoon’s way of firmly admonishing anti-Reformed critics like Wesley, without putting them all the way outside the camp.90

While the modern reader may wonder if Witherspoon the pro-revival, anti-Arminian, evangelical Calvinist is trying to have his cake and eat it too, the footnote explored above perfectly illustrates a major, and almost entirely overlooked, theme in Witherspoon’s writings. For all his polemical instincts, there was a deeply ecumenical side to Witherspoon, but it was an ecumenicity with a definite center and with defined boundaries. On the one hand, Witherspoon was happy to profit from and commend a wide array of Christian authors outside the circles of strict Presbyterianism—from evangelical favorites like the Dissenter Phillip Doddridge91 and the Nonconformist Richard Baxter,92 to theologically middle-of-the-road bishops like Gilbert Burnet93 and

89 Ibid., 1:88-89. Although he elsewhere speaks highly of certain Latitudinarian clergy (e.g., Bishop Gilbert Burnet), when Witherspoon references “many good men among them” with strong sermons and pious prayers, he is likely thinking of revivalist Arminians. Recall that with the dedicatory address to James Hervey, John Wesley lurks in the background to the whole essay.
90 Other Popular Party ministers were more accommodating to Wesley’s Arminianism than was Witherspoon. John Gillies, for example, downplayed the Calvinist-Arminian divide between Whitefield and Wesley, suggesting that both men were passionate about saving souls and simply emphasized different sides of the divine sovereignty/human responsibility equation (John Gillies, Memoirs of Rev. George Whitefield, Revised and Corrected [Middletown: Hunt and Noyes, 1838], pp.55-56).
93 “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 2:548.
John Tillotson,94 to the English scholar William Warburton,95 to the Catholic (and strongly Augustinian) Port Royal Jansenists.96 Witherspoon believed that men “often differ more in words than in substance.”97 He adopted Doddridge’s words as his own: “If this doctrine, in one form or another, be generally taught by my brethren in the ministry, I rejoice in it for their own sakes, as well as for that of the people who are under their care.”98

Although he remained staunchly committed to and invested in Presbyterianism his whole life, Witherspoon was not a man of party spirit. Truth was truth whether it came from Anglicans, Presbyterians, or Dissenters. In his Treatise on Regeneration (1764), Witherspoon noted, “I am fully convinced, that many of very different parties and denominations are building upon the one ‘foundation laid in Zion’ for a sinner’s hope, and that their distance and alienation from one another in affection, is very much to be regretted.”99 In his farewell sermon in Paisley, Witherspoon warned against “going too much into controversy” and developing “a litigious and wrangling disposition” that would lead Christians—and here he is quick to add the qualification “I mean real Christians”—into “innumerable little parties and factions.”100 He longed for the day when the “unhappy divisions” among “protestants in general” would be “abolished” and those truly centered on Christ crucified would “be no longer ranked in parties and marshaled under names” but only strive with each other to see “who shall love our Redeemer most, and who shall serve him with the greatest zeal.”101

This ecumenical streak in Witherspoon, however, was not borne out of doctrinal indifferentism. His desire for unity did not encompass Socinians, Pelagians, Catholics,
or any other group holding religious views he deemed antithetical to true biblical Christianity.\textsuperscript{102} Witherspoon had no patience for the latitudinarian kind of unity he found among his colleagues of a more Moderate disposition.\textsuperscript{103} In conjunction with the publication of his St Giles’ sermon before the SSPCK, Witherspoon penned a robust defense for pointing out error entitled “An Inquiry into the Scripture Meaning of Charity.”\textsuperscript{104} With characteristic verve, Witherspoon attacked the increasingly popular notion among Enlightened clergy that “charity was a far more important and valuable bond among Christians than exact agreement on particular points of doctrine.”\textsuperscript{105} For Witherspoon, Christian unity was not rooted in downplaying doctrinal distinctives (least of all among those who could not be counted true believers), but in stressing the theological similarities that existed among born again Christians from a variety of denominations. “No man, indeed,” Witherspoon wrote, “deny it to be just, that every one should endeavor to support that plan of the discipline and government of the church of Christ, and even the minutest parts of it, which appear to him to be founded upon the word of God. But still sound doctrine is more to be esteemed than any form.”\textsuperscript{106}

Living in an era marked by evangelical awakenings across the English speaking world and marked by rank hypocrisy (as he saw it) in the Scottish Kirk, Witherspoon wanted Christians of a “truly catholic disposition” to “discover a greater attachment to those even of different denominations, who seem to bear the image of God, than to

\textsuperscript{102} “As to Socinians and Pelagians . . . I never did esteem them to be Christians at all” (“Essay on Justification,” \textit{Works}, 1:88). “I do freely acknowledge, as I have formerly done, that I never did esteem the Socinians to be Christians” (“An Inquiry into the Scriptural Meaning of Charity,” \textit{Works}, 2:377). Speaking of Catholic missionaries among the North American Indians, he remarked, “But being once converted, not the Christian faith, but to the Romish superstition, they are inviolably attached to the French interest” (“The Absolute Necessity of Salvation through Christ,” \textit{Works}, 2:364). Witherspoon’s strong, and at times harsh, anti-Catholicism cannot be separated from geo-political concerns. He had no quibbles about praying for the Protestant cause throughout Europe and entreating God’s favor in defeating the Catholic imperial power that he considered (and virtually every Protestant considered) a threat to religious and political liberty (“The Charge of Sedition and Faction against Good Men,” \textit{Works} 2:429; “Prayer for National Prosperity and for the Revival of Religion Inseparably Connected,” \textit{Works}, 2:474). In a fast day sermon from February 16, 1758, Witherspoon enthused with thanksgiving for the surprising victories recently won by Frederick the Great at Rossbach and Leuthen during the Seven Years War (\textit{Works}, 2:461). If British Protestants were agreed on anything in the second half of the eighteenth century it was that the Catholic Church, and those states aligned with it, were enemies of British freedom, British prosperity, British religion, and the British crown (See Noll, \textit{The Rise of Evangelicalism}, p.49; Kidd, \textit{George Whitefield}, p.263).

\textsuperscript{103} “Ecclesiastical Characteristics,” \textit{Works}, 3:257.

\textsuperscript{104} “An Inquiry into the Scripture Meaning of Charity” \textit{Works}, 2:369-84.

\textsuperscript{105} This summary statement comes from Ahnert, \textit{The Moral Culture of the Scottish Enlightenment}, p.38; for more on the importance of “charity” during the Scottish Enlightenment in contrast to the Orthodox insistence on right doctrine, including Witherspoon’s role in that insistence, see pp.37-45, 81, 106-8.

\textsuperscript{106} “Treatise on Regeneration,” \textit{Works}, 1:253. What Witherspoon meant by “sound doctrine” is clear from the rest of the paragraph where he speaks of the gospel work of convicting and converting sinners.
profane persons, be their apparent or pretended principles what they will.”

This was Witherspoon’s way of simultaneously distancing himself from the half-hearted confessional subscription of the Moderate Party and from the Scottish ministers (inside and outside the established church) who railed against any cooperation with George Whitefield. In an address before the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr (October 9, 1759), Witherspoon urged his ministerial colleagues to turn their “zeal from parties to persons,” that is, to be on look out for “the wolf in sheep’s clothing” and to be eager to embrace those from any party who know “the power of true religion.” Given the many spiritual dangers in the world and the spiritual degradation in the church, it was time for “the sincere lovers of Christ, of every denomination” to “join together in opposition to his open enemies and treacherous friends.”

Witherspoon’s vision was not for the end of separate ecclesiastical bodies but for true believers—which, as we will see, was roughly equivalent to sincere Reformation-rooted evangelicals—to be united around the core tenets of the Christian faith. Sometimes called “fundamental truths,” or “essential doctrines,” or “leading truths,” Witherspoon had an inexact, but consistent and coherent, set of doctrines in mind when he spoke about Christian unity. “In order to preach the Gospel with success,” Witherspoon stated in a sermon on Revelation 3:7, “it is necessary that we should begin, by establishing the great and fundamental truths, on which all the rest are built, and to which they constantly refer.” Witherspoon, in introducing the theme of his sermon, mentioned one doctrine “of this sort”: the guilt, misery, and weakness of human nature.

Similarly, in the Essay on Justification, Witherspoon described the “great and fundamental truths of the gospel” as “the lost condemned state of man by nature, and the necessity of pardon through the righteousness, and renovation by the Spirit of Christ.”

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107 Ibid., 1:253-54. The reference to the image of God in this context is likely not a general comment about all human being, but an aspect of Witherspoon’s conviction that the “doctrines only come from God, which tend to form us after the divine image” (“The Trial of Religious Truth by its Moral Influence,” Works, 2:390).

108 For a discussion on confessional subscription see Collin Kidd, “Scotland’s Invisible Enlightenment: Subscription and Heterodoxy in the Eighteenth Century Kirk” Records of the Scottish Church History Society (2000), pp.28-59. Fawcett provides a useful overview of Whitefield’s falling out with the Erskine’s and how this influenced the Secession churches and the national Kirk (The Cambuslang Revival, pp.182-201). See also the pamphlet A Fair and Impartial Account of the Debate in the Synod of Glasgow and Air (1748), where a complaint is brought against two ministers from the Presbytery of Glasgow for giving “considerable countenance to the ministrations of a celebrated stranger” (i.e., they opened their pulpits to Whitefield). Special thanks for David Gibson of Trinity Church (Aberdeen) for locating this pamphlet at the University of Aberdeen and sharing with me his notes.


Witherspoon urged preachers to zealously preach these truths so that “a far greater number of those who call themselves by the name of Christ” would become “Christians indeed.”

Witherspoon sounded the same note two years later in a footnote from *The Absolute Necessity of Salvation through Christ*. Witherspoon called “justification by free grace” a “fundamental doctrine of the gospel” and insisted that “charity” does not require us to overlook doctrinal errors on such an important point. Later that year, in his charge to Archibald Davidson who was being ordained as one of the ministers of the Abbey Church in Paisley, Witherspoon talked at length about preaching “the pure and uncorrupted doctrine of Christ.” By this he meant preaching Christ as the only way for sinners to be reconciled to God and experience a changed life: “You will never be able to make men truly good, till you convince them of their lost state by nature; and thence make them see the necessity of justification by the free grace of God, through the imputed righteousness of Christ.” Above all, Witherspoon exhorted the young minister to preach the cross of Christ as the “Christian’s hope” and the “Christian’s glory.”

Witherspoon gave a similar list of “fundamental Scripture doctrines” in his sermon before the Synod: “The doctrines I mean are the lost state of man by nature; salvation by the free grace of God; justification by the righteousness of Christ; and sanctification be [sic] the effectual operations of the Holy Spirit.” Witherspoon lauded these truths as “the doctrines of the reformation, when their excellence was put beyond all doubt or question, by their powerful and valuable effects.”

Examples of the same language can be easily multiplied. Toward the end of the *Treatise on Regeneration*, Witherspoon concluded that we can know “what are the fundamental and essential doctrines of the gospel, to which all others are but subordinate and subservient.” He listed two such doctrines: regeneration (new birth) and reconciliation to God through the blood of the atonement. These constituted the great foundation upon which a believer’s faith must be built. Witherspoon confessed not to know “what degree of error and misapprehension concerning these truths” could be consistent with a true profession of faith, but any who openly opposed these truths were,
according to 2 Peter 2:1, guilty of “damnable heresies” and would bring swift destruction upon themselves.115

In 1768, Witherspoon released *Practical Discourses on the Leading Truths of the Gospel* as an attempt to “form a little system of the truths of the gospel.”116 The thirteen sermons give a good picture of what Witherspoon considered the basics of Christian doctrine: sin, forgiveness, faith, propitiation, redemption, the cross of Christ, prayer, and obedience. And in his farewell sermon that same year before his own people in Paisley, Witherspoon took the opportunity to highlight the fundamentals of the faith one last time:

If we look into the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament, we shall find certain leading truths, which are of so great moment, that they ought hardly ever to be out of view; such as the lost state of man by nature; the absolute necessity of salvation through Christ; the suffering of the Saviour in the sinner’s room; and free forgiveness through the blood of the atonement; the necessity of regeneration; and the gift of the Holy Ghost, to enlighten, sanctify and comfort his people. These truths are of such unspeakable moment, in divine revelation, that they ought to be clearly explained, strongly inculcated, and frequently repeated; they are the doctrines of the reformation; they make the substance of all Protestant confessions; they are the glory of the Protestant churches; and have been sealed by the blood of thousands of suffering martyrs.117

Witherspoon’s passion for believing and preaching the “leading truths of the gospel” marks him out as a typical eighteenth-century evangelical. One thinks, for example, of James Erskine, Lord Grange (c. 1678–1754)—who, as a key patron of evangelicalism, threw his weight behind Wodrow, McCulloch, Robe, Whitefield, the Wesleys, and the Moravians—supporting the orthodox clergy in the Kirk, while at the same time backing the revivals and calling for closer ecclesiastical union and the end to clerical narrow-mindedness.118 If the anti-Cambuslang sectarianism of the Seceders was on one side and the doctrinal indifferentism of the Moderates on the other, in the middle was a vast swath of the Kirk’s clergy and congregations who were robustly evangelical in doctrine and experimental in piety, an old combination which fit in well with newer expressions of transatlantic and trans-denominational evangelicalism. Witherspoon was more decidedly

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Reformed than some of his contemporaries (like Lord Grange) by doggedly insisting on the importance of imputation and in expressing extreme reservations about Arminians, but his doctrinal emphases—original sin, justification by faith, the new birth, substitutionary atonement, and sanctification by the Holy Spirit—were standard fare among evangelicals across Europe and in North America.119

Putting Witherspoon in Place

What can finally be said about Witherspoon’s role in the evangelical awakening of the eighteenth century? I have tried to argue that he was more involved in the diffuse network of pro-revival ministers, more supportive of Cambuslang and its fruit, and more typically evangelical in his emphases than many have assumed. One only has to glance at a few of his sermons to see that Witherspoon’s ministry not only focused on the centrality of the cross and the need for conversion, it was steeped in biblical proof-texting and animated by a desire to see the lost won to Christ. In other words, every facet of the famous Bebbington Quadrilateral—biblicism, crucicentrism, conversionism, activism—can easily be found in Witherspoon. His theology was evangelical, his contacts were evangelical, and his reputation was as a stalwart evangelical. Indeed, the first endorsement listed under the “Recommendations” for the 1802 edition of Witherspoon’s Works comes from John B. Smith, minister of Third Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, who hails the late President as a writer “highly and deservedly esteemed by all the friends of Evangelical truth.”120 By all accounts—doctrinal, personal, devotional, and practical—Witherspoon was a pro-revival, polemically orthodox, evangelical Protestant whose deserves to be seen as playing an important role (even if he was not the star player) in the Whitefield-Wesley-Edwards inspired drama that unfolded in Britain and America in the eighteenth century.

So why has this not always been the case? What has been the reason for Witherspoon’s relative neglect in telling the history of evangelicalism? First, as we will see even more clearly in the next chapter, Witherspoon’s vision for the future was shaped preeminently by what he wanted to preserve from the past. This is especially true regarding his theological commitments. Like other eighteenth-century evangelicals,

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120 Works, 1:n.p.
Witherspoon’s theology was essentially (and self-consciously) derivative. Depending on one’s perspective, Witherspoon was a committed Presbyterian without a denominational party spirit, a wide-hearted evangelical with a doctrinal bent, or a rabid traditionalist who—at least when it came to his list of fundamentals—was unwilling to countenance any measure of doctrinal laxity or theological innovation. A case can be made for each of these Witherspoons, or even that all three portraits can be right at the same time. Witherspoon was a man of the eighteenth century, and so he spoke and wrote as one concerned to present the orthodox Reformed faith in a way that made sense to Enlightened Britons. At the same time, the main contours of Witherspoon’s theological commitment were anything but new; indeed, they can be found in unbroken succession in Scotland since the time of Knox (c.1514-1572) and the Scots Confession (1560).

Even Witherspoon’s attention to “fundamental articles” has roots that go deeper than we might think. It is tempting to explain this emphasis as nothing but a Whitefieldian zeal for breaking down sectarian barriers so that the truly born again may be one. This is partly true. But the desire for Christian unity around the essentials of the gospel did not start with eighteenth-century evangelicals. Witherspoon may have been using the language of “fundamental articles” as a technical term from another century. Reformed theologians had often used the category as a way of distancing themselves from Roman Catholics and in hopes of finding common ground with Lutherans. Francis Turretin, for example, called the “question concerning fundamental articles” both “difficult and important.” Some, like the Socinians and Arminians, he said, made the number of essential doctrines too small, while the papists made fundamental “their own hay and stubble,” and the Lutherans made the number of essential articles too large. Confessional Reformed believers, on the other hand, held to the golden mean, neither restricting the number of fundamental articles too closely, nor extending them too far. Turretin went on to discuss at length the biblical warrant for distinguishing between fundamental and 

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123 Elenctic, I.xiv.1-3. The presence of the category in Turretin undermines Van Asselt’s claim that the increasing use of the distinction between fundamental and non-fundamental articles was rooted in the Enlightenment impulse to minimize theological differences (Introduction to Reformed Scholasticism [Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2011], pp.173-74).
non-fundamental articles and the criteria for judging which are which. Not surprisingly, Turretin’s list of fundamental articles is more exhaustive than many of Witherspoon’s ad hoc enumerations, but both sets of lists center on the doctrines which flow from and are foundational to salvation.124

The notion of fundamental articles was also important to Turretin’s successor in Geneva, the man whose dogmatics textbook would form the backbone of Witherspoon’s theological training: Benedict Pictet. In the French edition of his systematic theology, Pictet included a lengthy chapter on *les articles fundamentaux* in which he explored what we must believe and the doctrines “without which one cannot be saved.”125 Although Pictet was closer theologically to his uncle (Francis Turretin) than to Jean-Alphonse Turretin (Francis’ son), Pictet worked closely with the younger Turretin to heal the divisions in the Protestant church. In language that sounds as if it could have been written for Witherspoon, Pictet’s biographer, Eugene de Budé, describes the Genevan professor as thoroughly Calvinist and strong on essential matters, but more flexible when it came to secondary doctrines—“while he was tolerant, Pictet was no less strict with regard to dogmatic fundamentals, as we saw in the subject of the [Helvetic Formula] consensus.”126 Interestingly, Budé maintains that the Pictet/Turretin reunification project was simply a reprisal of the ecumenical efforts undertaken by the Scottish minister John Dury (1596-1680) a generation earlier.127 However much Witherspoon’s ecumenical side was in keeping with the evangelical ethos of the eighteenth-century revivals, the particular terms he employed and the specifics of what he was proposing contain strong echoes of Francis Turretin and Benedict Pictet and the ecumenical project that concerned the leading voices of Reformed Orthodoxy in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.128

126 Eugene de Budé, *Vie de Bénédict Pictet, theologien genevois (1655-1724)* (Lausanne: Georges Bridel, 1874), pp.52, 47-52.
127 Budé, *Vie de Bénédict Pictet*, p.48. John Durie (Dury) is not to be confused with his grandfather of the same name who died in 1600. The “Duraeus” Budé mentions is the Scottish minister who was ordained in the Church of England and labored tirelessly throughout Western Europe to reunite Protestants. See J. Kirk, “Durie (Dury), John” in *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology*, p.267.
128 Neither Turretin nor Pictet give a full list of their fundamental articles, but both give ad hoc lists more comprehensive than Witherspoon’s. One can see the influence of the evangelical movement in that Witherspoon’s articles focus entirely on matters related to soteriology. Turretin mentions the inspiration of Scripture, the unity and Trinity of God, Christ’s satisfaction, sin and its penalty, the law and its inability
If Witherspoon’s role in the rise of evangelicalism can be overlooked because of the way in which his instincts demonstrate strong continuity with the past, his views are also subject to misunderstanding because of the context in which he ministered. Witherspoon is sometimes neglected in telling the story of the evangelical awakening because his understanding of revival was thoroughly embedded in a national church. Although the movements inspired by Whitefield and Wesley drew from a diverse set of devotional sources and introduced new language concerning, a convincing case can still be made that in terms of doctrinal commitments and gospel priorities, the evangelical movement of the eighteenth century displayed considerable continuity with its Reformational roots. The uniqueness of evangelicalism lay chiefly in two areas: the language of revival and the new methods used to promote these revivals. In other words, evangelicals of the eighteenth century were traditional Protestants who told stories about revivals, longed for revivals, and were willing to employ new means in pursuing revival.

On both counts—the new emphasis on revival and the new methods—Witherspoon was a friend of the new evangelicalism, and yet his sympathies come across muted due to his ecclesiastical context. Witherspoon supported Whitefield’s open air, itinerant ministry across party lines, but as a local Kirk minister with sermons to prepare, discipline cases to attend to, and denominational fires to put out (and start!), Witherspoon was never going to look the part of a great revivalist. Likewise, although Witherspoon preached for individual consciences to be awakened and desired individual souls to be saved, he saw revival inextricably bound up with the reformation of the Kirk. Witherspoon was looking for a revival not just of a congregation or a town or parish, but of a nation. He wanted “a happy revolution” where religion would “rise from its ruins” and truth and purity would hold sway just like they did in 1638 when the enemies of the gospel were turned back and the National Covenant united faithful Presbyterians in to save, justification by faith, the necessity of grace and good works, sanctification and the worship of God, the church, resurrection of the dead, final judgment and eternal life “and such as are connected with these” (Elenetic, I.xiv.24). Pictet’s list is shorter: there is one true God, the divinity of Christ and his satisfaction, justification by faith, necessity of good works, the Trinity, corruption of nature and need for grace, Jesus Christ as an expiatory sacrifice to appease divine justice (La Théologie Chrétienne, Lxxii.6).

Scotland.\textsuperscript{132} As Mark Noll has observed, the legacy of revivalism did less to shape culture in Scotland than in America, not only because America was less developed as a culture but because the Scottish revivals—conducted by local ministers, centered around the Lord’s Supper, and rooted in the established church—acted as agents of communal cohesion instead of fragmentation.\textsuperscript{133} For this reason, the evangelical awakening as a whole can seem less noteworthy in Scotland, especially when the new methods take a backseat to Presbyterian polity and a churchly revivalism steeped in the vagaries of Scottish history.

Finally, we will not make sense of Witherspoon and the rise of evangelicalism unless we try to make sense of Witherspoon’s relationship to Jonathan Edwards. At Witherspoon’s death in 1794, the only Edwards book in his library was the popular biography of the missionary David Brainerd.\textsuperscript{134} Despite John Erskine’s friendship with both Edwards and Witherspoon, there is no record that Witherspoon revered Edwards in the same way he respected and gave thanks for Whitefield. It would be hard to make a case that Witherspoon looked to Edwards for theological or personal illumination, but easy to make the case that Witherspoon did not think such edification would come from Edwards’ disciples. This does not mean Witherspoon disliked Edwards or disavowed his theology or his views on revival. It does, however, suggest that with all the close connections Witherspoon had to some of the leading lights and strongest proponents of the Evangelical Awakening, he was not overly enamored with the Awakening’s most famous theologian.

The publication of \textit{Theron and Aspasio} was likely part of the reason why. In 1759, Jonathan Edward’s pupil, Joseph Bellamy—on slightly different grounds from Wesley, but also related to the charge of antinomianism—attacked \textit{Theron and Aspasio} as naïve

\textsuperscript{132} The reference to 1638, here made in Witherspoon’s Fast Day sermon “Prayer for National Prosperity and for the Revival of Religion Inseparably Connected” (Works, 2:476-77), is made once again (almost verbatim) at the end of \textit{A Serious Apology for Ecclesiastical Characteristic} (Works, 3:309-10).


and full of pernicious errors. Bellamy argued that the understanding of faith, assurance, and love to God found in writers like Hervey and Walter Marshall (The Gospel Mystery of Sanctification [1692]) was not only unhelpful and unscriptural, but lacked the sophistication and insight found in Edwards. For the next four years, Bellamy’s controversy with Hervey’s supporters consumed much of the Connecticut pastor’s time and correspondence. While many New Light ministers embraced the emphases found in Theron and Aspasio, opposition to Hervey coalesced into an unusual amalgamation of Edwardseans, Old Light Calvinists, and Arminians.

Surely, the theological tit-for-tat involving Hervey’s magnum opus played a role in Witherspoon’s coolness toward New Divinity theologians once at Princeton. If the doctrine of justification Hervey espoused was at the heart of the gospel—so much so that Witherspoon wrote his own essay to defend it—and if one of Edward’s best-known disciples took great (and repeated) exception to Hervey’s work, it stands to reason that Witherspoon may have come to harbor suspicions of Edwards himself, or at least his theological instincts. Add to this Witherspoon’s reported contempt for Berkeleyean idealism, and one can see how Witherspoon’s relative silence regarding Edwards may have been rooted in real reservations. In the end, then, Kidd was only half right: Witherspoon did have little sympathy for the devotees of Jonathan Edwards, but this did not mean he was anti-revival or something other than an evangelical. If Edwards is the plumb line for evangelicalism and revivalism, let alone for Calvinism, we will misread traditional Scottish ministers like John Witherspoon whose theological instincts and traditions of piety did not run through Edwards, and may have even skirted around him.

138 See PW, 1:35-38.
Chapter Three

“How Is the Gold Become Dim!”
Witherspoon’s Ministry in the Church of Scotland

As John Witherspoon began the first half of his two-part farewell sermon on April 16, 1768, he did not want things to get too emotional. He admitted that upon leaving his previous church at Beith he could not summon the courage to attempt a “formal farewell of a very affectionate people.”¹ But now as he put things in order to make the long journey from Paisley to Princeton, he was going to attempt the emotional challenge he feared eleven years earlier. Ever since his capture by the Young Pretender’s forces, Witherspoon suffered from “a peculiar affection of his nerves, which always overcame him when he allowed himself to feel very fervently on any subject” and forced him “to impose a strict restraint and guard upon his sensibility.”² As a young minister, Witherspoon led a group of militia volunteers from Beith intent on fighting for King George and joining the royal forces at Stirling. When the militia was informed by military authorities at Glasgow that their services were not needed, the party disbanded, except for Witherspoon and his beadle who on January 17, 1746 appeared as spectators at the Battle of Falkirk. Witherspoon—along with his beadle, ten other civilians, and five men from the Edinburgh volunteers—were captured and on January 25 imprisoned in the Doune castle near Stirling. Several of the prisoners escaped using a rope of tied blankets, but when Witherspoon saw more than one man seriously injured by falling to the ground, he decided to forgo any heroic departure. The total time of Witherspoon’s captivity and imprisonment was short, though the effects of the ordeal lasted his whole life.³ No doubt, a good part of his reputation for being unanimated in the pulpit was due to this affliction. And it made saying goodbye to a very affectionate people even more difficult. As Witherspoon entreated the congregation at Laigh Kirk “to attend to the following discourse, with patience and composure” one gets the sense he is talking to himself as much as to his people.⁴

¹ “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 2:509.
³ See Life, pp.34-40 (most of which is based on Crichton’s memoir in the Edinburgh Instructor); PW, 1:21-24. The story is also told in The Weekly Entertainer, Vol. 58 (Sherborne: J. Langdon and Son, 1818), pp.137-38. Here we read how Rev. M’Vey of Dreghorn escaped by dressing up like a woman, and unlike Crichton’s account which has the imprisonment at two weeks, the Entertainer (borrowing explicitly from Blackwood’s Edinburgh Monthly Magazine) says Witherspoon was not released until after the Battle of Culloden (April 16, 1746).
⁴ “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 2:510.
Witherspoon was well loved by both Scottish congregations he served. There is no reason to think he was not telling the truth during the farewell sermon when he spoke of having had “the honor and happiness of being intrusted with the ministry of the gospel in this place.” In a May 9 letter read before the Presbytery of Paisley the following day, Witherspoon explained that the reasons for accepting the call to the College of New Jersey had nothing to do with any “dissatisfaction either with the Church of Scotland or my present charge.” “On the contrary,” he wrote, “I part with all my connections in Scotland with the greatest reluctance and shall ever retain a grateful sense of the obligations I lie under to my brethren in the ministry in this presbytery and elsewhere as well as to a very affectionate congregation the care of which I am now to surrender.” A few months later, Witherspoon informed the gathered congregation at Princeton that he had just “left country, and kindred, and connexions of the dearest kind.” In other words, Witherspoon set sail for the colonies happy with the ministry, happy with his congregation, and happy with the Church of Scotland.

Or maybe not. There has been a long debate over whether Witherspoon’s departure for America was owing, at least in part, to a sense of disappointment and discouragement with the opposition he faced on many fronts in Scotland. In his *Scottish Philosophy* (1875), James McCosh asserted that although Witherspoon “had a brave heart and could have stood it all,” the enemies rising up against him in the Moderate Party and the legal troubles facing him because of the Snodgrass Affair combined to make “Scotland somewhat too hot for him.” Along the same lines, Collins mentions several other nineteenth-century sources which describe Witherspoon at the time of his departure as “soured and embittered” and “harassed by long persecution.” But Collins only mentions these theories to refute them: “The opinion has been expressed that Dr. Witherspoon left Paisley a persecuted and disappointed man. But the documentary

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5 Ibid.
6 Paisley Minutes, CH2/294/10/295.
evidence in the case is quite to the contrary.”\textsuperscript{10} Like Ashbel Green before him, Collins insists that Witherspoon’s friends did not esteem him any less for his troubles.\textsuperscript{11}

It is not hard to make a case for Witherspoon’s popularity. In 1762, the town council and magistrates of Paisley intervened to keep their pastor from being “transported” to Dundee where he had just received another ministerial call. In 1764, the University of St. Andrews awarded Witherspoon an honorary Doctor of Divinity.\textsuperscript{12} In 1766, the Paisley magistrates and council twice voted to give Witherspoon a “Compliment” of sterling, one in the amount of 15 pounds and the other 12 pounds.\textsuperscript{13} Moreover, in the spring 1768, Witherspoon agreed to preach one more time in Beith (at their invitation), though he felt obliged to turn down Benjamin Rush’s invitation to preach in Edinburgh, because with so little time left in Scotland the people in Paisley did not want their minister out of the pulpit again.\textsuperscript{14} This is not the picture of a persecuted pastor being pushed out of his native land.

In the end, we cannot know all the reasons Witherspoon finally accepted the call to Princeton, which may be precisely what he wanted. “Least of all,” Witherspoon told the congregation in Paisley, “do I intend to endeavor to satisfy you of the motives which have induced me to accept of a call to a distant part of the world, and, in some degree, a different employment in the church of Christ.”\textsuperscript{15} No doubt, Collins’ picture of Witherspoon the successful and much appreciated pastor is accurate. But then again, so is Crawford’s “cautious conclusion” that it is “inconceivable that Witherspoon was unaffected by the [legal] case” against him.\textsuperscript{16}

Crawford is speaking of the Snodgrass affair—the long, drawn out ecclesiastical and civil case prosecuted against Witherspoon for denouncing a young Paisley lawyer who had celebrated a riotous, mock Lord’s Supper ceremony back in 1762 and would not receive a final verdict on his case until 1776. But what Crawford contends about the influence of the Snodgrass affair on Witherspoon’s decision to leave for America could just as certainly be said about his controversies in the Kirk: it is inconceivable that Witherspoon was unaffected. Witherspoon had enemies—a number of powerful

\textsuperscript{10} PW, 1:94.
\textsuperscript{11} Life, pp.78-90.
\textsuperscript{12} That the University tried to balance out different wings of the Kirk is suggested by the fact that Hugh Blair had received a D.D. from St. Andrews in 1757.
\textsuperscript{13} PW, 1:58-59, 64-65, 94.
\textsuperscript{14} Butterfield, p.73.
\textsuperscript{15} “Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 2:510.
\textsuperscript{16} Crawford, Lost World, pp.292, 287-300.
enemies—and he knew it. As much as the people of Paisley never wavered in their support for Witherspoon, the overwhelmingly Moderate Presbytery of Paisley was never eager to give Witherspoon the benefit of the doubt. At the time of his departure in 1768, Witherspoon had been more successful as a pastor than as a polemicist.

My aim in this chapter is not to adjudicate whether Green and Collins were right about the reasons for Witherspoon’s departure or whether McCosh and Crawford are closer to the truth. Determining why Witherspoon accepted the position at Princeton is an important question, but not essential. The point I wish to make is that these divergent portraits are not mutually exclusive. It is possible that Witherspoon was a fruitful parish minister and a frustrated pastor in the Church of Scotland. In fact, I want to argue that he was considered faithful in the one, while he found himself so frustrated in the other, for the same reason. Witherspoon was a traditional Reformed minister whose traditional doctrines and traditional ways marked him out as a man caught between two times and between two audiences—between the traditional parishioners in his congregations who warmly approved of his old school Presbyterianism and the enlightened Moderate ministers in the Church of Scotland who did not. Of course, in important ways, Witherspoon was a man of his own time. His political instincts were pro-Hanoverian, his satire was Swiftian, and his intellectual reference points were as much contemporary as pre-1700. The questions Witherspoon tried to answer from the pulpit were not uncommon among Kirk ministers (including Moderate ones) in the middle of the eighteenth century. But when it came to matters of doctrine, discipline, and the duties of pastoral fidelity, he drew strength from an earlier age. Witherspoon was a pessimist in an era of optimism, a traditionalist in a time of Enlightenment, and a man who, in a future-looking age, was intent on preserving the glories of the past. This combination of characteristics helps to explain why Witherspoon’s Scottish ministry was so fruitful and so frustrated at the same time.

Haddington, 1723-1745

Over the course of John Witherspoon’s forty-five years in the Church of Scotland (1723-1768), he was affiliated with three churches and three presbyteries. Witherspoon was born on February 5, 1723 in Yester parish (East Lothian), twenty-five miles east of
Edinburgh in the village of Gifford.\textsuperscript{17} His father James Witherspoon was ordained by the Presbytery of Haddington in 1720 and served at Yester parish until his death in 1759.\textsuperscript{18} The village of Gifford, four miles south of Haddington, was not unlike many other small towns in Scotland during the eighteenth century. There was a church and a manse (built in 1708) and a patron (the Marquis of Tweeddale) who played a key role in filling in pastoral vacancies (perhaps a wise move, then, that Witherspoon dedicated his Master’s thesis to the Marquis). Most adults labored as farmers, servants, tailors, weavers, masons, or carpenters. Most of the land was used for pasture and sown grass.\textsuperscript{19} By the 1750s, there were just over 1,000 people in the parish, a number that would remain virtually constant for the next 80 years.\textsuperscript{20} It is safe to assume that during Witherspoon’s years in Yester, the population hovered around the same mark, maybe a little higher, with roughly half of the people (400-500) living in the village of Gifford.\textsuperscript{21}

Throughout the eighteenth century the parish remained remarkably loyal to the Church of Scotland. At the time of the \textit{First Statistical Account of Scotland} (1789-1799), Rev. James Innes, the parish minister from 1760 to 1821, estimated there were only ten Seceders out of a population close to 1,000.\textsuperscript{22} A generation later in 1835, Rev. John Thomson noted that there were no Dissenting or Seceding chapels and only “about six Seceders and two or three Episcopalians in the parish,” some of whom still worshiped in the Kirk. “The great body of the people,” Thomson remarked, “have long been firmly attached to the Established Church; and their love has not waxed cold.”\textsuperscript{23} Whatever the reason for the loyalty—perhaps the stability of its population, or the longevity of its ministers, or the fact that John Knox had been born in Haddington—some of it seems to have rubbed off on John Witherspoon, who, despite numerous frustrations with the Kirk and shared theological affinities with leaders in the separatist bodies, never showed the least inclination to join the Seceders or Thomas Gillespie’s Relief Church. On September 6, 1743, after delivering a sermon from Romans 8:32 the Presbytery of Haddington

\textsuperscript{17} Because Witherspoon was born under the Old Style calendar, which marked the beginning of the year on March 25 instead of January 1, his birth year is sometimes given as 1722. In fact, the inscription on his tomb in Princeton says he was born “on the 5th of February MDCCXXII O.S.” Witherspoon died on November 15, 1794.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{The First (1789-1799) and New (1841) Statistical Accounts of Scotland: Haddington}, Volume 2 (Glasgow, Grimsay Press, 2008), p.219 (New).

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid, pp.198-200 (First).

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid, p.211 (New).

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid, p.200 (First), p.212 (New).

\textsuperscript{22} According to the First Account, there were 800 residents ages 5-90 (p.200-1). The New Account indicates that the population was 933 in 1791 (p.211). There is no reason both numbers cannot be accurate.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid, p.217 (New).
concluded that Witherspoon had satisfactorily completed all his “Tryalls” and licensed the twenty year-old to “preach the Gospel as a Probationer within their Bounds.”

Witherspoon’s ministerial career in the Church of Scotland had begun.

**Beith, 1745-1757**

Or, more precisely, his career had almost begun. It would be another year and a half before Witherspoon was finally ordained as a minister at Beith in Ayrshire. The Beith of Witherspoon’s era was a slowly growing town with a long history of agriculture and dairy as well as a newer manufacturing sector dependent on the soon-to-be booming clothing industry in nearby Paisley and Glasgow. By the 1790s, in addition to the usual list of barbers, butchers, smiths, and masons, Beith—which had more than doubled in size from 2,065 residents in 1755 to 5,113 in 1,831—was filled with hundreds of persons employed in spinning cotton, making thread, and weaving muslin and silk. For a parish its size, Beith had an especially large number of heritors, owing to the fact that its properties were remarkably subdivided. The church, which had the Earl of Eglington for its patron, was originally a chapel planted by the monastery at Kilwinning.

Witherspoon’s initial difficulty in getting installed in Beith presaged a ministerial career in Scotland that would rarely be free from controversy. According to Collins, Witherspoon and three other candidates were recommended by the mother of the Earl of Eglington (a minor at the time) to the Presbytery of Irvine for the vacancy at Beith. The presbytery minutes (January 29, 1745) record that the final decision was between Witherspoon and one of his classmates at Edinburgh, George Muirhead (not to be confused with George Muir who would later be Witherspoon’s colleague in Paisley). Two calls had been presented, one to Witherspoon and one to Muirhead, but after a vote of the heritors (106 for Witherspoon and 49 for Muirhead) and a vote of the heads of families (119 for Witherspoon and only 5 for Muirhead), the presbytery unanimously concurred with Witherspoon’s call and judged that Muirhead’s call was “fallen.”

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24 Haddington Minutes, CH2/185/12/213-14.
27 First Statistical Account, 8:320.
28 Ibid., 8:315.
29 First Statistical Account, 8:316, New Statistical Account, 5:593.
30 PW, 1:20-21.
31 Irvine Minutes, CH2/197/5/101-5.
Following this victory, the presbytery appointed ordination trials for Witherspoon, but the young licentiate was not yet in the clear. The minutes from February 19 explain that a protest had been lodged against Witherspoon’s call from a pro-Muirhead faction who wanted the sentence appealed to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr. The presbytery, however, judged the appeal “irregular,” (1) citing the lack of a written commission to represent those who had subscribed Muirhead’s call and (2) noting that there was no reason their appeal could not have been lodged at the previous meeting. When no further reasons of appeal were submitted, and after Witherspoon defended his Edinburgh thesis on the immortality of the soul to the satisfaction of the presbytery at their March 12 meeting, “it was ordered that they proceed to his ordination as minister of the gospel at Beith.” On April 11, 1745, once “the presbytery waited a considerable time before the congregation to see if any would comppear to object against the doctrine, life, and conversation of the said Mr. Witherspoon,” the probationer from Haddington was finally “ordained with prayer and the laying on of hands” and “thereafter received the right hand of fellowship.”

Why the congregation was divided between Witherspoon and Muirhead—both recent Edinburgh graduates looking for their first call—is hard to say. It is nevertheless tempting to speculate that the disagreement may have been theological, not first of all because of Witherspoon’s Edinburgh thesis (that protest seems to have been a last ditch effort to give Muirhead another shot at the call), but because of a split between moderate and evangelical forces in the congregation. Witherspoon’s predecessor in Beith was William Leechman who served the congregation from 1736 until he demitted his charge on January 3, 1744 after being appointed the previous year as Professor of Divinity at the University of Glasgow. As a pupil of William Hamilton (1669-1732)—the liberal Edinburgh professor whom Robert Wodrow reckoned had “departed from the Calvinisticall doctrine and the ordinary doctrine taught in this Church, though he hath the wisdom to keep himself in the clouds”—and as the protégé of the Enlightenment philosopher Francis Hutcheson, Leechman was a forerunner of the later Moderate ministers who were long on practical religion and short on doctrinal specifics. The same

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32 Irvine Minutes, CH2/197/5/106.
33 Irvine Minutes, CH2/197/5/110, 113.
34 Irvine Minutes, CH2/197/5/114.
Glasgow presbytery that had charged Hutcheson with heresy while he was Professor of Moral Philosophy also opposed Leechman’s appointment as Professor of Divinity. In the end, despite strong opposition, Hutcheson was able to pull enough strings behind the scenes to secure the position for the man he thought would “put a new face upon theology in Scotland.”

By May of 1744 the controversy surrounding Leechman reached the General Assembly, as a committee from the Presbytery of Glasgow complained about a sermon on prayer Leechman had published in 1743 which the committee felt was only generically theistic and made too little mention of Jesus Christ. Although Leechman’s answers to the committee’s charges satisfied the Assembly, the attack on the new professor’s theological integrity was indicative of how suspiciously he was viewed by many conservative ministers in the Kirk. Later James Robe, the pro-revival minister at Kilsyth, published an account of the ordeal in which he alleged that Leechman, from his earliest days as a probationer, was never considered an evangelical preacher but offended many with his abstract philosophizing from the pulpit. Likewise, John Willison’s *Fair and Impartial Testimony* (1744) included a postscript criticizing Leechman’s sermon on prayer.

Was the choice between Muirhead and Witherspoon a decision whether the church wanted to turn in a more evangelical direction? Surely, something of Witherspoon’s theological instincts were known, either from his exams, his candidating sermon, or from the reputation of his father. As for George Muirhead, he was called to the church of Monigaff in the summer of 1746 and ordained later that December. His mark, however, would be made not in the church, but in the academy, just like Leechman. In 1753, Muirhead was appointed Professor of Oriental Languages at the University of

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38 *Annals 1739-1752*, pp.46-61.
39 *Annals 1739-1752*, p.46. According to Carlyle, the attacks on Leechman came from the “fanatical or high-flying clergy in the presbytery of Glasgow,” the same men “who had encouraged Cambuslang’s work” (*Autobiography of Alexander Carlyle*, p.77).
41 Witherspoon’s father was not an obscure clergyman, having preached before the High Commissioner in 1742 (*Annals 1739-1752*, p.335) and appointed to a royal chaplaincy in 1744 (PW, 1:10). It is also worth remembering that John Witherspoon’s uncles, Thomas Walker and Archibald Walker, were ministers well known to be aligned with the pro-revival wing of the Kirk.
Glasgow, and in 1754 appointed to the Chair of Humanity. After Leechman became Principal in 1761, Muirhead was appointed Dean of the Faculty (1764-66) and elected Clerk of the University (1769). If Muirhead was not the pro-Leechman candidate at Beith in 1745, he clearly had the support of Leechman once the former Beith minister took the helm at Glasgow. It is not hard to imagine that the factions in the congregation at Beith—one side for Muirhead and one side for Witherspoon—were representative of deeper theological differences threatening to divide the Kirk as a whole.

Witherspoon’s twelve years in Beith were fruitful, both personally and professionally. On September 2, 1748, he married Elizabeth Montgomery, who, as the daughter of Robert Montgomery of Craighouse, belonged to one of the prominent families in the parish. John and Elizabeth had five or six children of their ten children in Beith. Not only did Witherspoon publish several of his most significant works while at Beith—Ecclesiastical Characteristics (1753), the Essay on Justification (1756), and A Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage (1757)—he also came into his own as a preacher and pastor. As one early memorialist put it, he labored at Beith “with much acceptance, and received many pleasing tokens of their high esteem and cordial affection.” In 1754, one of the aisles of the church was lengthened to make room for an “additional 200 sitters.” And years later when returning to Scotland on a fundraising trip for Princeton, Witherspoon received a warm welcome in Beith where he spent time with old friends and preached in his old church. The session records show that while there were difficult situations to navigate in the parish, there was a strong sense of unity between the pastor and his people. The dozen years in Beith were, at least on the local level, an ecclesiastical success.

Paisley, 1757-1768

The subsequent eleven years in Paisley were just as fruitful, though punctuated with more frustration. Situated six and half miles west of Glasgow, Paisley was one of the towns which benefited most from the Union of 1707 and the free trade that opened as a result

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44 PW, 1:24-25; Life, pp.31-32; James Patterson, History of the Counties of Ayr and Wigton, Vol. 3 Cuninghame (Edinburgh: James Stillie, 1866), p.86.
45 It is unclear whether the sixth child, also John Witherspoon, was born at Beith or Paisley.
46 Crichton quoted by Green in Life, p.31.
47 First Statistical Account, 8:317.
with England. Even by the middle of the eighteenth century Paisley was on its way to becoming a major manufacturing center, with a considerable part of its population employed as weavers, winders, warpers, clippers, spinners, bleachers, mill-drivers, and any number of activities related to the clothing industry. “The spirit of manufacture,” one minister observed, “is the secret spring which puts all in motion.” When Witherspoon arrived in 1757, the combined population in the Abbey of Paisley and the Town of Paisley (two separate parishes since 1738) was approaching 7,000, more than three times as large as Beith and ten or twelve times as large as Witherspoon’s childhood home of Gifford. By 1791, Paisley would nearly quadruple in size to just under 25,000, and over the next forty years, the combined population of the Abbey and the Town would swell to more than 57,000.

Not surprisingly, as the town grew, so did the number of churches. From the time of the Reformation until 1738, the only church for the town and parish of Paisley was the old Abbey Church (which, since 1641, had the benefit of two ministers). This changed in 1733 when the Earl of Dundonald—the town and church’s patron—entered into an agreement with the local magistrates and town council for the planting of new churches in Paisley. In exchange for 1,000 merks (silver coins) and the promise that he would be relieved of the financial obligations for any future congregations, the Earl granted to the magistrates and the town council the rights of patronage for the church plants. In 1736, the burgh of Paisley was made its own parish (separate from the Abbey Parish) and plans were made for a new church. The church, which began its ministry in 1738 with room for 1,300 worshippers, was called Laigh Kirk or Low Church, so named because of its geographic position in the town. In 1756, a second congregation, High Church, was founded, with Low Church and High Church sharing a joint session (much to their dismay) until 1781 when Middle Church began its ministry and the three churches were divided into three parishes. The congregation at Laigh Kirk eventually outgrew its building and in 1820 moved to a larger facility on George Street. St. George’s Church (as it came to be called) replaced Laigh Kirk as the parish congregation. In one of the

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50 Ibid., 7:73.
51 Ibid., 7:66.
52 New Statistical Account, 7:248-49. Collins says, without attribution, that the population of Paisley at the time of Witherspoon’s arrival was 12,000 (PW, 1:50). Both the First Statistical Account (7:66, 91) and the New Statistical Account (7:248) list the same 1755 population numbers for the Abbey Parish and Town Parish—2,509 and 4,290 respectively, or 6,799 total.
ironies of history, the original Laigh Kirk building, where Witherspoon—the formidable opponent of the stage—ministered so effectively, is now used as a community center and theatre.\footnote{Cf. https://www.paisley.org.uk/attractions/paisley-arts-centre/ (accessed August 14, 2018).}

Like the twelve years in Beith, Witherspoon’s eleven years in Paisley proved to be pastorally and personally fruitful. The Laigh Kirk minister not only published significant works like \textit{A Practical Treatise on Regeneration} (1764) and \textit{The History of the Corporation of Servants} (1765), he also saw several of his occasional sermons put into print—like the ordination sermon \textit{The Charge of Sedition and Faction Against Good Men} (1758), his message before the SSPCK \textit{The Absolute Necessity of Salvation through Christ} (1758), and his sermon before the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr \textit{The Trial of Religious Truth by its Moral Influence} (1759). Additionally, Witherspoon issued \textit{A Serious Apology for the Ecclesiastical Characteristics} in 1763 along with two collections of sermons (\textit{Practical Discourses on the Leading Truths of the Gospel} and \textit{Sermons on Practical Subjects}) released just as he was leaving for America. During his time at Paisley, several of his earlier works continued to be reprinted in new editions.\footnote{See \textit{PW}, 2:235-66 for a list of Witherspoon’s published (and republished) works up to the time of Collins’s biography (1925).} Witherspoon also received calls from churches in Dublin, Rotterdam, and Dundee, prompting the town leaders to intervene in an effort to keep their pastor happy and to keep him in Paisley.\footnote{See Rodgers, “A Funeral Discourse,” \textit{Works}, 1:28-29 and \textit{PW}, 1:50-51, 58-59, 64-65, 94. Collins notes that Witherspoon’s starting salary of more than 100 pounds a year was considerably higher than the average for a Scottish minister of 70 pounds per annum, and this was before the town of Paisley increased his salary by an additional 12 pounds in 1766 (pp.51, 65).} In other words, from 1757-1768, we find Witherspoon in a growing city, with a growing ministry, a growing family, a growing salary, and a growing reputation, ministering to a growing congregation. It was a remarkably fruitful decade of pastoral and theological ministry for a man who is rarely remembered as a pastor and theologian.

It was also a period of recurring frustration. From the day Witherspoon arrived in Paisley—actually, even before he arrived—there were serious disputes and disagreements with the presbytery. In June 1756, the magistrates and town council, patrons of the living at Laigh Kirk, resolved to extend a call to the young, dynamic minister down the road at Beith. Although the citizens of the town and the session supported Witherspoon’s call, the Presbytery of Paisley objected on the grounds that he was reputed (correctly, it turns out) to have authored the anonymous satire \textit{Ecclesiastical...
Characteristics. The town council appealed the matter to the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, before which Witherspoon offered a point by point defense of his call to Paisley—an argument which not only proved persuasive for the matter at hand but was later included (and expanded) in A Serious Apology (1763). With the synod ordering “the Moderation of a Call to Mr Witherspoon with all convenient speed” the presbytery was ready to stand down, provided “the Synod vindicat [sic] them from the injurious Reflections [sic] thrown out against them as if their Conduct had been inquisitorial and hurtful to the Liberties of Mankind.”

The synod appointed Thursday, December 9, 1756 for the official moderation of the call, but this appointed service never happened. It would take another six months before his release from Beith was secured. Witherspoon’s “transportation” to Paisley was finally made official on June 16, 1757, a full year after he had first received the call to Laigh Kirk.

Witherspoon was not in Paisley long before he ran afoul of the presbytery a second time. In 1758, Witherspoon and James Baine (the minister at the newly formed High Church) petitioned the Presbytery of Paisley to have separate sessions—a petition rejected by the presbytery, approved by the synod, and ultimately rejected again by the General Assembly. It is hard to see why the presbytery objected to a reasonable request strongly supported by both ministers and by the session itself, except to assume that the presbytery was loathe to do Witherspoon any favors. Relying on a 1964 dissertation by I.D.L. Clark, Ronald Crawford argues persuasively that the Presbytery of Paisley was dominated by Moderate men. Of the eight ministers (not counting Witherspoon) whose party affiliation can be confidently discerned, seven were Moderates—Archibald Davidson at Inchinnan (initially at the second charge in the Abbey Church), John Warner at Kilbarchan, John Fleming at Kilmacolm, John Couper at Lochwinnoch, Alexander Cruickshank at Mearns, Henry Millar at Neilston, and James Hamilton at Abbey Church (the first charge). James Baine was the only minister in the presbytery, besides Witherspoon, known to have been on the side of the Popular Party. Not surprisingly,
Low Church and High Church were stuck sharing a joint session until 1781, long after Witherspoon moved to America.

The Snodgrass Affair
This setback was far from the worst frustration Witherspoon faced as a member of the Presbytery of Paisley. No doubt, the high point of local conflict, and perhaps the low point of his Scottish ministry, were two separate incidents regarding a young lawyer named John Snodgrass. While the legal wrangling—which Crawford has analyzed in remarkable detail—is tortuously complex, the event which precipitated the controversy is relatively straightforward. On February 6, 1762, a group of young men engaged in “a very atrocious riot” in Paisley, in essence a wild drinking party in which the drunken men alarmed their neighbors, uttered profane oaths, made fun of preachers, and (most heinously) conducted a mock celebration of the Lord’s Supper. The men charged with this gross impiety—William Wilson, Robert Hunter, John Snodgrass, James and David Chalmers, William M’Croachit, and Robert Corse—were well-known and almost all from well-respected families, some of which were likely at Laigh Kirk. Seeing it at his duty to rebuke the wayward and protect the purity of the church, Witherspoon preached a chastising sermon on February 21 entitled “Seasonable Advice to Young Persons.” The next day, Snodgrass and the others were brought before the session. Although Snodgrass was clearly implicated by the testimony of his friends, he continued to deny the charges. The session was not impressed. They shared their pastor’s sense of outrage and agreed that a rebuke was necessary.

The presbytery, however, did not see the situation quite so cut and dried. With seven known Moderates out of eleven ministers, a presbytery moderator who despised Witherspoon, and the other minister from his own session (James Baine) also hostile to Witherspoon (though sharing his theology), the presbytery was in no mood to do sensibilities—both preached traditional doctrine and both opposed the theatre—it would be a mistake to think Baine and Witherspoon were close allies. The Paisley colleagues clashed over the matter of William Adie (a teacher whom Witherspoon, but not Baine, wanted to serve as English schoolmaster and session clerk) and ultimately parted ways when Baine, angered by the treatment a licentiate named Alexander Simpson had received, left for the Relief Church in 1766. Although Simpson preached in Laigh Kirk on occasion, there is no indication that Witherspoon supported Baine’s departure or the reasons for it. In fact, one of the strongest rebuttals came from Witherspoon’s uncle, Thomas Walker, who wrote a series of letters in response to Baine under the pseudonym Philalethes (see Crawford, Lost World, pp.64-65, 144-50; Annals 1752-1766, pp.242-43, 292-93, 313-29).

61 See Crawford’s helpful chronological summary in Lost World, pp.xvi-xix.
62 Ibid., p.85.
63 Ibid., p.63.
Witherspoon any favors.\textsuperscript{64} Witherspoon, in turn, threatened to print the sermon and name names publicly if the presbytery did not uphold the sentence of the session. It is little wonder that after Witherspoon did just that—publishing the sermon in May—that the presbytery on July 7 approved an overture (offered by a committee of four Moderate, anti-Witherspoon ministers) which was clearly hostile to the Laigh Kirk pastor, citing Witherspoon’s actions as “highly irregular and injurious” and “highly unsuitable to the Ministerial Character.”\textsuperscript{65} By August of that year, Witherspoon would receive a Court of Session summons indicating that Snodgrass and the others had filed a defamation suit against him. No one knew at the time that a legal process had begun that would last another fourteen years.

If the situation was not already complicated enough, a second incident regarding John Snodgrass surfaced in 1764.\textsuperscript{66} In “Snodgrass 2” (as Crawford calls it), the Paisley lawyer was accused of being caught in a compromising position with a prostitute named Jean Steell. According to the charges against him, Snodgrass was found on or around December 10, 1763 to be in the house of Robert Armour with “a woman of a most abandoned & infamous Character.” It was further alleged that he had been paying her rent for over a year. Snodgrass denied the charges and claimed that the precognition—a preliminary statement gathered from eyewitnesses—had been written by Witherspoon himself.\textsuperscript{67} While it is unlikely Witherspoon fabricated the charges out of thin air, it seems plausible (assuming Snodgrass’s defense was not fabricated out of thin air) that Witherspoon went too far in trying to prosecute a new case against the man who had made his life so difficult for the past two years. Snodgrass shrewdly refused to answer any accusations before the Witherspoon led local session—where he was charged with “the most atrocious Crimes,” including “adultery fornication” as well as “scandalous behavior” and “uncleanness”\textsuperscript{68}—and instead made his appeal before the much friendlier Presbytery of Paisley. In the end, on April 25, the Presbytery dealt their evangelical colleague another blow by fully acquitting Snodgrass of any wrongdoing.\textsuperscript{69} However personally frustrated Witherspoon might have been with John Snodgrass, his fiercest anger was reserved for the Presbytery of Paisley. Among

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{64} Ibid., p.100.
  \item \textsuperscript{65} Ibid., pp.105-6.
  \item \textsuperscript{66} The incident is detailed in twenty-one consecutive pages in the presbytery minutes (CH2/294/10/230-50) and summarized by Crawford in \textit{Lost World}, pp.112-35.
  \item \textsuperscript{67} Ibid., pp.116-18.
  \item \textsuperscript{68} Paisley Minutes, CH2/294/10/235-36.
  \item \textsuperscript{69} Ibid., pp.121, 128.
\end{itemize}
Witherspoon’s papers in the Library of Congress is a five-page satirical poem meant to be a scathing rebuke from the Paisley pastor to his own presbytery.\textsuperscript{70} The work, entitled an \textit{Epistle of Thanks from J(oh)n Sn(odgra)ss to the ReVD P(resbytery) of P(aisle)Y}, is nowhere to be found in any of Witherspoon’s published works. What is more, almost no mention is made of the piece in any Witherspoon scholarship up to this point.\textsuperscript{71} No date is given for the poem, but since the events of Snodgrass 2 are clearly in view, we can surmise that the work was drafted sometime after the presbytery exonerated Snodgrass on April 25, 1764. Whether Witherspoon intended the poem to be read before the presbytery or published in some form is difficult to know, though the fact that the work has been buried in complete obscurity suggests Witherspoon decided to keep the doggerel to himself.

The poem, written satirically in the voice of John Snodgrass thanking the Presbytery of Paisley for their support, shows just how frustrated, indignant, and clever Witherspoon could be. It begins:

\begin{quote}
Most reverend Fathers of the church  
accept this humble boon  
As you’ve not left us in the lurch  
a Prey to W[itherspoon]
\end{quote}

Then “Snodgrass” applauds the presbytery for understanding that the drinking party was only a bit of harmless fun.

\begin{quote}
That famous zealot in his Rage  
will pardon no man’s Crimes  
But you know something of the Age  
and spirit of the times.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
You know it is in vain to think  
that men of sense and spirit  
Will ever cease to swear and drink  
While as their Purse will bear it.
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Nay even when the money’s seased  
We drink to bear down sorrow
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{70} Papers JW, Bundle 2\textsuperscript{nd} No. 9. See my Appendix 4 for the complete poem. I am grateful to Ronald Crawford for lending his paleographic expertise to the rough spots in Witherspoon’s scrawl.

\textsuperscript{71} The only mention I found comes from David Walker Woods in his 1906 biography \textit{John Witherspoon} (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company). Woods includes three stanzas of the “wretched doggerel” that he found “among some manuscripts of Witherspoon,” but Woods mistakenly identifies it as meant to accompany \textit{A Serious Apology} and concludes that the other verses “would not interest the modern reader” (pp.69-70).
For all the World’s but a farce
And we may die tomorrow

Must there be no indulgence given
in liquid Consolation
To a poor sinner who is driven
almost to Desperation

As for the sacramental Feast
of which we were accus’d
You knew the matter was a jest
So kindly be excus’d

A little later, “Snodgrass” makes oblique reference to *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* and how the presbytery resisted Witherspoon’s transportation to Laigh Kirk.

If we were man of Ready wit
amidst your Panegyrick
We'd give this W(itherspoon)n a hit
in Style and Phrase Satyrick

And was he not an animal
in hopes for your assistance
Who to his coming here at all
made such a stout Resistance

In the second half of the poem, Witherspoon turns to more recent allegations, having “Snodgrass” casually reference “that sly and saucey slut” and make light of the charges against him.

Soft touch & pleasant Innuendoes
as light as any Feather
While two are standing in the windows
and whispering together

The point of the poem is less about the lifestyle of John Snodgrass and more about the presbytery’s shocking indifference to public virtue and ecclesiastical discipline.

The way for Clergymen to win
a sacred delicious Dinner
is still to wink & approve the sin
or justify the sinner

This couplet from the middle of the piece captures the heart of Witherspoon’s critique. Snodgrass may have been a liar and a lecherous young man, but he was scarcely the only one brought before Witherspoon’s session for drunkenness and sexual immorality. His
case may have quickly disappeared were it not for Witherspoon’s intransigence in the face of the presbytery’s insouciance. He would not compromise with them, so long as they compromised with the world. As far as Witherspoon was concerned, his ministerial adversaries embodied everything he disdained in Moderate men: abusive of power, vindictive toward evangelicals, in love with carnal things, and married to the spirit of the age. Snodgrass was a sinner, but the presbytery was the scandal.

**Witherspoon’s Pastoral Ministry**

With the basic chronology of Witherspoon’s Scottish career in place, we can turn our attention to three broad themes in his Kirk ministry: church discipline, gospel preaching, and a longing for revival.

The long, circuitous Snodgrass affair is noteworthy on many levels—as a precedent-setting legal case, as a salacious glimpse into the messiness of real life in Presbyterian Scotland, and as a personal headache (and possibly a motivation for heading to America) for Witherspoon. What is most striking, however, at least for our purposes, is how the two Snodgrass episodes reveal Witherspoon as a man caught between two times. His adherence to the old Scottish paths won him a loyal following on a local level and among the evangelical wing of the Kirk, while at the same time putting him out of step with the ecclesiastical powerbrokers and polite fashions of the day.

Witherspoon’s commitment to church discipline is an instructive case in point. When Ashbel Green noted that his mentor “had been known as the strenuous advocate, not only of the orthodox doctrine, but of the strict discipline of the Scottish church,” there was more evidence than the Snodgrass Affair to make his point. “They that desire to banish discipline,” Witherspoon wrote, quoting an unnamed Reformer, “desire to banish Christ from his church.”

Most of the items recorded in the minutes of the Beith Kirk Session (sadly, the minutes from Laigh Kirk are not available for Witherspoon’s tenure) deal with the sins of church members. On September 25, 1747, Margaret Snodgrass (no known relation to the aforementioned John) was called before the elders and asked if she was with child. She responded that she was and that the father was John Sheddan of Cuff. In October, Sheddan was brought before the session and denied having had “any carnal dealing with” Margaret. A few days later William Mitchell and Elizabeth

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72 *Life*, p. 87.
Cochran, who had been rebuked by Witherspoon for their irregular marriage (i.e., conducted in secret without the sanctioning of the church), stood before the session and agreed to pay the Kirk dues for a regular marriage. Although most cases were concerned with adultery (and the resulting pregnancy) and irregular marriages, the session dealt with almost every kind of serious transgressions, like the time Matthew Swan and Matthew Sheddan were accused of beating a poor woman and exhorted to beware of drunkenness, or the time Thomas Caldwell and David King were rebuked for “very indecent behavior in the church” and (after their failure to appear before the congregation) received the sentence of lesser excommunication.

While Witherspoon’s persistence in the Snodgrass Affair (i.e., the one involving the lawyer) may seem excessive to modern sensibilities, it was not at all unusual for a minister, together with the session, to follow through with ecclesiastical oversight for several years following the initial allegations. For example, Margaret Snodgrass and John Sheddan first appeared before the Beith session in the fall of 1747 (again, a different case than the Snodgrass Affair). Not relenting after an initial denial, in March 1748, the session ordered Robert Sheddan, John Sheddan of Marshland, and William Caldwell to speak with John Sheddan to see whether he would make a statement under oath before the presbytery. Three years later, in July 1752, the issue was still not resolved: Margaret and John were now married, but both had been found guilty (again) of “uncleanness” and ordered to appear before the congregation. Since Margaret had lied under excommunication she could only be absolved of her sin by the presbytery, while John would not be absolved without evidence of good behavior.

74 Beith Minutes, CH2/31/2/192. In 1751, the disorderly practice of clandestine marriages became such a serious matter that the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr overtured the General Assembly for help (Annals 1739-1752, p.219).
75 Beith Minutes, CH2/31/2/201.
76 Irvine Minutes, CH2/197/5/500-1. Lesser excommunication amounted to suspension from the Lord’s Supper and a final admonition before proceeding to greater excommunication, which meant cutting off the offender as “a heathen man” (See Walter Steuart, Collections and Observations Concerning the Worship, Discipline, and Government of the Church of Scotland (Edinburgh: W. Gray, 1770), pp.237-38.
77 Beith Minutes, CH2/31/2/197. Years later, Witherspoon baptized one of Robert Shedden’s slaves, a black man named James Montgomery who tried to escape his master and then appealed to his Christian baptism as one reason he should be set free. See my Appendix 5 for more on the Sheddens, Montgomery, and their connection to Witherspoon.
78 The public acts of rebuke, confession, repentance, and absolution were an integral part of Kirk worship well into the eighteenth century. For a uniformly negative assessment of these Scottish traditions, see William D. Maxwell, A History of Worship in the Church of Scotland (London: OUP, 1955), pp.145-55. A more comprehensive, and balanced, analysis can be found in Margo Todd, The Culture of Protestantism in Early Modern Scotland, (New Haven: Yale, 2002), pp.127-82.
79 Beith Minutes, CH2/31/2/209.
Even more protracted was the case of George King and his servant Margaret King. When Margaret accused her master of committing adultery with her and being the father of her child, George denied the accusations and charged Margaret with sleeping around. The Beith session, not believing George’s denials, appealed to the Presbytery of Irvine for help. They too did not trust George’s profession of innocence, finding him “guilty of gross prevarication of such indecent behavior that he deserves to be publicly rebuked.” A decade later, in the summer of 1756, just after Witherspoon had received a call to Paisley, George King finally admitted before the presbytery that he was guilty of adultery with Margaret. The Presbytery of Irvine then began the process of “removing the sentence against him” and referred the matter back to the session of Beith.

In pursuing such exacting oversight of his flock, Witherspoon was in step with the rigorous pattern of pastoral care that had reigned in Scotland for nearly two centuries. As Margo Todd has demonstrated in her magisterial work on the culture of Protestantism in early modern Scotland, the Reformation took root in Scotland in a way it never did in England because the latter lacked local kirk sessions to reorient religious practices and systematically administer thoroughgoing church discipline. Even Crawford, who is quite critical of Witherspoon in his handling of the Snodgrass Affair (calling it “a largely forgotten and infinitely darker side to Witherspoon’s life”), admits that Witherspoon’s actions were in keeping with the duties placed upon him as a Kirk minister. Indeed, as Ashbel Green was keen to point out, Walter Steuart’s Collections and Observations (1709)—a polity and disciplinary manual for the Church of Scotland—called for the relevant ecclesiastical judicators to make a “timeous [i.e. prompt] notice of all Scandals.” Church members presumed that clergy would not only preach on Sunday, but visit the people from house to house and be intimately involved in their lives (even if they sometimes complained of the involvement). So when scholars conclude that “Few aspects of the history of Scottish Presbyterianism are more repugnant to the

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81 Of course, pastoral care meant much more than formal discipline. In a letter from Paisley dated April 4, 1766, Witherspoon comforted Mrs. Hogg that it had “pleased God in his holy Providence” to remove her eldest daughter from this world. After expressing his “tender sympathy,” Witherspoon borrowed the language of Scripture in holding out hope that God would give a peace which the world cannot give and work all things together for good to those who love him (Princeton University, Firestone Ms. CO274, Box 1, Folder 5a, “Hogg, Ballie Thomas, Mrs.”).
82 Todd, Culture of Protestantism, p.408.
83 Crawford, Lost World, pp.2, 277-78.
84 Life, pp.86-87; see also Crawford, who points out that Witherspoon’s personal copy of Steuart’s Collections and Observations (the 1770 edition) can be found at Princeton (Lost World, pp.78-79).
modern mind than kirk session discipline with its connotations of public humiliation, voyeurism and smug self-righteousness,” the verdict reflects more about contemporary standards of privacy than what eighteenth-century Scots expected from their local parish.87

And yet, by the middle of the century, even these expectations were changing. Within a day or two of the publication of Seasonable Advice (1762), George Muir came to Witherspoon’s aid with a published sermon of his own entitled The Excision; or, Troublers of the Church Characterized and Cut Off (1762). It was a vigorous defense of the session’s duty to discipline unholy men. But come September, William Thom (1710-1790), a Popular Party minister in Govan who sometimes exchanged pulpits with Witherspoon, would poke fun at Muir’s zeal and at Paisley’s reputation for being “the occasion of more business to church-courts, for these last ten years, than any two boroughs within the bounds of this synod.” A little over a year later (November 8, 1763), John Erskine weighed in with a sermon before the Synod of Lothian and Tweeddale entitled Ministers of the Gospel Cautioned Against Giving Offence in which the “enlightened evangelical” sounded a softer note, enjoining his fellow pastors to rebuke “the open practice of scandalous crimes,” but not in a way that allowed “sober reasoning” to be silenced “by raillery, by dark malicious innuendoes, by bitter satirical invectives, or by noisy cries for a vote.”

With an increasingly prosperous society less tolerant of ecclesiastical intrusion, and a Moderate regime intent on softening the Kirk’s hard edges, the traditional expression of pastoral care was changing, even within the ranks of evangelical clergy (like John Erskine) who hoped the old paths could be walked in new ways. William


87 See also “Questions to Be Put to Elders and Ordination” in Papers JW (Bundle 2nd No. 22). Question 3 asks the elder to approve the constitution and disciplinary procedures of the Church of Scotland. Question 5 is even more to point: “Do you promise to give faithful judgement as an office bearer and ruler in the Church of Christ and in this Congregation to be strict and impartial in the Exercise of Discipline for the Correction of Offenders and the preservation of others?”

88 Thom published two anonymous pamphlets in wake of the Snodgrass Affair: The Defects of an University Education (1762) and Scheme for Erecting an Academy Set Forth in Its Own Proper Colours (1762), both of which are including in The Works of the Rev. William Thom (Glasgow: James Dymock, 1799). The second pamphlet includes an accompanying note, entitled Uncorrupted Inhabitants of Paisley to the Public, in which Thom satirically advises that all ministers who speak favorably of educational academies should face “the EXCISION” (pp.348-50, emphasis original; the remark about Paisley can be found on p. 349). Information on Witherspoon’s pulpit supply and pulpit exchanges in 1763 can found in Princeton University, Firestone Ms. CO199, number 1141, “Manuscript 1763.”

Maxwell’s summary is apt: “Under presbytery and episcopacy the disciplinary system pursued its relentless way, practically unchanged till the middle of the eighteenth century, when it was very gradually dropped.”

This slow but profound change marked Witherspoon as a man caught in an age of transition—on the one hand embracing traditional ministerial practices familiar to most of his countrymen, while at the same time having to defend those practices in a world that was not sure it believed in them anymore.

Witherspoon’s Preaching Ministry

We see a similar dynamic when it comes to Witherspoon’s preaching. There is nothing novel about the style or substance of his sermons. They were familiar in structure and predictably evangelical. And yet, as Moderates like Hugh Blair came to shape and define respectable preaching in the second half of the eighteenth century, Witherspoon’s sermons, like that of other evangelical ministers, began to look traditional by comparison. But as Witherspoon saw things, if being out of date was the price of pastoral faithfulness, the cost was well worth paying. The truth was too important to be constrained by the dictates of a degenerate age.

Witherspoon was a popular, effective preacher, making up in diligence and clarity what he may have lacked in rhetorical ability. According to John Rodgers’s funeral oration, Witherspoon’s “principal merit appeared in the pulpit.” Though not “fervent and animated,” Witherspoon was “always a solemn, affecting, and instructive preacher.” He handled the biblical text well, avoided speculation, eschewed all ostentation, and cultivated a delivery that was clear, simple, and dignified.

Ashbel Green acknowledged that Witherspoon rarely exhibited any movement in the pulpit, and his public speaking sometimes suffered from “the lowness of his voice.”

Years later, Ebenezer Bradford, with a bit of an axe to grind against Witherspoon for opposing the Edwardsean New Divinity, would remark in a letter to Joseph Bellamy that the Princeton president was

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90 Maxwell, History of Worship, p.146. For more on the use of church discipline and how “the unity of the Presbyterian commonwealth . . . began to unravel as the eighteenth progressed” see Stewart J. Brown, “Religion and Society to c.1900,” in T.M. Devine and Jenny Wormald (eds), The Oxford Handbook of Modern Scottish History, (Oxford: OUP, 2012), pp.84-91.
91 “[A] faithful minister,” Witherspoon suggests, “who openly dares to bear witness against the apostacy of others, is traduced and slandered, loaded with imaginary crimes, and often falls a martyr to the sinking cause of truth and righteousness” (“The Charge of Sedition and Faction against Good Men,” Works, 2:437).
93 Life, pp.266-67.
“what we call a dull preacher.”\textsuperscript{94} Owing to the “peculiar affection of his nerves” which began after his imprisonment in Doune Castle, Witherspoon deliberately worked hard to stay under control in the pulpit, committing his written sermons to memory and then preaching them without any notes.\textsuperscript{95} Taken as a whole, however, Green felt that his mentor’s preaching had “not only the recommendation of good sense and powerful reasoning, but a gracefulness, an earnestness, a warmth of affection, and a solemnity of manner . . . such as was calculated to produce the very best effects of sacred oratory. Accordingly, his popularity as a preacher was great.”\textsuperscript{96} A young Benjamin Rush was even more effusive, declaring Witherspoon the best preacher he had heard in Scotland and one of the finest preachers he had heard anywhere. Years later, Rush would remark that Julia Stockton’s admiration for Witherspoon’s preaching at Princeton was one of the main reasons he sought to marry her.\textsuperscript{97}

Witherspoon’s homiletical approach was effective, but not unusual. Like most British preaching in the eighteenth century, Witherspoon had little use for humor or personal illustrations. Once when a woman noticed there were no flowers in his garden, he fired back “No, Madam, no flowers in my garden, nor in my discourses either!”\textsuperscript{98} He rarely referenced external events, except during official Fast and Thanksgiving sermons.\textsuperscript{99} As a typical Scottish evangelical, Witherspoon often relied on scriptural quotations, biblical allusions and phrases. To cite but one typical example, his sermon on Psalm 130:4 (“Hope of Forgiveness with God”) includes no fewer than 32 explicit scriptural references.\textsuperscript{100}

Witherspoon also employed numerous points and subpoints in all his messages.\textsuperscript{101} Like the English Puritans, Scottish preachers were influenced by the logic and rhetoric of Peter Ramus (1515-72), which meant the ideal sermon was organized, orthodox, and practical. The near ubiquitous practice—which was Ramist in its quest for clarity if not in its tripartite structure—was to expound a text, state the doctrine, and then


\textsuperscript{95} British preachers typically read from a full manuscript or spoke extemporaneously. Witherspoon represented a third category: \textit{memoriter} (remembered preaching). William Gibson, “The British Sermon 1689-1901: Quantities, Performance, and Culture” in \textit{OHBS}, pp.3-30 (p.16).

\textsuperscript{96} Life, p.267.

\textsuperscript{97} Butterfield, p.34.

\textsuperscript{98} Quoted in \textit{PW}, 1:147-8.


\textsuperscript{100} “Hope of Forgiveness with God,” \textit{Works}, 1:299-313.

apply its significance ad seriatim. In the Psalm 130:4 message, Witherspoon lays out three main points: the first point (why we can believe there is forgiveness with God) has three subpoints; the second point (the connection between the mercy of God and his fear) has two subpoints, the second of which is followed by a further two subpoints; the third point (“practical improvement of the subject”) has another five subpoints. Witherspoon’s preaching demonstrates the truth of Matheson’s claim that sermons in eighteenth-century Scotland, at least until the ascendancy of the Moderate Party, were “strongly Evangelical, elaborate, and heavily structured.”

Witherspoon liked to anchor his sermons in big doctrinal themes like human depravity, faith in Christ, justification, regeneration, eternal reward, and eternal punishment. He championed strong gospel preaching, which meant a special emphasis on the imputation of Christ’s righteousness and the uniqueness of Christ as Savior. “The imputed righteousness of Christ” should, for all ministers of the gospel, “be the main and leading theme of their sermons.” Indeed, the best defense against infidelity is “zealous assiduous preaching [of] the great and fundamental truths of the gospel.” While Witherspoon preached warmly on the love of Christ, he could also paint a dramatic picture of the dangers of hell. He took seriously his responsibility not to speak “smooth things” that leave people estranged from God, but to admonish, warn, and present the gospel “with freedom and boldness to persons of every rank and character.” This meant opening the sinner’s eyes to see how he had displeased a holy God and helping him to see that the only way to secure eternal life was through faith in the only Savior, Jesus Christ. Witherspoon often concluded his messages with an appeal to believe in Christ and seek mercy through the blood of the atonement before the pronouncement of the “irreversible sentence.”

105 Ibid., 1:90-91.
107 Ibid., 1.367; “The Glory of Christ in His Humiliation,” Works, 2.38; “The Righteous Scarcely Saved, and the Wicked Certainly Destroyed,” Works, 2:286. Contra Tait, Piety of Witherspoon, pp.55-6. Tait’s superficial knowledge of Reformed theology causes him to frequently misunderstand Witherspoon, whether on the doctrine of depravity (p.44), free grace (pp.55-56), divine sovereignty (p.56), limited atonement (p.57), or justification (p.58).
While Witherspoon’s homiletical pattern was common throughout the eighteenth century, “the nature of sermons in Scotland began to change quite significantly from the 1740s with the rise of the Moderates.” The change did not manifest itself in doctrinal repudiation as much as in doctrinal avoidance. The novelty of Moderate preaching was not in what was said, but in what was unsaid. A comparison between Witherspoon’s Communion message (“Christ’s Death a Proper Atonement for Sin”) and a similar-themed Action sermon (“On the Death of Christ”) from the acclaimed Moderate minister Hugh Blair (1718-1800) is instructive. Both Witherspoon and Blair point to the ubiquity of propitiatory sacrifices throughout history as corroborating the Christian truth that our sin and guilt must be atoned for. But whereas Witherspoon states explicitly that Christ bore the wrath of God for our sins, Blair will only say that “there was an efficacy in his sufferings,” but how exactly our sins were washed away “we cannot penetrate.” The understanding of the atonement as a “propitiation”—one of the hallmarks of preaching in the Popular party—is missing from Blair’s exposition. Likewise, Blair skirts the issue of hell, claiming that he wants nothing to do with “dubious and intricate reasonings concerning the conduct which God may be expected to hold toward his offending creatures.” Stewart Brown’s assessment is surely correct: “While [Blair’s] sermons were broadly orthodox in their Reformed theology, they neglected doctrinal issues or close analysis of biblical texts. There was no attention to hell, Christ’s atonement, or the need for personal conversion by accepting Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.” Witherspoon, on the other hand, warns of “the despairing horror of a sinner on his death-bed,” “the blaspheming rage of those who are tormented in hell-fire,” and what a terrible fate it is “to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Two sermons before the SSPCK provide another striking example. Three years before Witherspoon received the honor of preaching before the missionary society in Edinburgh, William Robertson (1721-1793) addressed the same gathering.

111 Matheson, “Preaching in the Churches of Scotland,” p.154.
113 Blair, Sermons, p.51.
114 McIntosh, Church and Theology, p.46.
115 Blair, Sermons, p.56.
118 In 1750, Hugh Blair preached before the SSPCK on “The Importance of Religious Knowledge to the Happiness of Mankind.” For a list of SSPCK preachers and sermons from 1739-1766, see Annals 1739-1752, p. 337; Annals 1752-1766, p.416.
Robertson’s message, *The Situation of the World at the Time of Christ’s Appearance* (1755) would become a classic, going through six editions by 1791. In making his confident case for the superiority of the Christian religion, the leader of the Moderate Party struck a nerve with those who believed in a narrative of progress and in the reforming capabilities of Enlightened piety. Robertson’s defense of Christianity focused almost entirely on the effectiveness of its virtue in the world. The “genius of the gospel,” according to Robertson, lay in “civilizing the fiercest and most barbarous nations, and inspiring gentleness of disposition, unknown to any other religion.” Genuine Christianity was distinguished above all other religions “by the mildness of its spirit,” Robertson cheered. “It not only sanctifies our souls, but refines our manners.”

By contrast, when Witherspoon preached before the SSPCK he made his focus *The Absolute Necessity of Salvation Through Christ*. If Witherspoon was not trying to oppose Robertson directly, he certainly had in his sights those who were saying similar things. Witherspoon attacked “nominal Christians” who “disguise or alter the gospel, in order to defend it.” He railed against those who would soften, conceal, or deny the fundamental truths of gospel, doctrines like the “lost and guilty state of man by nature, his liableness to everlasting misery, and the necessity of that satisfaction and ransom which was paid by our Redeemer when he died upon the cross.” Witherspoon expressed concern that people were being “presented with a character of Christ as a teacher only, and not a Saviour.” As he saw it, the “blessed Redeemer” was being “expressly classed with mortal reformers.”

Robertson and Witherspoon both believed in the power of Christianity to shape nations and transform civilizations, but Witherspoon took pains to state what Robertson left unstated: namely, that putting explicit faith in Christ was not only necessary for such a transformation to take place, but was necessary in order to escape the wrath of God. Toward the end of both addresses, Robertson and Witherspoon turn their attention to the Society’s missionary work. Launched as social reform initiative, the Christian knowledge

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120 William Robertson, *The Situation of the World at the Time of Christ’s Appearance, and Its Connexion with the Success of his Religion, Considered*, Third Edition (Edinburgh: Hamilton and Balfour, 1759), p.31. Blair made similar statements in his 1750 SSPCK sermon *The Importance of Religious Knowledge to the Happiness of Mankind* (Edinburgh: R. Fleming, 1750), arguing that religious knowledge awakens the “Sense of our friendly Relation” and “prepares the Way for all useful and ornamental Improvements in Society.” Strikingly, he lauds the Reformation for bringing about a true knowledge of “the Lord, Learning, Liberty, and Arts” (pp.24-26).

movement was transformed in the 1740s by a revival narrative that shifted the SSPCK’s focus from civilization to salvation. But for Robertson, “the conversion of distant nations is not the chief care of the Society.” Rather, their principal concern was still the “reformation of the Highlands,” where “society still appears in its rudest and most imperfect forms” and must be retrieved from “ignorance and barbarism.” Witherspoon does not deny the Society’s role in promoting “true religion, loyalty, and industry” in the Highlands. But he sees “two great purposes” for the SSPCK: not only moral reformation but also “spread[ing] the knowledge of Christ, the only Saviour of sinners, among the unenlightened heathen nations.” Witherspoon wanted to keep together the aims of making men happy in this life and heirs of eternal life in the next. What Robertson neither affirmed nor denied, Witherspoon underlined and highlighted. “What comparison,” he asked, “is there between any acts of beneficence that regard only the present life and the welfare of the body, and those that affect the everlasting interest of an immortal spirit?”

In his satire *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, Witherspoon lampooned the Moderate preacher (1) for confining his discourses to social duties, (2) for recommending Christianity only from rational considerations without regard to a future state, (3) for drawing mainly from heathen writers, and (4) for being unacceptable to the common people. As with most satirical polemics, these critiques were both exaggerated and plausible. Moderates like Robertson and Blair were well versed in Scripture and were not unpopular preachers. Blair’s five volumes of sermons were one of the most successful publishing projects in the eighteenth century. And yet, however brilliant in print, Blair’s homiletical delivery was formal and stiff, and his powdered wig and fastidious dress gave him a reputation for vanity. The Moderate men wanted Christian commitment and Christian virtue without the definition of Reformation doctrine and the edges of Presbyterian confessionalism. They wanted sinners to be saved—from their

125 Ibid., 2:362.
126 Ibid., 2:361. By comparison, Robertson speaks of the joy “in rescuing an immortal soul from vice, in adorning it with virtue, in seasoning it with grace, in manifesting the mystery of the gospel to those from whom it was hid, and in feeding the hungry with the bread of life” (*Situation of the World*, pp.40-41).
129 Ibid., p.414.
vices, if not from the wrath of God. By the middle of the eighteenth century, Witherspoon’s preaching still sounded comfortably familiar and was beginning to sound strangely out of place at the same time.

**A Revival of Religion**

Throughout his Scottish career, Witherspoon warned against lifeless Christianity, denounced the hypocritical espousing of orthodox theology, and in general bemoaned the low state of religion in Scotland. Although Scotland had known the Lord’s favor as much as any nation, he deemed the current religious situation “languishing” and in need of a “time of refreshing.”

Infidelity was spreading, vice and wickedness were abounding, and nominalism was multiplying. Witherspoon worried that Scotland’s churches were filled with vain, empty worship, and its people asleep in the false security of a cold and formal religion. He feared that as people departed from the doctrine of justification by faith alone, the church would descend into a corruption of worship, the relaxation of discipline, and the dissolution of manners. No doubt, some of the harsh language is owing to the Scottish penchant for jeremiad, but there is no escaping that Witherspoon found much to fault in his native land: neglect of prayer, neglect of family worship, profanity, pride, luxury, sensuality, debauchery, lying, fraud, perjury, and neglect of God. Like John Willison’s immensely popular *A Fair and Impartial Testimony*, Witherspoon “was launching a comprehensive onslaught on the state of the Church from an orthodox evangelical perspective.”

Despite Scotland’s glorious past, there was “little real religion in the world at present; and yet even that little is often, in a most shameful and cowardly manner, dissembled or denied.”

We get a good look at Witherspoon’s frustrations from the numerous denominational controversies he threw himself into during the 1750s and 1760s. In

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136 McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.32; the quotation is from McIntosh about Willison.
138 Witherspoon was only a voting member of the General Assembly five times: 1747, 1751, 1757, 1760, 1761 (See George Rich, “John Witherspoon: His Scottish Intellectual Background” (Ph.D. dissertation:
1751, Witherspoon joined in a complaint against the presentation of Charles Bannantine to be the minster at Irvine. The objection—which dealt with the provisions of the ministerial stipend set by the patron, the Earl of Eglington—was quickly dismissed by the Assembly. More significantly, a chain of events was set in motion at next year’s Assembly (1752) that would have a profound impact on Witherspoon for the rest of his Scottish career. When the Commission of the Church narrowly declined to censure the Presbytery of Dunfermline for its failure to follow orders and install Andrew Richardson as minister at Inverkeithing (where the people were opposed to Richardson’s presentation), seven ruling elders and seven ministers (including William Robertson, John Home, and Hugh Blair) drew up their Reasons of Dissent in protest. The Dissent, which amounted to an explicit defense of Presbyterian polity and an implicit defense of the rights of patronage, was dubbed “The Manifesto of the Moderate Party” and marked the beginning of the Robertson-led wing of the Kirk. The Assembly met in May and agreed with the Dissent that the Commission in March had erred in letting Dunfermline off the hook. They then ordered the presbytery, with at least five ministers to constitute a quorum, to admit Richardson the following week. When six ministers from the presbytery refused to participate in Richardson’s installation, thus denying the necessary quorum, they were brought before the Assembly to be held accountable for their obstinacy. Only one of the six, Thomas Gillespie, spoke in support of his actions. Gillespie was in turn deposed by a vote of 52-4 (with 102 abstentions).

Although there is no record of Witherspoon’s direct involvement in the “origin of the Relief” (the name of the presbytery Gillespie formed in 1761), he clearly was sympathetic to Dunfermline’s refusal to install a minister the people did not want. Witherspoon wrote most of *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* after witnessing the “strange abuse of church authority” in the patronage cases in Torphicen (1751) and Inverkeithing (1752). He then decided to publish the work after John Hyndman’s *A Just View of the Constitution of the Church of Scotland* (1753) took a swipe at his evangelical colleague and friend (and, it should be added, a leading defender of Cambuslang) Alexander

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Syracuse University, 1964), pp.76-77; Richard Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1985], pp.128-29). He should have been a voting member in 1766, but the delegation from Paisley was not seated (see below).

139 *Annals 1739-1752*, pp.218, 367.
Webster. Whatever we make of the Popular Party—and it was more of a loose affiliation of doctrinally concerned, anti-patronage ministers than an organized force like the Moderates—Witherspoon was clearly on its side against the likes of Robertson and Blair.

In 1757, Witherspoon wrote a *Dissent* of his own, joining with seven other ministers in protesting the Assembly’s decision to receive the commissions of several elders who were not properly attested. At issue was a 1722 statute requiring elders to be “faithful in the discharge of their office, tender and circumspect in their walk, punctual in their attending on ordinances, strict in the observation of the Lord’s Day, and regular in keeping up worship of God in their families.” Witherspoon argued that at a time “when the decay of religion is so great and visible” and the progress of “impiety and irreligion in Scotland these last thirty years” has been so great, insisting on godly commissioners to the General Assembly was more important than ever. Moreover, the unattested commissions were received not because the 1722 stipulation had been forgotten, but because no one cared that the elders were “in fact and reality, unqualified.”

In the end, Witherspoon’s *Dissent* changed nothing.

On occasion, Witherspoon’s efforts at the national level prevailed. In 1761, the Assembly reversed the sentence that the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr had forced upon the presbytery and approved the plan from the Paisley magistrates and session to unite the offices of English schoolmaster and session clerk. Five years later, the Assembly again sided with Witherspoon, this time with the synod and against the presbytery, in overturning Paisley’s refusal to admit two new elders into membership. But the victory was pyrrhic, for the Assembly then ruled that Paisley’s entire delegation, including Witherspoon, should be rendered “void and null” and stricken from the rolls.

143 It is sometimes thought the Witherspoon wrote the “Popular Party Manifesto”—the *Answers to the Reasons of Dissent* in 1752. Collins claims, without evidence, that Witherspoon was the author (*PW*, 1:33), and Sher repeats the assertion, citing only Collins (*Sher, Church and University*, p.54). We know for certain that Witherspoon was not one of the seven ministers tasked with the *Answers* by the Commission (*Annals 1739-1752*, p.230). Indeed, Witherspoon was not even a delegate to the 1752 Assembly. Moreover, Witherspoon’s patronage-related *Dissent* of 1760 does not sound much like the *Answers* of 1752. Finally, Witherspoon never mentions any involvement in the 1752 manifesto when explaining his reasons for *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* or when recounting (by satirical analogy) the turbulence of the 1750s in *Corporation of Servants*. McIntosh is on safer ground: while the Moderate *Dissent* was likely authored by one man (Robertson), the Popular Party *Answers* was the work of a committee that did not include Witherspoon (*McIntosh, Church and Theology*, pp.104-5).
144 *Annals 1752-1766*, p.106 (see pp.102-8 for the entire *Dissent*).
145 Ibid., pp.242-43.
146 Ibid., pp.312-13.
On the most consequential matters, Witherspoon took his share of denominational blows, as when the 1763 Assembly received a protestation from the Presbytery of Paisley against his actions in the Snodgrass Affair, or when the 1760 Assembly once again forced a ministerial settlement that the local presbytery was unwilling to carry out. Against this latter action, Witherspoon gave a lengthy speech on the floor, arguing against the tyranny of patronage. He readily acknowledged that patronage was the law, and the law must be obeyed. No one was asking for the right for church members to call whomever they wanted to the church. But Witherspoon countered that people should not have a minister forced upon them. Unless there is no other recourse, churches should be able to welcome ministers they are eager to receive. If we want “total indifference about religion among all members of the Established Church,” Witherspoon stated in a moment of sarcastic scorn, “take our neighbor country of England as an example of that desirable peace.” Scotland was no place for Chalmers’ “ambition and open solicitation of ecclesiastical preferment.” As Witherspoon argued in closing: “I shall be sorry to see the day, when by resembling them in their practice, we shall learn from England to leave the people and the work altogether out of the act, and so call our charges no more parishes but livings.” If theological reasoning would not persuade the Assembly, perhaps bashing the English would.

The problem with the Church of Scotland, however, was not simply patronage, but, as Witherspoon saw it, moral degeneracy, theological indifferentism, and rank hypocrisy. And so he attacked disingenuous subscription to the Westminster Confession in *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753), the impiety of worldly entertainment in *A Serious Inquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage* (1757), and the disregard for pointing out doctrinal error in *An Inquiry Into the Scripture Meaning of Charity* (1758). Later, Witherspoon published *The History of the Corporation of Servants* (1765), a satirical homage to Robertson’s *The History of Scotland* (1759) in which a long-lost people in the interior parts of South America are increasingly mistreated by lazy, deceptive servants (i.e., pastors) who work for a corporation (i.e., the Church of Scotland) incapable of reforming itself. For Witherspoon, the history of the Kirk had been a fall

147 Ibid., p.200-1, 262. The Assembly voted to “transport” Dr. John Chalmers from Elie to Kilconquhar.
149 Ibid., 4:278.
150 Ibid., 4:279.
from grace since the days of the courageous Covenanters in 1638.\footnote{“A Serious Apology,” \textit{Works}, 3:309-10; cf. “Prayer for National Prosperity and for the Revival of Religion Inseparably Connected,” \textit{Works}, 2:476.} “May I not say without offence,” Witherspoon remarked before the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr, “that an eminent, holy, diligent, and successful gospel ministry was once the glory and blessing of this part of the united kingdom! But how are we since fallen asleep! ‘How is the gold become dim! How is the most fine gold changed!’”\footnote{“The Trial of Religious Truth by its Moral Influence,” \textit{Works}, 2:407-8.} Or as Witherspoon put it in his Fast Day sermon eighteen months earlier, Scotland needed the glory of God to be displayed “in an eminent and remarkable revival of religion among all ranks.”\footnote{“Prayer for National Prosperity and for the Revival of Religion Inseparably Connected,” \textit{Works}, 2:474.} The Lord had stretched out his mighty hand before, in the days of the Reformation and at the signing of the National Covenant. At just the right time, when “truth seemed to be fallen in the streets,” God “enabled a few plain men, lovers of the truth, to assert, to defend and to spread it.”\footnote{Ibid., 2:476.} Witherspoon saw himself as one of those plain men, speaking the truth no matter the cost. After all, as Witherspoon said in his last sermon before setting sail across the Atlantic, “No faithful minister can expect to be without enemies.”\footnote{“Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” \textit{Works}, 2:538.}

But of course, Witherspoon’s remnant theology was not entirely accurate. Although Witherspoon faced a number of challenges, and issued a myriad of complaints, within the changing landscape of the mid-eighteenth-century Kirk, it would be a mistake to paint the Paisley minister as some sort of ecclesiastical outcast. Despite fierce opposition from some Moderate ministers and more denominational defeats than victories, Witherspoon was still a member of the Kirk’s elite. His books were popular. He was courted by various congregations. He preached at St Giles’ and before the High Commissioner.\footnote{Annals 1739-1752, p.336.} He was elected moderator of his synod. He received an honorary degree from St. Andrews. Even the Snodgrass Affair, as Crawford concedes, did nothing to alter Witherspoon’s high standing in Paisley, or even in Scotland more generally.\footnote{Crawford, \textit{Lost World}, p.80.} That Witherspoon was almost constantly battling foes and engaged in ecclesiastical controversy says as much about Witherspoon as it does about the Kirk. Although a mediating voice in intramural disputes within the world of evangelical Calvinism, when it came to the Church of Scotland, Witherspoon was often polemical and routinely pessimistic. The glory of Scotland’s Christian heritage had grown dim, and too many
ministers were all too willing to keep up the veneer of traditional religion, without any of the old-time power. In Witherspoon’s mind, his beloved Kirk was in danger of squandering its Reformation inheritance for a compromised mess of polite pottage.
Chapter Four

“An Age in which Infidelity Greatly Prevails”
Witherspoon and the Enlightenment

Because Witherspoon’s most famous Scottish work (*Ecclesiastical Characteristics*) seems to lampoon so much of the Enlightenment ethos, while his most famous American work (*Lectures on Moral Philosophy*) seems to embrace so much of the Enlightenment’s philosophical foundations, scholars have tended to analyze Witherspoon’s intellectual contribution through the lens of Enlightenment categories. So Witherspoon was against the Enlightenment and then for it, or he was really much more influenced by it even when he seemed to be against it, or he was simply muddleheaded all the way through from Scotland to America. It is surely significant that almost every major book dealing with Witherspoon’s intellectual contribution in Scotland has the word Enlightenment in the title.\(^1\) The problem, of course, is not in trying to situate Witherspoon in his eighteenth-century context. Rather, the danger is that we let a contemporary curiosity—was he for the Enlightenment, against it, neither, or both?—determine the shape of historical investigation.

The simple answer is that while in Scotland, Witherspoon strongly opposed the infidelity of David Hume, the sheltering of Lord Kames, the urbane worldliness of John Home, and the direction Moderate ministers like William Robertson were taking the Kirk. If they represented the Enlightenment (or at least the Scottish Enlightenment), Witherspoon was against it. And yet, Witherspoon would not have thought in such grand abstractions. No one even spoke of the “Scottish Enlightenment” until 1900.\(^2\) We will misread Witherspoon if we see him as an Enlightenment thinker for this “ism” or against that school of thought, instead of seeing him as a pastor trying to defend traditional belief against powerful forces inside and outside the church who, by Witherspoon’s reckoning, were undermining Scotland’s brave ecclesiastical history and rich doctrinal heritage.

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2 The term was coined by William Robert Scott in his book on Francis Hutcheson (see Alexander Broadie [ed.], *The Cambridge Companion to the Scottish Enlightenment* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003], p.3).
Witherspoon did not publish his views unaware of the men he was critiquing. His interaction with key Enlightenment ideas and the leading Enlightenment figures in Scotland was intensely personal and pastoral. Consider the five men Sher identifies as the “Moderate literati of Edinburgh”: Hugh Blair (1718-1800), William Robertson (1721-1793), Alexander Carlyle (1722-1805), John Home (1722-1808), and Adam Ferguson (1723-1816). Four of the five would become parish ministers like Witherspoon (Ferguson was a chaplain). Three of the five (Robertson, Carlyle, and Ferguson) were, like Witherspoon, sons of Kirk ministers (Blair and Home had other ministerial connections in their lineage). All except Ferguson went to the University of Edinburgh, where Witherspoon and the four future Moderate ministers did their undergraduate and divinity studies together. There they would have studied classics with John Kerr, logic with John Stevenson, mathematics with Colin Maclaurin, and moral philosophy with John Pringle. In their ministerial training they would have all sat under William Wishart Jr., John Gowdie and Patrick Cuming. It is little wonder that Witherspoon marched against the Young Pretender like his classmates did, or that he was loyal to the established church as they were, or that all of them were conversant with the same Reformed tradition and the same philosophical ideas coming from the British Isles and the rest of Europe. Witherspoon and his Moderate opponents not only grew up in the same kind of families, went to many of the same schools, and entered the same profession, they knew each other since they were teenagers. Indeed, Carlyle and Witherspoon grew up as friends even before that.

None of this is to suggest Witherspoon was motivated by jealousy or personal animus. But it is to remind us that Witherspoon’s polemical instincts were kindled by concerns that were local and ecclesiastical, not merely intellectual and theoretical. He

3 Witherspoon received his Master of Arts on February 26, 1739 upon successfully defending his dissertation De Mentis Immortalitate. Although Witherspoon’s Latin thesis on the immortality of the mind is in itself unremarkable (he was only 16 years old at the time), it shows him to be well taught by John Stevenson in philosophical disputation and familiar with classical authors like Herodotus, Plutarch, Strabo, Plato, and Cicero. An English translation can be found in George Rich, “John Witherspoon: His Scottish Intellectual Background” (Ph.D. dissertation: Syracuse University, 1964), pp.157-67.

4 Sher, Church and University, pp.23-36; Sloan, Scottish Enlightenment and American College Ideal, pp.2-35; Jack C. Whytock, “An Educated Clergy”: Scottish Theological Education and Training in the Kirk and Session, 1560-1850 (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2001), pp.400-1.

5 Daniel Robinson wrongly concludes that Witherspoon’s opposition to the Jacobite uprising in 1745 presaged the theological disputes he was about to enter with the Moderate Party in the Kirk (“Witherspoon, Scottish Philosophy and the American Founding”, The Journal of Scottish Philosophy, 13, no.3 (2015), p.252. Robertson, Home, and Carlyle joined the College Company of Edinburgh Volunteers to fight against Bonnie Prince Charlie just as Witherspoon marched with the militia from Beith (Sher, Church and University, pp.37-44).
was a precocious brawler more than a dispassionate academician. And the ecclesiastical beatings he took in the 1750s and 60s bruised him more than he let on.

If Witherspoon’s intellectual climate was strikingly personal, it was also relentlessly pastoral. Whatever Enlightenment Witherspoon participated in, it was not an Enlightenment that was anti-clerical or anti-Christian. As Sher points out, the leading lights in the Scottish Enlightenment were middle class and upper middle class professional men. They were not bohemians, pantheists, free thinkers, revolutionaries, or otherwise alienated intellectuals. They were elite members of society, serving key roles in law, education, and the Church. The Moderate literati were, like Witherspoon, fundamentally Presbyterian churchmen. When Witherspoon tangled (directly or indirectly) with Hutcheson, Hume, or Kames, it was in the interest of pointing out theological deviance and protecting the integrity of the Kirk. And when Witherspoon used a line from Tillotson, Burnet, or Mandeville, it was toward the same end. Witherspoon was neither a misanthropic Calvinist caricature nor a conflicted Enlightenment philosopher. He was an orthodox Reformed theologian defending his doctrinal heritage and a traditional Presbyterian pastor who worried that the Moderate men he had known for years were misleading the faithful and providing cover for infidels.

Both phrases above are important for understanding Witherspoon’s relationship to the Enlightenment. We will first examine Witherspoon the orthodox Reformed theologian, exploring his views in three related areas: (1) the role of the conscience or the moral sense, (2) the use of reason, and (3) the nature of true virtue and true religion. Then we will seek to understand Witherspoon the traditional Presbyterian pastor by analyzing three polemical works directed at leading Enlightenment figures and their sympathizers: (1) the critique of Lord Kames in the *Scots Magazine*, (2) the lampooning of the Moderates in *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, and (3) the satire of William Robertson and the Church of Scotland in *The History of a Corporation of Servants*.

**A Case of Conscience**

Like the English Puritans, and consistent with typical Scottish preaching, Witherspoon had a prominent role for the conscience in his theology. He saw the conscience as an

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6 Sher, *Church and University*, 10-11.
innate moral sense: “a real and strong conviction of the obligation of the law of God upon every rational creature, which cannot be taken away.” Witherspoon believed the best means for drawing a sinner away from his sin was to show him the awful effects of displeasing God. Contrary to Douglas Sloan’s assertion that Witherspoon emphasized the conscience because he “came to stress moral conduct more than conversion itself,” Witherspoon preached to the conscience so that the sinner might be converted. In general, he expected the condemnation of natural conscience to do its work and hoped that as people became convicted of sin they would see their need for a Savior.

But Witherspoon was not naïve about the potential for the conscience to misfire or be overpowered. The conscience was not perfect. It could lead the unbeliever to put away the grossest crimes and live a decent life, while the one under conviction does nothing but take up religion as an outward form. The conscience may awaken sinners to “a legal sort of obedience,” but this “is not the same as being renewed in the spirit of their minds.” For true repentance to occur,” Witherspoon wrote in his Treatise on Regeneration, “the sinner must discover the infinite glory and amiability of the divine nature.” At other times, the force of conscience is overwhelmed and the sinner remains at peace with himself. As Witherspoon explains in his sermon The Deceitfulness of Sin, “Though the great lines of the law of God are written upon the conscience in so strong and legible characters, that it is difficult wholly to efface them, yet it is plain that men have often brought this about to a surprising degree.” And in the worst instances, the man convicted of sin, instead of turning from his iniquity, turns away from all religion in an effort to quiet his conscience.

Witherspoon’s most comprehensive treatment of the conscience can be found in the sermon he preached before the Synod of Glasgow and Ayr on October 9, 1759. The sermon, entitled The Trial of Religious Truth by its Moral Influence, was based on Jesus’s

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(The Culture of Protestantism, 48-56). It is worth noting that though he stands in continuity with the Puritans on this issue, Witherspoon does not cite them directly.

10 Sloan, Scottish Enlightenment and American College Ideal, p.136.
12 Ibid., 1:332.
13 “The World Crucified by the Cross of Christ,” Works, 1:433-34.
15 Ibid., 1:210-11.

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promise in the Sermon on the Mount: “Wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them” (Matt. 7:20). In the address Witherspoon accords the conscience a lofty role as the arbiter between good and evil and between truth and error. “For this is the very excellence of the rule laid down by our Saviour,” he says toward the start of this long message, “that though reason may be very unfit to pass an independent judgment upon truth and error, conscience may, with little danger of mistake, reject what is evil approbation to what is good.” Later he argues that “moral influence is the proper touchstone and trial of religious truth. These doctrines only come from God, which tend to form us after the divine image.” So great is Witherspoon’s confidence in the conscience that he concludes: “this rule of trying a doctrine by its effects, as a tree by its fruits, may be applied by the meanest as well as the greatest, and with as little danger of mistake.”

This confidence, however, is not without significant caveats. For starters, Witherspoon takes for granted that he is speaking to a Christian people in a Christian nation: “But what I have chiefly in view is, that supposing the truth of the gospel in general, particular opinions and practices must be tried in this manner.” In other words, the conscience by itself cannot make us Christians, but in Presbyterian Scotland it could tell you see what beliefs and behaviors were Christian or not. Witherspoon also presupposes he is dealing with serious and sincere people. Judging religious truth by its moral influence requires fair-minded persons, not scoffers and hypocrites. Most crucially, Witherspoon’s confidence in the conscience is for judging the fruit of others, not for judging our own hearts:

But it is of importance in the present argument to observe, that every one is able to pass a far surer judgment on the moral character of another, than of his own. The pollution of the heart brings a corrupt bias on the judgment in a man’s own case, and makes him palliate and defend those sins to which he is strongly inclined, or of which he hath been already guilty: whereas in determining the characters of others, this bias is less sensibly felt.

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20 Ibid., 2:388. He goes on to say, “Reason may convince the understanding, but example seizes and keeps possession of the heart” (2:398).
21 Ibid., 2:390.
22 Ibid., 2:393.
23 Ibid., 2:388.
24 Ibid., 2:395.
In other words, among generally decent people familiar with the gospel, the conscience can be relied upon to tell us which people (besides ourselves) and which practices (besides our own) are pleasing to God and worth emulating.

This understanding of the conscience provided Witherspoon with support for many of his most foundational and most strongly held convictions. Systems of moral virtue dependent upon “philosophical speculation” and “deductions of reason [that] are long and involved” will never be as useful as “the dictates of conscience” because the latter are “immediate and clear” and more “universally intelligible.”

Better to preach the gospel and call people to faith and repentance than to burden people with “an unsubstantiated theory of virtue.” By using the conscience to test the validity of religious faith and practice Witherspoon expected his audience to see that godly Christians in different denominations with different polities and different worship patterns were united around the essentials of the gospel. By the same test, he concluded that “great multitudes though born in a country where Christianity is professed” lived as enemies of the gospel and “ought rather to be thrown into the scale of infidelity.”

According to Witherspoon, even men like Anthony Collins (1676-1729) and Lord Shaftesbury (1671-1713), who had reputations for unblemished morals, proved their religious bankruptcy by subscribing to creeds and confessions they obviously did not believe. The fault of Collins (a freethinker) and Shaftesbury (a religious skeptic) was “their solemnly receiving the holy sacrament, to qualify themselves for bearing office in their country, though they believed it to be altogether imposture and deceit.”

In his sermon, Witherspoon referenced the 1757 debate over Assembly commissions and argued that if it happened in “one of the dark and corrupt ages of popery” that ministers signed off on elder commissions they knew to be false, surely the people then would see

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27 Ibid., 2:410.
28 Ibid., 2:394, 396, 404.
29 Ibid., 2:402.
30 Ibid., 2:404; cf. 2:409. Given their offices—Collins was justice of the peace and deputy lieutenant for Essex, while Shaftesbury was a member of Parliament, a vice-admiral for Dorset, and an Earl—both men would have been required to make a profession of Christian faith. While Collins and Shaftesbury may not have agreed to the charge of “imposture and deceit,” there is no doubt they wrote against elements of orthodox Christianity. Shaftesbury, for example, boasted (tongue-in-cheek) of conforming to the orthodox faith “in their minutest Particulars” while at the same time owning the labels skeptical and free-thinker (Characteristics, 3:193). Witherspoon’s criticisms may have relied, in part, on John Leland’s fifth and sixth letters (dealing with Shaftesbury and Collins respectively) in which both men are criticized for their opposition to Christianity. Shaftesbury is explicitly chided for his “pretended veneration and submission to the holy writ by public authority established” (A View of the Principal Deistical Writers [London: B. Dod, 1754], pp.69-125 [quotation on p.83]).
what a contemptible thing had been done. The conscience was not foolproof, but Witherspoon had enough confidence in the law written on the human heart to think that if people would only look at the beliefs and behaviors of Christians from all denominations (including their own) they would see who were real friends of the gospel and who were its enemies.

Witherspoon’s understanding of the conscience should not be confused with Hutcheson’s notion of moral sense, even if Witherspoon sometimes employed the familiar philosophical terminology. Already in Scotland, Witherspoon was operating with the understanding he would later make explicit in America: “The moral sense is precisely the same thing with what, in scripture and common language, we call conscience. It is the law which our Maker has written upon our hearts, and both intimates and enforces duty, previous to all reasoning.” Sense is more of a technical term for Hutcheson. We have a moral sense just like we have our other five senses. It is “a Determination of the Mind, to receive any Idea from the Presence of an Object, which occurs to us independent of our Will.” The last phrase is key. A blue sky does not look blue by reason of our will, nor does sugar smell sweet because we reason it to be so. These sense perceptions are received apart from our determination, prior to rational deliberation, and free from the taint of self-interest. The “simple Ideas of Approbation and Condemnation” well up within us unbidden, instinctively, and reflexively, “antecedent to any Opinions of Advantage or Loss to redound to ourselves from them.”

When Francis Hutcheson published An Inquiry into the Original of our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue (1725), he was trying to defend Shaftesbury’s sentimentalist moral theory against the more pessimistic views of Mandeville and Hobbes. Instead of seeing human action as motivated by self-preservation (Hobbes) or self-interest (Mandeville), Hutcheson argued that we have a natural bent toward benevolence. While Shaftesbury may have used the language of Stoicism, where Hutcheson employed a more distinctly religious vocabulary, their ideas were similar. What Shaftesbury introduced, Hutcheson

31 Ibid., 2:411.
34 Hutcheson, Inquiry into the Original, p.100. The first half of the quotation about “Aprobation and Condemnation” comes from the third and fourth edition (p.221).
defined and developed: a universal moral sense based on disinterested benevolent feelings and desires.\textsuperscript{35}

Witherspoon’s appeal to the conscience does not share Hutcheson’s rosy picture of human nature, nor is it willing to trade rational moral deliberation for subservience to the passions.\textsuperscript{36} The conscience and the moral sense were overlapping categories, but not identical. Although Hutcheson later sought to bring the two closer together, authors as diverse as David Fordyce, Lord Kames, and Thomas Reid objected to Hutcheson’s theory as relying too much on the passions and having too little place for the role of divine authority and a sense of duty.\textsuperscript{37} Witherspoon agreed with these objections, arguing that moral sentiment carries with it a sense of obligation that must be followed “independent of happiness.”\textsuperscript{38} In short, there was no single “Scottish philosophy” for Witherspoon to imbibe, either of sentimentalism or Common Sense. Instead, there were competing ideas inhabiting the same intellectual space and working from the same points of departure. Rather than looking for Hutchesonian antecedents to Witherspoon’s thought, it is better to see Witherspoon as belonging to a long (albeit evolving) tradition of Reformed theologians who made liberal use of the conscience in their preaching and devotional writing.\textsuperscript{39}

**Reason in Service of Religion**

In keeping with the convictions of Late Reformed Orthodoxy, reason also plays a prominent role in Witherspoon’s writings. If conscience is the law of God upon every human heart, reason is what we use to observe the natural world around us. “I am sensible,” Witherspoon said from the pulpit, “that nothing but an inward and personal conviction of guilt and misery wrought by the Spirit of the living God will bring the sinner to embrace the gospel; yet the necessity of salvation may be evinced in the clearest

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., pp.101-115. In the third and fourth edition, Hutcheson states, “There is in human nature a disinterested ultimate desire of the happiness of others” (p.229).

\textsuperscript{36} Both Howe and Ahnert echo the point about Witherspoon favoring ethical rationalism over sentimentalist theories See Howe, p.71; Thomas Ahnert, “Clergymen as Polite Philosophers: Doulgas and the Conflict Between Moderates and Orthodox in the Scottish Enlightenment”, *Intellectual History Review*, 18, no.3 (2008), p.378.


\textsuperscript{39} To cite just one example, the French pastor Jean la Place (1629-1718) authored a three-volume manual on the conscience entitled *The Christian Casuist: Or, a Treatise of the Conscience* (London: A. and J. Churchill, 1705). At the time of his death, Witherspoon had more books by La Place— including this one— than by any other author.
and most satisfactory manner, by reason and observation.”

To be sure, we need the Holy Spirit to be born again, but reason can help “stop the mouths of gain-sayers” and “establish the faith of God’s children.” In another sermon, Witherspoon explains that God has revealed himself to us in three ways: the visible creation, his written word, and the daily administration of providence. The works of nature teach us by reason, the written word teaches us by revelation, and the acts of providence teach us by feeling in our own experience. The three means of instruction are all valuable, and the believer will use them to know God and his ways.

As was common among Popular writers of every shade, Witherspoon believed natural religion had a role to play in communicating religious truth and defending true religion. Reason and revelation—that is, observation of the natural world and the testimony of Scripture—were complementary not contradictory. By looking at rampant sin in every society we can find evidence for human depravity. But noting the ubiquitous presence of sacrificial systems in the ancient world we can demonstrate that man knows he is sinful and in need of a savior. Reason is first and foremost an apologetic tool. The minister must “bend the force of his will against self-righteousness, whether we take this from scripture or from reason.”

At the beginning of A Practical Treatise on Regeneration, Witherspoon explains his aims as a writer—not just for this work, but arguably for his entire ministry:

43 Ibid., 1:508-9. Similarly, the Belgic Confession (1561) says we know God by “the creation, preservation, and government of the universe” and “more openly, by his holy and divine Word” (Art. 2). Turretin once referred to “a threefold book” of God: “of the creature, of Scripture and of life” (Elenctic, I.i.9).
44 McIntosh makes this point about the Popular Party (Church and Theology, p.36). Later he argues that their use of natural religion was not owing to Moderate influence (p.38; cf. pp.233-34). Likewise, Ahnert claims that the “positions of Moderates and the orthodox on natural religion, are, essentially, the reverse of what they are usually thought to be” (Moral Culture, p.96). The Moderates were not more “enlightened” in their use of reason (p.93). In fact, they used arguments from natural theology less frequently than did evangelical ministers. Orthodox Calvinists defended a more extensive idea of natural religion because they saw reason, however insufficient it was to save the sinner’s soul, as not only preparing the unbeliever for the gospel but also teaching him enough about God and his law so as to render him inexcusable (pp.50, 94-95).
45 Marilyn Westerkamp wrongly argues that piety and reason were competing forces within the Kirk and within Calvinism. Her contention that evangelicals preached free grace and downplayed exhortations to godly living, while moderates emphasized rational theology and subduing one’s sinful passions through enlightened reason, is a superficial reading of both positions (Marilyn J. Westerkamp, Triumph of the Laity: Scots-Irish Piety and the Great Awakening 1625-1760 [New York: OUP, 1988], p.82).
I pray that God may enable me to write upon this interesting subject in a clear, intelligent and convincing manner; to support the truth from the evidence of scripture and reason; to resolve in a satisfying manner any objections that may seem to lie against it; but, above all, to carry it home with a persuasive force upon the conscience and heart.  

That was Witherspoon’s consistent aim: to use reason as an ally of Scripture to press the truth of God upon the inner workings of the soul. He knew the truth of God was often contrary to the spirit of the world and that presenting the gospel in a clear and convincing manner was no guarantee anyone would actually be convinced. Marred by sin, we can view the faultless frame of nature in faulty ways. And yet, the sciences could be “handmaids to theology” and “turned into a divine channel.” In Witherspoon’s mind, Christianity had nothing to fear from rational observation on the natural work. Reason was not king, but in service to the King it could be extremely useful.

Witherspoon’s confidence—albeit a qualified confidence—in the conscience and in reason has sometimes been misunderstood as enthusiasm for Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid. Fred J. Hood maintains that Witherspoon’s use of reason as an ally to religion showed “Witherspoon was a vigorous exponent of the Scottish philosophy of common sense” and “a product of the Enlightenment.” Likewise, John C. Vander Stelt sees Witherspoon’s belief in the complementary roles of reason and revelation as proof of the latter’s uncritical allegiance to Common Sense philosophy and the acceptance of a stultifying rationalism. Gordon Tait looks at the reference to “reason” in Witherspoon’s sermons and concludes that “he was beginning to think in terms of his later common sense philosophy.” Such blanket statements not only effectively ignore Witherspoon’s Scottish ministry—most of which took place before Reid’s An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense was published in 1764—they also overlook the many antecedents to Witherspoon’s thought in Reformed Orthodoxy of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

50 “The Deceitfulness of Sin,” Works, 2:44.
55 See, for example, Samuel Rutherford’s blend of secular and religious arguments in Lex, Rex (John Coffey, Politics, Religion and the British Revolutions: The Mind of Samuel Rutherford [Cambridge:
At the beginning of his *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Francis Turretin posits an elaborate system of theological divisions. True theology consists of knowledge that is archetypal (that which God has of himself) and ectypal (that which God communicates to his creatures). One branch of ectypal theology is revealed knowledge, what God communicates to his creatures during their earthly pilgrimage. This revealed theology can be further divided into natural theology, which corresponds to the light of reason, and supernatural theology, which corresponds to the light of faith. Although Turretin means for his *Elenctic Theology* to examine supernatural theology as revealed in the Scriptures, he understands every branch of true theology to possess an underlying unity, since they are but different ways—some superior to others—in which the same God is made known.\(^{56}\)

Against the Socinians, Turretin argues for the legitimacy of natural theology.\(^{57}\) That God reveals himself in the book of conscience (innate knowledge) and from the book of creatures (acquired knowledge) is taught in Scripture (Psalm 19:1; Acts 14:15-17; 17:23; Rom. 1:19, 20; 2:14, 15) and confirmed by universal experience and the institution of religions in the world.\(^{58}\) Man is not an absolute *tabula rasa*. Even when men deny God’s existence, there are still remnants of the *imago Dei* and the law of God written on our hearts.\(^{59}\) In other words, from within ourselves and from observing the outside world, we can know true things about God—not enough to save, but enough to render men culpable for their unbelief.\(^{60}\)

In the same vein, Turretin admonishes the Christian to avoid “two extremes” when it comes to the use of philosophy in theology. “Although every truth cannot be demonstrated by reason (the boundaries of truth being much more widely extended than those of reason), yet no lie against the truth can be sheltered under the protection of true reason, nor can one truth be destroyed by another.”\(^{61}\) Turretin allows for the qualified use of reason and philosophy in the service of theology. “Grace,” Turretin maintains, “does not destroy nature, but makes it perfect. Nor does the supernatural revelation

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\(^{56}\) *Elenctic*, Lii.5-9.

\(^{57}\) *Elenctic*, Liii.1-4.

\(^{58}\) *Elenctic*, Liii.4-8.

\(^{59}\) *Elenctic*, Liii.9-14.

\(^{60}\) *Elenctic*, Liv.1-23; cf. Liii.3.

\(^{61}\) *Elenctic*, Lxiii.3.

abrogate the natural, but makes it sure.”62 Reason serves a valuable purpose in convincing unbelievers of their mistakes, confirming truths seen in nature, making rational judgments, and preparing the mind for the things of God. Philosophy should not be “regarded as a mistress,” but it can be a useful “handmaid.”63

The judgments reached by Turretin regarding reason, philosophy, and natural religion are substantially the same points taught by Pictet. While it is true that Pictet—who begins his system with proofs for the existence of God—absorbed more of Cartesian philosophy than Turretin, Pictet’s theology is still a long way off from the rationalistic natural theology put forth by the younger, less confessional Turretin.64 What we find in Pictet is, by and large, what was espoused earlier by Francis Turretin and what would be assumed later by Witherspoon.65 Pictet affirmed natural theology and divided it into the usual categories of innate and acquired knowledge.66 He believed the biblical depiction of God’s justice could be confirmed by the “dictates of conscience” in the inner man and by the “consent of all nations” which have approached God as a judge to be appeased.67 He distinguished between natural revelation, which was insufficient to save, and a supernatural revelation found in Scripture. In a familiar step, Pictet went on to argue that “Although the two systems differ from each other in the mode of revelation, in the number of things revealed, in their perspicuity and effects, yet are they in strict harmony, and render each other mutual service.”68 Like Turretin, Pictet upheld Scripture as the only rule of faith, without viewing reason as opposed to faith. Indeed, he acknowledged that reason has many uses.69 “There is a wonderful harmony between sound philosophy and divinity,” Pictet argued, “for truth is not contrary to truth, nor light to light.”70

To be sure, there are differences of emphasis and methodology among Turretin, Pictet, and Witherspoon. Turretin is more scholastic than Pictet. Pictet is less guarded in

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62 _Elenctic_, I.xiii.5. The Thomistic maxim “Grace does not destroy nature but perfects it” was key to Samuel Rutherford’s insistence in _Lex, Rex_ that reason and revelation were not contradictory but compatible (Coffey, _Mind of Samuel Rutherford_, pp.152-57). According to Rutherford, “Scripture’s arguments may be well drawn out of the school of nature” (_Lex, Rex: The Law and the Prince_ [London: John Field, 1644], p.5).
63 _Elenctic_, I.xiii.5.
64 _CT_, pp.17-20 (I.i.1-10); cf. _PRRD_ 1:145-46, 300-1, 305-7. Although he does not begin his system with proofs for the existence of God, Francis Turretin also affirms that “the existence of God [can] be irrefutably demonstrated against atheists” (_Elenctic_, III.i.1-28).
65 As Howe put it, “In his use of reason to justify religion, Witherspoon could draw inspiration from a Genevan Calvinist theologian named Benedict Pictet (1655-1724)” (p.69).
66 _CT_, 21 (I.i.1-4).
67 _CT_, 60 (II.viii.4).
68 _CT_, 23 (I.iii.5).
69 _CT_, 59 (I.xiv.8).
70 _CT_, 60 (I.xiv.10).
his use of natural theology than Turretin. And Witherspoon, whose theological writings in Scotland were more ad hoc and devotional than comprehensive and professorial, is less sophisticated than both. We have already seen how Pictet deliberately attempted a “system of didactic theology” that left out many obscure controversies and taught the truth “simply and plainly.”\textsuperscript{71} In this Witherspoon followed his Edinburgh textbook quite closely, preferring the “experimental” to the “speculative” and believing that “to explain and enforce the doctrines of the gospel is a better way to produce an unshaken persuasion of their truth, than to collect and refute the cavils of adversaries.”\textsuperscript{72} In the same vein, years later William Wilberforce would commend Witherspoon’s writings because they drew from the older Reformation divines but managed to produce “the same sentiments at a less expense of time and trouble; relieved not only from their prolixity, but sometimes from their obscurity, by the omission of those numerous subdivisions with which the works of our older divines so generally abounded.”\textsuperscript{73} But unlike Turretin and Pictet, Witherspoon was not a systematician, at least not during his Scottish career. He was a pastor who inherited a theological tradition which he gladly received, defended when necessary, and eagerly employed for his own apologetic purposes. As a minister in the Kirk, Witherspoon espoused no great theory of natural religion, much less a novel philosophical method. Natural theology—with its qualified confidence in the conscience and its qualified use of reason—was a means to an end. It was not on par with Scripture and was always subject to the judgments of Scripture. But if natural theology could expose the inconsistencies of scoffers, establish the faith of the Christian, prepare unbelievers for the gospel, and fend off the foolishness of infidelity, then reason could play a valuable role in the service of true religion.

The Nature of True Virtue and True Religion

As the emphasis in eighteenth-century thought shifted from theological doctrine to moral conduct, both Enlightenment thinkers and ecclesiastical thinkers (not mutually exclusive categories) wrestled with interlocking questions regarding true virtue and true religion.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71} CT, vii (Praefatio).
\textsuperscript{72} John Witherspoon, A Practical Treatise on Regeneration (London: Edward and Charles Dilly, 1764), Preface.
\textsuperscript{73} See Wilberforce’s “Introductory Essay” in John Witherspoon, Treatises on Justification and Regeneration (Glasgow: William Collins, 1830), p.x.
\textsuperscript{74} See, for example, Ahnert, Moral Culture, pp.1-16. Ahnert argues that Enlightened clergy focused on morality not because they meant to reject revealed religion, but because the legacy of Protestant solafideism had resulted in the downplaying of ethical obligation. While Ahnert is surely right to draw
How much religious commitment (or even awareness) was necessary for moral conduct to be considered truly virtuous? And was theological orthodoxy a sufficient condition (or even a necessary condition) for the establishment of true religion? From a theological view, both questions had to do with faith and good works. From a philosophical standpoint, the issues were related to moral sense, the affections, and the capacity for beneficence. On both sets of issues, Witherspoon argued for traditional Reformed conclusions, though with an awareness that there were new ideas to address (and sometimes employ) in his era of enlightenment and awakening.

The ideas on moral sense from Shaftesbury and Hutcheson were controversial not only because they offered a sunnier view of human nature, but because they tried to distance virtue itself from direct religious dependence. The shift, as Bruce Hindmarsh describes it, “was from morality as obedience owed to God in accordance with his revealed will, to morality as self-governance and the exercise of responsible moral agency in the world.” Hutcheson, for example, argued against the notion that for an action to be virtuous, “it is necessary that the Agent should have previously known his Action to be acceptable to the Deity, and have undertaken it chiefly with design to please or obey him.” If right notions of God were necessary to render an action truly virtuous, then the best of men—who often give no thought to pleasing God—would be “infinitely evil.” Hutcheson could not accept this logic, arguing instead that, “The bare Absence of the idea of a Deity, or of Affections to him, can evidence no evil; otherways it would be a Crime to fall asleep, or to think of any thing else.”

To suggest that all virtuous affections must be directed toward God meant, for Hutcheson, discounting natural affections and man’s innate capacity for disinterested benevolence. Hutcheson considered traditional conclusions about moral inability to go against our own observations of the natural world, conclusions that arose “from the long subtle Reasonings of Men at leisure.” It is not hard to detect here (an unstated) disdain for theological doctrine that goes against the more enlightened reasonings of moral

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attention to this theological root, we should bear in mind that Reformed theologians had been wary of antinomianism for centuries and that the controversies surrounding justification by faith alone and the necessity of good works were not new to the eighteenth century.

77 Ibid., 201.
78 Ibid., 204.
philosophy. Little wonder, then, that Hutcheson, together with James Moor (1712-79), translated *The Meditations of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus* (1742) and presented the Stoic philosopher as a model of virtue.\(^7\) To be sure, Hutcheson did not want to do away with the Deity. He acknowledged that when gratitude toward our universal Benefactor was not the strongest and most prevalent affection that virtue would be imperfect, inconstant, and partial. Nevertheless, natural man was still capable of true virtue: “*particular Actions* may be innocent, nay virtuous, where there is no actual *Intention* of pleasing the DEITY, influencing the Agent.”\(^8\) In other words, man could be good without an eye toward God.

No doubt, Witherspoon had these arguments in mind when his satirical Athenian Creed mocked “the saintship of Marcus Antoninus” and declared that “there is no ill in the universe” and “those things vulgarly called sins are only errors in the judgment, and foils to set off the beauty of Nature.”\(^8\) Witherspoon was willing to grant that some degree of love to mankind is naturally implanted in every heart.\(^9\) We can observe “good dispositions” and “good actions” in the unregenerate.\(^9\) We can even acknowledge a “human virtue” whereby man may “habitate himself to some degree of self-denial,” and possess some measure of “decency,” “sobriety and moderation.” But this comparatively virtuous person must not be confused with the truly religious believer who has been given a new nature and a gracious state.\(^10\) “I know it is pleasing and gratifying to human pride,” Witherspoon maintained, “to talk of the dignity of human nature, and the beauty of moral virtue; and if it be done in such a manner as to make us esteem the only mean of recovering our lofty integrity and original glory, I have no objection to it.” And yet, we should be careful not to ascribe too much to our natural state. “If it be spoken of man,” Witherspoon continued, “as he now is without regenerating grace, I am certain it is more agreeable to reason and experience to say, that from the lengths to which some have proceeded, when placed in circumstances of temptation, it is owing to the power of restraining providence, that others have been comparatively somewhat better.”\(^11\)

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12 Ibid., 1:116.
In keeping with confessional Presbyterian categories, Witherspoon affirmed that unregenerate men were capable of doing external good, even as they were incapable of doing anything truly virtuous in God’s sight. According to the Westminster Confession of Faith, “Works done by unregenerate men, although for the matter of them they may be things which God commands; and of good use both to themselves and others: yet, because they proceed not from a heart purified by faith; nor are done in a right manner, according to the Word; nor to a right end, the glory of God, they are therefore sinful, and cannot please God” (WCF 16.7). These are the same points made by Pictet when he argues that the “works of the heathens which are called virtues,” were actually “splendid sins,” because they did not come from a heart purified through faith, they were not done according to God’s law, and they were not directed to the glory of God. And if some of the heathens “did regard justice and goodness more than others,” Pictet insists (in language Witherspoon seems to have adopted), that this is due to “the divine influence of the Holy Spirit, who restrained the passions of some of them.”

In the end, Witherspoon firmly rejected any notion that man could be truly good apart from God—a position, ironically, that Noll, Marsden, and Hatch applaud Edwards for having and criticize Witherspoon for lacking. It is altogether impossible, Witherspoon argued, to reform sinners and bring them into real conformity to the law of God, unless their hearts are renewed and changed. “The exercise of our own rational powers, the persuasion of others, the application of all moral motives of every kind, will be ineffectual, without the special operation of the Spirit and grace of God.” This is why the unregenerate man cannot finally please God. Since he loves the creature more than the Creator, and loves the praise of man more than the praise of God, “he hath no ‘true’ love either, to God or man.”

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86 CT, 200-1 (V.x.12). Similarly, Rutherford argues that “a natural conscience” can “consent to good Laws,” and yet, arising from “natural affections,” these right actions will still be marked by “self-love, for self-preservation” (Lex, Rex, p.4). The phrase “splendid sins,” is a nod to Augustine’s famous description of pagan virtue (cf. City of God XIX.25), though there is now doubt whether Augustine used that exact phrase. See James Wetzel, “Splendid Vices and Secular Virtues: Variations on Milbank’s Augustine,” The Journal of Religious Ethics, 32, no. 2 (2004), pp.271-300.

87 CT, 201 (V.x.12).


90 Ibid., 1:134.

91 Ibid., 1:176.
This understanding of true virtue profoundly shaped Witherspoon’s assessment of moral philosophy. In an important section in his Essay on Justification, Witherspoon surveys a variety of contemporary approaches to virtue and finds them all lacking:

It may probably occur to some readers, that this reasoning will not accord with the accounts given by many moderns of the nature and foundation of virtue. Some found it upon the present prevailing tendency of our own dispositions, and make it point directly and immediately at our own happiness; others found it upon our connections with our fellow-creatures in this state, and make it consist in benevolence of heart, and beneficence of action; others again, who approach nearer the truth, but without precision, stile it an acting towards every object, according to reason and the nature of things. Upon any of these schemes, the connection, or rather coincidence between the love of God and virtue, or moral excellence, does not so clearly appear. This indeed seems to me the great defect of these accounts of the nature and foundation of virtue, that they keep our relation and obligations to God at a distance as least, and much out of view.  

More will be said about his views on moral philosophy in the concluding chapter, but here we should note that in the Scottish half of his career Witherspoon criticizes Archibald Campbell (“our own happiness”), Francis Hutcheson (“benevolence of heart, and beneficence of action”), Samuel Clarke (“reason and the nature of things”) implicitly, and in the next paragraph William Wollaston’s Religion of Nature Delineated (1722) explicitly. The defect in each system was that they were not founded upon “the relation of creatures to their Creator” nor upon “the inherent excellence of the Divine Nature.” The bottom line for Witherspoon: we must not think that man can be good without any intention of pleasing God. And yet, Witherspoon does not dismiss these new theories as utterly worthless. The accounts of “the nature of virtue” can have “meaning” and “truth and force in them” in so far as they are “founded upon, or coincident with” the word of God. Importantly, this leaves the door open that if the insights can be shown to cohere with Scripture and if the glory of God can be kept in view, then perhaps there is something to be gained from moral philosophy after all.

The Enlightenment concern with true virtue was related to the evangelical concern with true religion. From Jonathan Edwards’s Religious Affections (1746) to Sarah Osborn’s The Nature, Certainty, and Evidence of True Christianity (1755) to

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93 Ibid., 1:75-76. We can be sure of these four names because Witherspoon mentions them explicitly, aligned with the same basic summaries, in his Lectures on Moral Philosophy (Works, 3:384-85). In his Lectures he also mentions three other theorists: Adam Smith, David Hume, and Jonathan Edwards. David Hume is mentioned in a footnote in “Essay on Justification,” Works, 1:76-77.
William Wilberforce’s *A Practical View of Real Christianity* (1797), evangelical preachers and writers stressed the importance of a genuine, heartfelt experience of faith that produced a noticeable change of character.\(^94\) Formal church affiliation was not enough. Witherspoon shared this outlook, emphasizing over and over that we cannot “suppose the reality of religion in the heart, when there is not the least symptom of it in the life” and that there “must be a real inward change of heart, before there can be any true religion.”\(^95\) For Witherspoon, a good life was better a reprimand to vice and a more effective invitation to religion than speculative reasoning most people could not understand.\(^96\)

And yet, this emphasis on heart religion does not mean Witherspoon was indifferent, let alone antagonistic, to careful theological articulation. By the middle of the eighteenth century the objection to traditional Reformed doctrine came from many directions. On the one hand, there were those who argued that sola fide in general, and justification by the imputation of Christ’s righteousness in particular, would inevitably lead to license and immorality.\(^97\) Witherspoon was indefatigable in opposing these views, arguing that the doctrine of justification promoted godliness,\(^98\) that the doctrine of salvation by faith in Christ was not injurious to sanctification,\(^99\) that the doctrine of divine grace did not encourage sin,\(^100\) and that the cross was not unfavorable to moral virtue.\(^101\)

On the other hand, there were those who thought that attention to sophisticated doctrinal formulations was, at best, a distraction, and at worst, inimical to true Christianity. For example, Alexander Gerard (1728-95), the Moderate minister at Aberdeen Greyfriars and Professor of Divinity at Marischal College, looked forward to the day “when Christianity shall become in the writings and in the apprehensions of Christians, as it truly is in the New Testament, not a system of nice speculations and contentious subtleties, but a series of plain principles, evidently founded in scripture, unmixed with the arbitrary explanations, and precarious conclusions of fallible men, all naturally touching the heart, commanding congruous affections, and, by their joint force,


\(^{100}\) “Redemption the Subject of Admiration to the Angels,” *Works*, 1:378.

\(^{101}\) “Glorying in the Cross,” *Works*, 1:402.
directly inculcating piety and virtue, and promoting the reformation and happiness of mankind." Witherspoon strongly rejected this approach to true religion. “I pretend no great friendship,” he wrote, “to the sentiments so frequently expressed of late, ‘That it is a small matter what a man believes, if his life be good.’” The gospel, for Witherspoon, “lay great stress upon belief of the truth, not without, but as the only way of producing holiness.” Such insistence on the importance of orthodox doctrine not only put Witherspoon at odds with Moderate ministers in the Kirk, it also meant he was out of step with the Baxterian doctrinal minimalism found in Doddridge, not to mention some of the mystical emphases found in evangelicalism as a whole. Witherspoon did not want to save Christianity by stripping it of Reformation theology—not for morality’s sake, or even for devotion’s sake—for without right doctrine there would be no hope of morality or devotion. Only the true principles of true religion, derived from the truth of Scripture, can produce true virtue. In short, “there is an inseparable connexion between faith and practice, truth and duty; and therefore he that is a stranger to the one, is ignorant of the other.”

**“Remarks on an Essay on Human Liberty” (1753)**

According to Ashbel Green, Witherspoon promoted Thomas Reid’s ideas even before Thomas Reid: “The writer has heard him state, that before Reid and Beatty, or any other author of their views, had published any thing on the ideal system, he wrote against it, and suggested the same train of thought which they adopted, and that he published his essay in a Scotch Magazine.” Although the remark is well known and Witherspoon’s

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106 Suderman aptly observes, “If the Renaissance and Reformation began as back-to-the-sources movements, the Enlightenment was in its turn a self-emancipation from the weight of these ancient classical and Christian authorities” (Suderman, “Religion and Philosophy,” p.204).

107 Ibid., 2:350.


109 *Life*, p.132. Samuel Miller recounts the same anecdote from Green: “The late Dr. Witherspoon, president of the College of New Jersey, whose vigour and originality of mind are generally known, once informed a friend that the first publication in Great Britain in which Reid’s leading doctrine was suggested, and in a degree developed, was an Essay written by himself, and published in a Scottish magazine, some
Scots Magazine piece is often referenced, the article itself has rarely been scrutinized. Before we can evaluate Witherspoon’s self-assessment, we must understand what prompted him to write the article, what he wrote in the article, and what ecclesiastical controversies followed in the years after the article.

In 1751, Henry Home (1696-1782)—who took the title “Lord Kames” when appointed to Scotland’s Court of Session in 1752—published the first edition of his Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion. The longest section—Essay II on “Foundation and Principles of Morality”—is Kames’s attempt to put the sentimentalism of Shaftesbury and Hutcheson on firmer ground. While agreeing with both that man is a social being bent toward benevolence (he says of God in the conclusion, “Thou bendest self-love into the social direction” and “Thou infusest the generous principle”), Kames insists that too little has been made of the distinction between benevolence and duty. The principles of morality must take into account the voice of God within us and our natural sense of obligation, ought, and should.

As significant as Kames’s contribution was to the discussion of moral sense, it was his third essay, “Liberty and Necessity,” which drew the ire of Witherspoon and evangelicals in the Kirk. Kames was a strict necessitarian, believing all events go “on with unbroken order, in a fixed train of causes and effects.” And yet, Kames argued, we do not live as if a fixed necessity determined our steps. Instead, we are blissfully blinded by a false sense of liberty. “Tho man, in truth,” Kames writes, “is a necessary agent, having all his actions determined by fixed and immutable laws; yet that, this being concealed from him, he acts with the conviction of being a free agent.” In other words, man conducts his affairs with the illusion of contingency. The world is not as it seems.

years before Dr. Reid wrote on the subject.” (Samuel J. Miller, A Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century, Volume II [New York, T. and J. Swords, 1803], p.184).

111 Kames published the first two editions anonymously, but his authorship was an ill-kept secret. The three editions (1751, 1758, 1779) show important differences as Kames, faced with mounting criticism, revised many of his most controversial views. The Liberty Fund has published a critical edition of Kames’s Essays based on the third edition, with variant readings from the first and second edition included in an appendix. Unless otherwise noted, all references and quotations come from the 1751 text in this Liberty Fund edition (Henry Home, Lord Kames, Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion, Mary Catherin Moran [ed.] [Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2005]. For more on Kames and his context see Ian S. Ross, Lord Kames and the Scotland of his Day (Oxford: OUP, 1972).
112 See especially Kames, Essays, pp.30-36, 238-42. The “generous principle” quotation is found on p.234.
114 Kames, Essays, p.254.
115 Ibid., p.250.
The impressions we receive “do not correspond in every instance to the philosophic truth of things.”\textsuperscript{116} Moreover—and this is where Kames was at his most controversial—this “artificial” or “deceitful feeling of liberty” is owing to God’s design. The Deity himself has constituted each of us—for our own good, so that we might act as if contingency were real—with this delusive sense.\textsuperscript{117}

As far as Witherspoon was concerned, the essay on “Liberty and Necessity” contained nothing new, except for Kames’s assertion that “this feeling [of liberty] is deceitful or delusive, not correspondent to real truth.”\textsuperscript{118} Witherspoon concluded that Kames’s observation was “not just” and argued “that the ideas we receive by our senses, and the persuasions we derive immediately from them, are exactly according to truth, to real truth, which certainly ought to be the same as philosophic truth.”\textsuperscript{119} In this, Witherspoon was well within the mainstream of eighteenth-century moral philosophy—in the tradition of Bacon, Locke, and Hutcheson—with an emphasis on empiricism, phenomenological reasoning, and a close connection between the natural world and the moral life.\textsuperscript{120} This did not mean Witherspoon thought our knowledge of the external world was flawless. We may, as Kames noted, see a surface that appears smooth and uniform with our eyes, when under a microscope it is full of ridges and hollows. But according to Witherspoon, this does not prove our senses are deceitful, only that the conclusions we draw from our senses may be inaccurate. We can trust our senses “so far as they go.” The surface that appeared smooth really was smooth, but there are different degrees of smoothness, and some can only be discovered by the “finest possible sense.”\textsuperscript{121} Consequently, then, “We never hear of a deceitful sound, a deceitful smell, or a deceitful taste; but only, that the objects we see, are not in all respects the same as we may imagine them upon the first inspection.”\textsuperscript{122} More to the point, however, God does not give us “deceitful or delusive perceptions” in the natural world, nor, by analogy, in the moral world either.\textsuperscript{123} Witherspoon thought Kames not only wrong in his caricatured view of fatalistic predestination and wrong about the senses and our natural

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., p.242.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., pp.252-56.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{121} Witherspoon, “Remarks on an Essay on Human Liberty,” p.166.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., p.167.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., p.168.
consciousness of liberty, he worried that the jurist’s views demeaned God and would do “harm to the cause of virtue.”

Not surprisingly, many in the Kirk strongly objected to Kames’s depiction of God as a benevolent deceiver. This was no idle speculation, easily overlooked as philosophical musing; the Essays were, to many in the Popular party, nigh unto blasphemy. Kames’s most prominent opponent in the Kirk was the fiery preacher George Anderson who, at nearly 80 years old, attacked the Essays in his 1753 work Estimate of the Profit and Loss of Religion, Personally and Publically Stated. Things came to a head in 1755 and 1756 when some in the General Assembly pushed to censure Kames—a ruling elder in the Kirk and an honorary member of the Commission—for infidelity.

On the second day of the Assembly in 1755, an anonymous pamphlet (usually attributed to John Bonar) appeared in which “Sopho” (i.e., Kames) and Hume were not only lambasted, but the whole assembly was upbraided for “depos[ing] a minister who disowned your authority [i.e., Thomas Gillespie], but enrol[ing], as a member of your courts, an elder [i.e., Kames] who has disowned the authority of Almighty God.” In the end, the Assembly declined to rebuke Kames by name, choosing instead to issue a statement against “impious and infidel principles.”

Several days later, Hugh Blair entered the fray with an anonymous pamphlet defending his friend on the grounds that Kames was quoted out of context and that freedom of inquiry should not be stifled. George Anderson responded with a frontpage assault on Kames in the Scots Magazine and then a short pamphlet rebuking Blair’s pro-Kames tract just before the start of the 1756 Assembly. When an overture to censure and discipline Hume did not even make it out of committee, and Anderson’s complaint against Kames’s publishers (presented to the Presbytery of Edinburgh) failed to gain traction, the case against Kames and Hume fell apart. Anderson’s death later in December marked the end of the controversy: the Moderate Party had proven its powers of politics and persuasion.

It would be a mistake, however, to think the assault on Kames was inconsequential. The second (1758) and third editions (1779) of the Essays were

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124 Ibid., p.169-70.
126 An Analysis of the Moral and Religious Sentiments Contained in the Writings of Sopho and David Hume, Esq., (Edinburgh, n.pub., 1755), quoted in Annals 1752-1766, p.58.
substantially revised, so much so that by the last edition Kames thoroughly repudiated any notion that God had instilled man with a delusive sense of liberty.\footnote{Kames, {	extit{Essays}} (1779), p.123.} In 1756 Kames wrote a pamphlet (possibly co-authored with Blair) that he later appended to the second and third editions. The pamphlet tried to lean on the Reformed tradition for support, quoting at length from Calvin, Turretin, Pictet, and Edwards in defense of Kames’s necessitarian principles—a notable concession, and an indication of the standing of these theologians in the Kirk, considering these were not normal authorities for Enlightenment philosophers.\footnote{The pamphlet/appendix is included in the Liberty Fund edition, pp.131-39.} Whether Kames, who tended to collapse the distinction between moral and physical necessity in the first edition, understood the Reformed tradition correctly is debatable. Edwards for one—and the others were dead!—wrote a lengthy letter (later appended to his {	extit{Freedom of the Will}}) to John Erskine in which he distanced himself from Kames and charged the jurist with having an entirely different (and highly deficient) understanding of necessity and liberty.\footnote{“Freedom of the Will,” {	extit{WJE}}, 1:443-65.} Edwards’s rebuttal played a significant part in Kames changing his mind, or at least in restating his public opinions.

Kames also dropped one of the most offensive lines from the final essay, “Knowledge of the Deity.” In his {	extit{Essay on Justification}} (1756), Witherspoon notes, “These [Kames’s] essays conclude with an address to the Supreme Being which contains the following words; ‘What mortals term sin, thou pronounces to be only error; for moral evil vanishes, in some measure, from before thy more perfect sight.”\footnote{“Essay on Justification,” {	extit{Works}}, 1:78.} This line, which Witherspoon says comes from one who is an example of “the grossest and boldest infidels,” was replaced with “Even the follies and vices of men minister to thy wise designs.”\footnote{Strangely, there is no indication of this change in the Liberty Fund edition but checking with the 1751 edition directly (p.394) confirms that Witherspoon’s quotation is accurate.} Over time—whether from a genuine change of heart or, more likely, from a desire to save himself an ongoing headache—Kames softened (cloaked?) his views on human beneficence in order to mollify his more orthodox critics.

So what should we make of Witherspoon’s comment that he espoused the same views as Reid and Beattie before they did? For starters, we should not make too much of an offhand comment relayed secondhand after the one who made it has died. But even beyond that, Green’s remark does not convey much more than an awareness that Witherspoon came to oppose Berkeleyan idealism (or at least what Green labeled as
such) long before Reid published his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* in 1764. To be sure, Witherspoon was a man of his own age, easily drawing on empiricist assumptions about moral reasoning, but the works he published during his Scottish career show no signs of dependence on Reid or Beattie (and Reid and Beattie show no signs of dependence on Witherspoon). He may have espoused a similar set of basic convictions—a qualified confidence in the reliability of our senses—that were later developed by others into a full-fledged system, but in the 1750s Witherspoon was concerned that God not be dishonored, that virtue not be undermined, and that the man’s depravity not be mitigated. His burden in Scotland was not philosophical as much as it was theological and ecclesiastical.

**Ecclesiastical Characteristics (1753)**

The most studied work from Witherspoon’s Scottish career is the one that gave him his reputation as a thorn in the side of the Moderate Party. There are already many helpful summaries of *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* so I will not attempt a detailed overview.\(^\text{132}\) What I do hope to show, however, is that Witherspoon’s satirical roast was at least as much about Christian character and confessional subscription as about Enlightenment projects and moral philosophy. Of the 13 Maxims making fun of Moderate ministers, four have to do explicitly with theology (I, III, XI, XIII), three with Christian character (II, VII, XII), three with patronage (VIII, IX, X), and two with polite manners (IV, V). Only one (Maxim VI) targets Enlightenment luminaries directly as Witherspoon disparages a fawning devotion to Leibniz, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson. This is not to suggest that theology can be neatly separated from patronage or moral philosophy. Witherspoon sprinkles references to Hutcheson and Shaftesbury and “moral sense” throughout the piece. And yet, we will misread *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* if we do not see the profoundly ecclesiastical and expressly theological nature of Witherspoon’s concerns.

From the beginning, Witherspoon makes the case that the Moderate men had little interest in the Kirk’s Reformed heritage. The first Maxim argues sarcastically that “All ecclesiastical persons of whatever rank, whether principals of colleges, professors of

divinity, ministers, or even probationers, that are suspected of heresy, are to be esteemed men of great genius, vast learning, and uncommon worth; and are, by all means, to be supported and protected.”

Witherspoon is not only thinking of John Simson, the Glasgow professor who survived two heresy trials in the 1710s and 1720s, he’s thinking of all those who discredit the Church’s doctrinal foundations. He is thinking of those who want to throw out the systems of Pictet and Turretin. He is thinking of those who no longer care about Arian, Pelagian, and Socinian tendencies; he is thinking of those who cannot tolerate the theological exactness of the Seceders; he is thinking of those who not only tolerate Arminianism, but “could not tell what the five Arminian articles are.”

Maxim III, in particular, is an extended discussion on the importance of the Westminster Confession of Faith. It is not uncommon for Witherspoon to reference the Confession of Faith and the Shorter Catechism in his written works, so it is no surprise that Witherspoon was one of the “Presbyterian traditionalists” who, in the words of Colin Kidd, “wondered at the brazen hypocrisy of the ‘moderate,’ who were obliged by law to subscribe the Westminster Confession of Faith as a condition of their entry to the ministry of the Kirk, yet who remained otherwise stubbornly silent on the great themes of Calvinism enshrined within that creed.” In Witherspoon’s (satirical) mind, Moderate men cannot love the Confession of Faith because moderation implies charity and tolerance, whereas the Confession points out theological error and creates a “vile hedge of distinction.” The Confession was “framed in times of hot religious zeal,” he wrote, and it is a “disagreeable necessity” that Kirk ministers must subscribe to it.

Scottish

\[133\] “Ecclesiastical Characteristics,” Works, 3:211.
\[134\] Ibid., 3:260.
\[135\] Ibid., 3:231.
\[139\] Ibid., 3:216.
ministers were unfortunately becoming more like the “clergy of the church of England” who had no reservations about opposing in print the very articles to which they supposedly subscribed.\textsuperscript{140} The best remedy, Witherspoon suggested sarcastically, was for Moderate men “to keep themselves wholly ignorant of what it contains” so that they could subscribe to the Confession with a good conscience.\textsuperscript{141}

Although Witherspoon was the one dishing out the insults in \textit{Ecclesiastical Characteristics}, he could also be on the receiving end of theological criticism. For example, the \textit{Monthly Review}, in evaluating Witherspoon’s \textit{Practical Discourses on the Leading Truths of Gospel} (1768), observed that though he “seems to write from the heart, and with an earnest desire to be useful,” his “sentiments are highly calvinistical.”\textsuperscript{142} He received a similarly mixed view for his \textit{Sermons on Practical Subjects} (1768), which were regarded as having “not beauty or style, or great depth of sentiment, or criticism to recommend them.” And yet, “they seem animated by a sense of piety, and a concern to do good.”\textsuperscript{143}

The \textit{Critical Review}, which often looked to the William Robertson circle for reviewers, was even more negative.\textsuperscript{144} Evaluating the same two books (\textit{Practical Discourses} and \textit{Sermons on Practical Subjects}), the \textit{Critical Review} commented on Witherspoon’s “plain and artless expression” and noted how he advocated for “some theological notions, which, at present, are generally exploded.”\textsuperscript{145} More biting still was a 1764 review which suggested that the imputation of Christ’s righteousness was a “precarious doctrine” and that Witherspoon’s arguments would have been better if he had come to the “contrary supposition.”\textsuperscript{146} The 11-page review concludes with an assessment of the \textit{Treatise on Regeneration}, indicting Witherspoon for the notion that “every child of Adam, by nature, is at enmity with God” and apart from “the supernatural agency of the Holy Ghost” can do “nothing but sin.” With this severe assessment of human nature, Witherspoon had “invelop[ed] the doctrines of the Gospel in darkness and

\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 3:218.
\textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 3:219.
\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Monthly Review}, April 1769, pp.342-43.
\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p.343.
\textsuperscript{145} \textit{Critical Review} 26 (1768), pp.94-95. To be fair, the reviewer still thought Witherspoon “a man of sense and learning.”
\textsuperscript{146} \textit{Critical Review} 18 (1764), p.285.
mystery, and father[ed] nonsense and blasphemy upon the word of God.” In a stinging (and revealing) last line, the Critical Review lambasts Witherspoon, for “abandon[ing] the dictates of reason and Scripture upon the authority of that precious body of divinity called The Confession of Faith!”

A little sarcasm for the satirist perhaps. Witherspoon was right to suspect back in 1753 with the anonymous publication of Ecclesiastical Characteristics that the theological winds, at least as they came from the shores of the Moderate Party, were blowing against him and against the confessional theology he wished to defend.

**The History of a Corporation of Servants (1765)**

Witherspoon penned two full-length satirical pieces in Scotland. If one was a rousing success, the other amounted to little more than a curious blip. No scholar can talk about Witherspoon’s Scottish ministry without reference to Ecclesiastical Characteristics, whereas almost everyone manages to talk about the Scottish half of his career without paying any attention to *Corporation of Servants*. Both works were directed at the Moderate Party. Both attacked patronage. Both claimed (tongue-in-cheek) devotion to the third Earl of Shaftesbury. Both sought to lampoon the hypocrisy and impiety in the Established Church. And yet, *Corporation of Servants* did not go through multiple editions, did not stir up controversy, and did not seem to strike a chord with either

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147 Ibid., p.293.
148 Satire was a familiar genre in eighteenth-century polemics and not the province of one particular group or ideology. Terry Lindvall gives numerous examples from the eighteenth (and beyond) in *God Mocks: A History of Religious Satire from the Hebrew Prophets to Stephen Colbert* (New York: New York University, 2015). James Boswell (1740-95) found that the Scots in particular had a “strength of sarcasm which is peculiar to North Britain” (Janet Adam Smith, “Eighteenth-Century Ideas of Scotland,” in N.T. Phillipson and Rosalind Mitchison [eds], *Scotland in the Age of Improvement* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970], p.113). See also McIntosh, *Church and Theology*, p.90; Carey, “Francis Hutcheson’s Philosophy,” p.63. Witherspoon employed satire throughout his ministry, including his poem to the Presbytery of Paisley (see Appendix 4) and several little known (and biting) critiques of those who turned against the American Revolution: *Supplication of James Rivington, Recantation of Benjamin Towne*, and *Caspipina’s Catechism* (cf. *Works*, 4:387-401; *PW*, 1:233-237). Further proof of Witherspoon’s fondness for satire is suggested by the lost piece listed in the Library of Congress collection as *Panegyric on Momus* (Papers JW, Bundle 2nd No. 11). In Greek mythology Momus was the personification of mockery, ridicule, and scorn. Both Collins and Landsman agree that Witherspoon did not author the popular anti-revival satire (sometimes attributed to him), *A Letter from a Blacksmith* (*PW*, 2:266; Ned Landsman, “Witherspoon and the Problem of Provincial Identity,” in *Scotland and America in the Age of Enlightenment*, pp.44-45).
149 Again, even Mailer, comprehensive in areas of Witherspoon’s American career, does not spend any time with it. Green and Collins touch on the piece briefly (*Life*, pp.66-70; *PW*, 1:66-68).
Moderates or their critics. The piece was too labored and too oblique, lacking the freshness and creativity of Witherspoon’s earlier broadside.\footnote{150}

At the same time, the work provides an important window into Witherspoon’s mounting frustrations with the Moderate regime and their penchant (as he saw it) for oppressing the faithful and protecting the infidel. In the “Introduction,” Witherspoon explains (in the satirical voice of an unidentified narrator) that he’s written the work because there is a great demand in Britain for histories and for schemes designed for the betterment of society.\footnote{151} We can see how Witherspoon feels about the supposed age of progress and improvement when he remarks that these projects are abandoned or mismanaged nine out of ten times. Nevertheless, they are supported by the people, he says, just as “the new discoveries in the science of morals, for the support of infidelity” are warmly received.\footnote{152} The reference to histories has in view William Robertson, whom Witherspoon later describes (again, satirically and without mentioning his name) as one who shirked his ministerial duties, took on multiple posts (and salaries!), and learned to delight the common folk by “telling wonderful stories of the heroic acts of that people’s predecessors.”\footnote{153} To make the satirical voice more authentic, Witherspoon has the narrator strut his Enlightenment bona fides by mentioning “a great living author, David Hume, Esq.” and quoting from the “lofty and sonorous earl of Shaftsbury.”\footnote{154}

The story itself plays off of George Anson’s (1697-1762) famous voyage around the world in 1741. As Witherspoon tells it—with echoes of Defoe’s \textit{Robinson Crusoe} (1719)—some of the men were cast away in the South Seas, but eventually made their way, through a dangerous journey, to the interior of Brazil. After living there many years, being taken as a prisoner, learning the language, and seeing the manners of the country, one member of the crew survived and eventually returned to Great Britain to tell of the character of the people and the history of the nation. The story focuses on “one class of

\footnote{150} To cite one recent example, Craig Steven Wilder seems unaware that the work has anything to do with the Church of Scotland, reading the satire as a fantasy novel about economic empowerment and stagnation (\textit{Ebony and Ivy: Race, Slavery, and the Troubled History of America’s Universities} (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), p.80.

\footnote{151} “The History of a Corporation of Servants,” \textit{Works}, 3:313-14. This lends credence to John Robertson’s contention that at the heart of the Enlightenment was the quest to better the human condition (see \textit{The Enlightenment: A Very Short Introduction} [Oxford: OUP, 2015]).


men in that nation, whose constitution as a body, and many of whose characters and practices were of the most extraordinary kin, viz. the SERVANTS.”

As opposed to Robertson’s more optimistic History of Scotland (1759), Witherspoon’s Corporation of Servants represents a not very veiled history of the Church of Scotland and its fall from grace with the introduction of patronage and the corruption of its clergy.

Witherspoon’s cloaked tour through church history begins with a description of the industrious and compassionate (and freely chosen) servants of “very early times.” From there he quickly transitions to tell how “it happened, some ages ago” that a “generous prince” (Constantine?) was delivered in his hour of need (Milvan Bridge?) and afterward used his “absolute power” to benefit the servants in the land. In particular, the prince (whom Witherspoon later calls an emperor) established three noteworthy regulations: increased pay for the servants, new schools to train the servants, and a system of “classes and divisions” to help break down the large corporation into smaller bodies and societies. Although the intention behind these new regulations was laudable, the results were dubious as many servants grew “fat” and “lazy” and took up their profession for a living instead of as a service.

To make matters worse, some of the servants no longer thought of themselves as servants. Instead, they thought some should be “overseers” and “sub-overseers” and “arch-overseers.” That Witherspoon is bemoaning the rise of the Papacy and its ecclesiastical hierarchy is made clear when we read of “an overseer of the capital city” gathering his contemporaries around him to assert his “absolute uncontrollable dominion” and claim that “power and authority” belong to him and to his “successors in office.” When asked where this innovation came from, Witherspoon’s Pope-like figure explains that “though all the records that contained this regulation are lost, yet I very well

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155 Ibid., 3:316.
156 On Robertson’s aim to write a history that would unify Scotland, negotiate political and theological divisions, and present a Moderate vision of Scotland’s newfound liberty and genius, see Jeffrey R. Smitten, The Life of William Robertson: Minister, Historian, and Principal (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), pp.112-23. For more on whig historiography in the age of Robertson see Colin Kidd, Subverting Scotland’s Past: Scottish Whig Historians and the Creation of an Anglo-British Identity, 1689-c. 1830 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp.185-204.
157 “The History of a Corporation of Servants,” Works, 3:318-19. Witherspoon says the prince “was saved from a formidable conspiracy against his life and crown, just upon the point of execution, by the fidelity and courage of a servant” (3:318). This does not exactly mirror the “conversion” of Constantine, but perhaps the “courage of a servant” is a reference to Constantine’s vision before the Battle of Milvan Bridge. It is worth noting, that if Constantine is the historical referent in Witherspoon’s mind, the latter never treats the former as a Christian, but rather as a generous ruler whose reforms yielded good and bad results.
158 Ibid., 3:319-25.
159 Ibid., 3:326-27.
remember, that my nurse told me before I was two years of age, that her grandmother’s sister’s cousin-german assured her it was fact.”160 Throughout his life, Witherspoon’s ecumenical sympathies never stretched as far as the Catholic Church. In Witherspoon’s short summary, the Medieval Catholicism was an institution rife with self-flagellating monks, fabulously wealthy Popes and Bishops, and an overtaxed people who, with amazing “pusillanimity,” acquiesced to this sordid regime.161

Thankfully, “there were always some in every age” who “thought fit to complain of the sloth, debauchery, avarice and tyranny of the servants.” Though he does not mention anyone by name (in keeping with the satirical guise), Witherspoon is clearly thinking of Luther (“Many tumults were raised against him, and he was often in imminent danger of his life”) and the Reformers. No doubt, Witherspoon saw himself among this lineage of faithful complainers who “set the abominable conduct of the covetous blood-suckers in the most odious light” and tried to “rouse the people from their lethargy and inflame them with resentment against their oppressors.”162 In Witherspoon’s mind, the powerful clergy were villains, the truth-telling clergy were heroes, and the common people were torn between the two, noble in their own right but often too oppressed to know that they should yearn for freedom.

This is the story not only of the Church in general, but of Scotland in particular, or as Witherspoon puts it: “the Reformed Establishment, in a Northern Province”163 Things went well in the Northern Province when the servants were “bound by a tremendous oath” (robust subscription formulas), when patronage was denounced (in the Second Book of Discipline [1578]), and when the “helpers” (ruling elders) did their part as a “representative of the people.”164 But “after a long season of peace and quiet, things began to alter for the worse.” The clergy once again grew corrupt from ambition and avarice. Most crucially, the sacred law which allowed families to choose their own servants was overturned in favor of “re-establishing the law which empowered great men to nominate servants to inferior families.”165 In other words, the restoration of patronage

160 Ibid., 3:327.
161 Ibid., 3:329.
162 Ibid., 3:331.
163 Ibid., 3:333.
164 Ibid., 3:334.
165 Ibid., 3:335.
in the Act of 1712 would rot away at the root of the Kirk tree, forcing ill-trained, impious, unsuitable pastors upon helpless congregations.\textsuperscript{166}

The \textit{Corporation of Servants} shows Witherspoon at his most publicly exasperated. Two chapters in particular—Chapter 8 ("Servants of different characters") and Chapter 9 ("The carelessness of Servants in their work")—allow Witherspoon to vent his righteous indignation more than would have seemed appropriate from the pulpit or in a non-satirical work. He depicts the bad "servants" as lazy elites who, though masters in theory, are failures in their work and ignore the will of the common people.\textsuperscript{167}

The good servants, by contrast, are constantly bothered and harassed:

Nothing was more remarkable than the rancorous hatred which the self sufficient bore to the humble servants; especially such as showed the most remarkable diligence in their work. They spread slanders against them without number. They used to go about with indefatigable diligence, among the great men, and nominators to the established salaries, to exasperate their minds against them and prevent their settlement or promotion. They represented them as a set of poor, silly, sneaking, spiritless fellows, who, for no other end than to throw an odium on the more free and generous livers, would work longer than usual.\textsuperscript{168}

When the narrator bemoans the bad servants "executing revenge" on the good, one cannot help but assume Witherspoon had in mind his disputed settlement in Paisley. In fact, there is more personal biography in \textit{Corporation} than in any of his other published works. Witherspoon’s narrator tells of a certain servant, a “great opposer of the prevailing measures,” who “possess a vein of humor” and was skilled at representing the other servants “by aenigmatical characters.” The common people loved the drawing and kept a copy in their homes, recognizing many of their servants among the “aenigmatical characters” and laughing at the uncanny resemblance.\textsuperscript{169} That Witherspoon is speaking of himself and \textit{Ecclesiastical Characteristics} becomes even more obvious in the next paragraph:

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{166} Witherspoon tells the story of a “certain court” that examined a young aspiring servant who received his apprenticeship in a toy shop and thought you plowed the land with a wheel-barrow. Witherspoon sarcastically notes that after the “discontented zealot” sat down (the man pressing the would-be servant for better answers), a “moderate man asked him a few polite and fashionable questions.” In the end, the court approved the naïve young man as a “most accomplished servant,” having taken up the principle of meaningless subscription “that a man might attest any thing to be true, which he did not know to be false” (3:344-45).
\item \textsuperscript{167} Ibid., 3:336-42. To wit: “the mark of an improver is not to have a good crop, but to be able to give a rational and philosophical account of how he came to have a bad one” (3:339).
\item \textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 3:346-47.
\item \textsuperscript{169} Ibid., 3:348-49.
\end{itemize}
The fury and resentment of the servants, on the publication of this piece, is not to be conceived. The author had done it with so much caution and secrecy that they could not get him legally convicted. However, they either discovered, or at least thought they had discovered who he was, and employed themselves night and day, in devising methods of revenge.

Witherspoon goes on to say that “the poor author” was “constantly upon his guard, as there was always a set of desperadoes lying in wait for him, armed with clubs, and fully determined to beat his brains out….In the mean time, they all agreed in telling lies upon him without ceasing.”\textsuperscript{170} This is a portrait of a pastor more hurt than he let on.

In Chapter 9, Witherspoon relays a “curious” incident in which some of the “industrious” servants try to convince the whole body of servants that the “strange cattle” should be driven out of their bounds. Collins mistakenly identifies this as the schism of 1763,\textsuperscript{171} but Witherspoon is thinking of the 1756 General Assembly—he says this “debate in a certain family” took place “about three years after the publication of the aenigmatical picture”—where an effort to censure and excommunicate David Hume never made it out of the Committee of Overtures.\textsuperscript{172} It is fitting, therefore, that Witherspoon would summarize the chapter as “A curious debate in a certain family, which issued in nothing.” Moreover, the seven arguments against driving out the strange cattle track almost perfectly with the seven points of “strenuous objection” listed in the \textit{Annals of the General Assembly} against the Hume motion.\textsuperscript{173} For those making the motion, Hume was the most daring of the infidel writers, and even though he did not visibly belong to a church, the fact that he had never denied his baptism or formally excluded himself from the Kirk meant he was a proper subject of church discipline. Those on the opposite side argued that it would do no good to censure Hume, that his mind was already made up, that most people disregarded him anyway, and that a vote of excommunication would only please him and help the sales of his books. In the end, the motion to bring the overture to the floor of the Assembly failed 17 to 50.

\textsuperscript{170} Ibid., 3:349.
\textsuperscript{171} \textit{PW}, 1:68.
\textsuperscript{173} Both the \textit{Annals} and Witherspoon were drawing from the report given in the \textit{Scots Magazine}, “On a Motion for Censuring Infidel Writers,” June 1756, Vol. 18, pp.280-84. Curiously, Witherspoon references a “servant of ancient standing” well known for making long, incomprehensible speeches who argued that if the Kirk really started exercising discipline, there would hardly be anyone left in the church. Neither Witherspoon, the \textit{Annals}, the \textit{Scots Magazine}, nor the account given by Lord Woodhouselee in his biography of Kames indicate who this old minister might be, except to note that when he spoke “it did not appear that any body concurred” (\textit{Scots Magazine}, “On a Motion for Censuring Infidel Writers,” p.283).
The issue for Witherspoon was not Hume himself, whom he thought beyond the reach of reason and utterly devoid of virtue. Witherspoon figured the ideas of both Kames and Hume were so novel and such examples of bold infidelity that no “sober judge” would take them seriously. Sure, people in Scotland were talking about the philosophy of Kames and Hume, but only “by way of amusement,” not because “one in a hundred” appeared “to have any serious conviction of their truth.” Kames and Hume would have mattered little to Witherspoon, except for the Kirk’s refusal to care. With Robertson and the Moderates at the helm, the “great majority” of servants had come to accept that “intruders in general should be winked at, and that beast in particular, whether he were bull or ox, should continue where he was.” Ministers like Robertson were men of “uncommon ability” who found ingenious ways to neglect their pastoral work, deceive regular churchgoers, accrue lavish salaries, and heap worthless degrees upon each other. Worst of all, they neither fed the flock from green pastures nor protected the sheep from wolves.

As a minister in Scotland, Witherspoon did not enter the world of Enlightenment ideas in order to prove victorious in intellectual debate. He was not interested first of all in the moral sense, or the nature of virtue, or the ideas of Kames or Hume or Hutcheson for their own sake. His goals were more personal and pastoral. Witherspoon was not concerned to dissect the latest philosophical ideas, except in so far as they seemed to help, or more likely, seem to threaten, his larger aims: the retrieval of Calvinist theology, the reformation of the Established Church, and the revival of true religion in Scotland. Surely, it reveals something crucial about Witherspoon’s ideas, not to mention his psyche, that he comes across in Corporation of Servants as an anti-elitist “servant” whose hope for the church rests in the common people. Twice in the final pages, he mentions “common sense,” not as a robust philosophical category, but as an appeal to the laity to

176 Ibid., 3:353. See Sher, Church and University, for the distinct advantage Moderates had in attendance at the General Assembly from 1751-1785 (pp.127-29).
177 “The History of a Corporation of Servants,” Works, 3:355-56. Witherspoon complained that the faults of the Moderates were too often excused as “good humored vices” (“Ecclesiastical Characteristics,” Works, 3:214), and that their vaunted moral preaching had no place for typical exercises of Christian piety and devotion (“Ministerial Fidelity in Declaring the Whole Counsel of God,” Works, 2:520-21). Surely, it was not lost on Witherspoon that all the early Moderates were either indirectly supported or directly promoted by the impious and massively influential Duke of Argyll who gave perhaps the clearest example of “practising hypocrisy” in eighteenth-century Scotland (Roger L. Emerson, An Enlightened Duke: The Life of Archibald Campbell (1682-1761), Earl of Bay, 3rd Duke of Argyll [Kilkerran: Humming Earth, 2013], pp.163-85, 317, 353-54).
shake off passivity and demand more from their churches. In Witherspoon’s mind that means the best hope for the Kirk lies not with the servants (the pastors), but with the helpers (the elders). What Scotland needed was not a reformation of manners, but a lay-led reinvigoration of a more faithful (and somewhat romanticized) past. Already in 1765, Witherspoon was the sort of outspoken pro-liberty, pro-democracy, anti-tyranny, anti-infidelity Reformed apologist and national leader we will see more of after 1768, except in his next career he will labor for what can be built rather than for what has been lost.

179 Ibid., 3:363.
Conclusion

“The Infinite Importance of the Salvation of Your Souls”
Witherspoon’s Work in America

John Witherspoon’s career and ministry can be divided into almost two equal halves. For 25 years—from his ordination in 1743 until he sailed across the Atlantic in 1768—Witherspoon was a minister in the Church of Scotland, serving two congregations (Beith and Paisley), both on the outskirts of Glasgow. After moving to America, Witherspoon labored another 26 years, still as a preacher, but now also as a college president and a founding father of a new republic. My focus has been on the first half of Witherspoon’s career, on Witherspoon the Presbyterian pastor and polemicist. I have argued that we cannot understand Witherspoon’s theology (let alone Witherspoon the person) unless we see him not only engaged with the Scottish Enlightenment, but firmly grounded in the Reformed tradition, embedded in the transatlantic Evangelical Awakening, and frustrated by the state of religion in the Kirk. The focus on Witherspoon’s Scottish career has been intentional: those that know his Scottish context well tend to be less conversant with the nuances of Reformed theology, while those that show an interest in theology tend to mine the first half of Witherspoon’s career in order to set the stage for his more famous endeavors in America.¹ Both groups are more interested in the new than the traditional and more concerned with Witherspoon’s Enlightenment credentials than his Reformation roots. My contention is that Witherspoon’s ministerial career, and the theology that drove it, deserve scholarly inquiry of their own, quite apart from whatever the Scotsman would go on to accomplish in the New World.

And yet, no analysis of Witherspoon’s theology would be complete without some examination of whether that theology stayed intact from the first half of Witherspoon’s career through the second. As Ned Landsman has observed, just as scholars have struggled with “das Adam Smith problem”—how to reconcile Smith’s views of human nature in *Moral Sentiments* (1759) and *Wealth of Nations* (1776)—so we must grapple

¹ Case in point: the two most well-researched volumes covering Witherspoon’s entire career—Varnum Lansing Collins’s *President Witherspoon* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925) and Gideon Malle’s *John Witherspoon’s American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017)—focus mainly (not surprisingly given the titles) on Witherspoon’s output in America, even though 45 of his 71 years were spent in Scotland and of the more than 2,200 pages in the four-volume *Works*, almost 1,400 pages are from his Scottish career.
with “das Witherspoon problem” and ask whether Witherspoon the Scottish firebrand is a different theologian than Witherspoon the American moral philosopher. Douglas Sloan maintains that Witherspoon adopted a different set of priorities in America, changing his views on piety and conversion, and championing an inconsistent moral philosophy that amounted to “eclecticism with a vengeance.” Jack Scott sees in the American Witherspoon a “modified Calvinism” and a “softening” of Calvinist dogma when it comes to predestination and human depravity. Henry May says that “shortly before sailing,” Witherspoon “converted” to the “new Common Sense philosophy of John [sic] Reid.” Jeffry Morrison celebrates Witherspoon as an original philosophical thinker who, uniquely among American colonists, synthetized Calvinism and Enlightenment science. Benjamin Lynerd claims that the one-time menace to the Moderate party eventually shifted his views on virtue and adopted a modified version of Hutcheson’s moral sense theories. Landsman, for his part, argues that Witherspoon changed because orthodoxy itself had changed.

No one has argued as thoughtfully for the “sea change” thesis as has Mark Noll. Here, for example, is Noll summarizing Witherspoon in Scotland and Witherspoon in America:

The Scottish minister who read Joseph Bellamy’s works with delight, urged ministers not to meddle in politics, denounced Francis Hutcheson, opposed ecclesiastical patronage as tyrannical, and mobilized troops against the Rebellion of ’45 was also the American college president who banned Bellamy’s works from his campus, joined legislative assemblies, modeled his collegiate instruction on Hutcheson, supported a moderate establishment of religion, and championed the rebellion of ’76. A partial explanation of this ambiguity must include the observation that, while in Scotland, Witherspoon’s antiestablishment “populism” was associated with theological conservatism. In America, by contrast, his republicanism was shared by representatives of every position on the theological

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spectrum. Nonetheless, “sea change” still seems the only appropriate phrase to describe the two stages of Witherspoon’s career.9

For over thirty years Noll has employed his impressive scholarly acumen in presenting a view of Witherspoon’s intellectual achievement and long-term influence that is, by Noll’s own admission, “not wholly favorable.”10 Spurred on by Sydney Ahlstrom’s seminal essay, Noll has maintained that Old Princeton was “heavily, even uniquely, indebted” to the “Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense” and that naïve convictions about human rationality and the powers of observation began to take root at Nassau Hall through Witherspoon’s influence.11 While Witherspoon’s formal theological commitments may not have changed, his philosophical convictions moved from the periphery to the center, so that “Hutcheson’s moral philosophy became the engine that drove his activity in society and provided, to some extent, his views in theology.”12 For Noll, the evangelical stalwart in Scotland was at least partly responsible for infusing in his adopted country a not so subtle (and not entirely salutary) hodgepodge of Bible-based Protestantism, republican Whig principles, and common sense moral philosophy.13 This assessment of Witherspoon’s American career has become common.14

In the last decade, however, there has been growing opposition to the “sea change” thesis as an explanation for the two halves of Witherspoon’s career. Daniel

10 Ibid.
14 For example, Robert Calhoon argues that “Witherspoon’s popularity among Presbyterians in America” had little to do with “his intellectual ability or his preaching” and much more to “his cultural role as exponent of civic republicanism and secularized Calvinism” (“Witherspoon, John” in *Dictionary of Evangelical Biography 1730-1860*, Donald M. Lewis [ed] [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004], 2:1215). Likewise, Bradley Longstreet claims that in setting aside an Augustinian distrust of human nature and embracing a rosy Hutchesonian moral sense, Witherspoon became an “amalgam of republican, Enlightenment, and Christian values” (Bradley J. Longstreet, *Presbyterians and American Culture: A History* [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013], p.37).
Howe finds Noll’s negative assessment of Witherspoon “too narrow in focus,” while Paul Helseth makes a compelling case that Noll has read Witherspoon too much through the lens of his Enlightened son-in-law, Samuel Stanhope Smith, when the successor who more faithfully took up the Witherspoon mantle was the president’s protégé, editor, and biographer, Ashbel Green. Most importantly, Gideon Mailer has challenged the notion that Witherspoon abandoned his evangelical convictions and moved to an anthropocentric understanding of ethical perception. Although Mailer is more conversant with Witherspoon’s American career than with the dogmatic tradition of Reformed Orthodoxy, his overall case is a cogent one, prompting Noll to acknowledge (on a back cover blurb) that “Mailer corrects what other historians, including myself, have written about this influential minister, educator, and public servant.”

**A New Role in a New Place**

In the end, the best analysis of “das Witherspoon problem” must recognize both continuity and discontinuity. While I have been arguing that there is more continuity than many scholars have thought, we would be lurching too far in the other direction to present the American half of Witherspoon’s career as a carbon copy of the Scottish half. *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* certainly sounds much different in its attitude toward Hutcheson and his Moderate Party defenders than the biting sarcasm in *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*. There is no doubt that Witherspoon wrote about (some) different topics and was agitated by (some) different controversies in America. These differences are real, but they must not be exaggerated, and they must be understood in their broader context. Witherspoon did not become a new man in sailing across the Atlantic, but he

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15 Howe, p.67; Paul Kjoss Helseth, “The Legacy of John Witherspoon and the Founding of Princeton Theological Seminary: Samuel Stanhope Smith, Ashbel Green, and the Contested Meaning of Enlightened Education” in Mark Jones and Michael A.G. Haykin (eds), *A New Divinity: Transatlantic Reformed Evangelical Debates during the Long Eighteenth Century* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2018). In defense of Helseth’s contention, it is telling that in the first issue of *The Presbyterian Magazine* the two most substantial biographical sketches are for John Witherspoon and Ashbel Green (C. Van Rensselaer [ed.], *The Presbyterian Magazine*, Vol. 1 [Philadelphia: Wm. H. Mitchell, 1851], pp.236-41; 573-78). Green is quoted as saying, “To Dr. Witherspoon, more than to any other human being, I am indebted for whatever of influence or success has attended me in life” (p.236). The sketch lauds Green as “a connecting link between old times and new” (p.241).

was in a new place with a new role. He was no longer a regular pastor with a kirk-session to lead and shepherding matters to attend to. Witherspoon was now a college president, responsible for discipline, fund raising, recruitment, and a significant teaching load. And in the 1770s and 1780s he turned his attention to politics, signing the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, helping ratify the Constitution in New Jersey, holding a seat in the state legislature, and serving on 126 committees during six years in the Continental Congress. It is not surprising, then, that the written record of his American career—with speeches in congress and lectures on subjects like moral philosophy and eloquence—that Witherspoon’s emphases sound different than when he was writing theological treatises and getting tangled up in ecclesiastical affairs.

Witherspoon rarely hesitated to throw himself into the fray. In Scotland that was the reviving of the old Kirk. In America that was the formation of a new Republic.

If Witherspoon’s role changed in the last quarter century of his life, so did his place. Witherspoon often talked wistfully about what he left behind in Scotland. In his first sermon at Princeton, he acknowledged having left “country, and kindred, and connexions of the dearest kind, in order to serve the interest of the church of Christ, in this part of the globe.” At the outset of his Lectures on Divinity, Witherspoon recollected with pain that he had left a congregation of 1,200-1,500 souls who were subject to his oversight and discipline and now preached to a “thin and negligent assembly,” mostly composed of those “who think themselves under no obligation to attend but when they please.” He also noted that “One of great zeal and discernment” (Whitefield) had warned him of the humbling difference between “a small country society in America and a large city congregation in Scotland.”

On another occasion, Witherspoon remarked he would ride ten miles every Lord’s Day to preach to the congregation he left behind at Paisley. Surely, Ashbel Green’s comment from 1840/41 is accurate: “It is not easily understood by the present generation of Americans how much extra respect was yielded to a man of confessedly an excellent character if he had been born and educated in Britain and had emigrated to this country from mere choice and preference.”

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17 Witherspoon pastored the congregation at Princeton, but he was more of a regular preacher than a parish minister. Until he lost his eyesight later in life, he preached twice every Sunday during the summers and once in winter, plus other special holidays and appointed observances (Life, p.144).


20 Life, p.227.

21 Ibid., p.151.
As much as Witherspoon missed his homeland, he found a new energy in the British colonies. In Scotland, Witherspoon could not help but look back at the glory days gone by and lament the compromised state of the Kirk. But America was a different story. Witherspoon did not think “any part of the British empire” could equal the churches in New England “for real religion and sound morals.” Even if men like Franklin and Jefferson were hardly more religious than Hume, at least the former were not sheltered by ecclesiastical leaders and undermining the doctrinal moorings of the national church. There were New Siders and Old Siders in the American Presbyterian church, but no one was championing deists and freethinkers or providing cover for unbelievers. Witherspoon, as a result, did not fear heterodoxy in the colonial church as he did in Scotland. Moreover, instead of being on the margins of elite power, he was now a member of the inner circle, revered by his fellow Presbyterians for his British education and sacrifice in coming to America and respected by heroes of the Revolutionary era like George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Alexander Hamilton. Witherspoon went from being schooled with (and eventually estranged from) the Moderate literati in Scotland to schooling an entire generation of Presbyterian ministers in a new country he helped establish.

While Witherspoon never changed his stance on human depravity, Witherspoon expressed more optimism about the future once in America. He envisioned science and religion coming together and expected “progress, as in every other human art, so in the order of perfection of human society.” This was why Witherspoon was so bullish on confederation. “I am none of those who either deny or conceal the depravity of human nature,” he said in a speech in Congress. Yet, this was no reason to give up on forming a new government. “Shall we establish nothing good, because we know it is not eternal?” he asked. “Far from it, sir: it only requires the more watchful attention to settle government upon the best principles, and in the wisest manner, that it may last as long as the nature of things will admit.” Scotland’s gold may have dimmed, but America’s future was bright. When Ashbel Green informed Witherspoon of the completed turnpike

22 “Ignorance of the British with Respect to America,” Works, 4:290.
23 We should be cautious, however, in thinking that this optimism was quintessentially American. Landsman argues that the vision of unlimited American potential was actually British in origin. See Ned C. Landsman, “The Provinces and the Empire: Scotland, the American Colonies and the Development of British Provincial Identity,” in Lawrence Stone (ed.), An Imperial State at War: Britain from 1668 to 1815 (London: Routledge, 1994), p.278. Cf. Alexander Murdoch, Scotland and America, c. 1600 – c. 1800 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp.144-47.
24 “Part of a Speech in Congress upon the Confederation,” Works, 4:350.
25 Ibid.
from Philadelphia to Lancaster, Witherspoon replied enthusiastically that Green might just “live to see a Turnpike road that shall extend from Philadelphia to the Pacific Ocean.”

Witherspoon’s Presbyterian context was different in one other crucial respect. Whereas the establishment principle, enshrined in the Westminster Confession of Faith (especially chapters 20 and 23), was assumed in Scotland, much less authority over religious affairs was granted to the civil magistrate in America. From the reorganization plan in 1787 to the first General Assembly in 1789, Witherspoon played a key role in establishing a national Presbyterian church, and when the ecclesiastical constitution was finally adopted, the Westminster Confession had been altered to create more distance between church and state.

While it is true that Witherspoon had come to embrace Lockean Republicanism in a form that early Scottish divines like Rutherford would find hard to fathom, it would be misleading to think that post-Revolution Witherspoon quickly gave up treasured Presbyterian principles. There is a good chance Witherspoon came to America with chastened views on church and state already formed. In his Lectures on Moral Philosophy, which he composed between 1770 and 1772, Witherspoon acknowledged that when it comes to “how far the magistrate ought to interfere in matters of religion,” religious sentiments “are very various.” For Witherspoon, “what the magistrate may do” was “confined” to three areas: (1) encouraging piety by his example, (2) defending the rights of conscience and tolerating religious sentiments that are not injurious to our neighbors, and (3) enacting laws against profanity and impiety. Witherspoon also affirms that those who go one step further and think the magistrate ought to make provision for public worship have “a good deal of reason” for their view. In the end, Witherspoon likens the magistrate to a parent: “they have a right to instruct, but not to constrain.”

Well before the Revolution and his turn to politics, Witherspoon had already moved away from the establishment principle.

This was a move that made perfect sense in Witherspoon’s American context. In conjunction with the Adopting Act of 1729, the Presbyterian church already allowed that

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26 Life, p.173.
29 Ibid., 3:448-49.
30 Ibid., 3:449.
chapters 20 and 23 of the Westminster Confession were not binding on ministers and that ministers need not receive “those articles in any such sense as to suppose the civil magistrate hath a controlling power over Synods with respect to the exercise of their ministerial authority.”

The revision to the Westminster Standards in the 1780s was monumentally uncontroversial (to Witherspoon, it appears, as much as to anyone) because the voluntary principle was already a given. Whether his views changed over the years in America or had already been moving in a disestablishment direction when he left Scotland, Witherspoon likely felt more comfortable with a change like this in America, not only because of the new political situation, but because of his ecclesiastical context. From the highest levels of the church, the presbyteries were frequently urged to examine ministers “in order to obtain satisfaction respecting their orthodoxy and piety” and to be “very strict and careful” and to guard “against danger from the admission of ministers and probationers of unsound principles.” These injunctions no doubt reflected the convictions of the man who opened the first General Assembly with a sermon on 1 Corinthians 3:7—a man whose views on church and state may have changed, but whose insistence on honest subscription and sound doctrine had not.

The Case for Continuity

Even with his newfound intellectual interests and optimism, Witherspoon’s pastoral convictions and theological commitments remained virtually the same. Witherspoon the evangelical pugilist did not suddenly become Witherspoon the Enlightenment philosopher. From the beginning of his ministry in the countryside outside of Glasgow to the end of his ministry at his country home Tusculum outside of Princeton, Witherspoon was animated by the same desires and stirred by the same passions. As a traditionalist minister in submission to the Westminster Confession, he sought to defend the orthodox Reformed faith. As an evangelical in the age of awakenings, he preached for the salvation of souls. And as Scotsman in the eighteenth century, he labored for the improvement of society wherever he was, whether that was through the national church or through the national legislature. When it came to the things that made Witherspoon who he was, there was no sea change.

32 Extracts from the Minutes of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, from A.D. 1789 to A.D. 1802 (Philadelphia: Jane Aitken, 1803), pp.6-8.
He still shared New Side sympathies toward revival. It is sometimes suggested that once in America Witherspoon “came to favour (at least tacitly) the anti-revival Old Side.”

In 1772, a revival swept through the students at Princeton, and according to Aaron Burr, Witherspoon did not approve. Ashbel Green, however, argues that Burr was incorrect and that the “remarkable and general revival” was “conducted under [Witherspoon’s] supervision with great discretion and was productive of the happiest results.” Elsewhere, Green acknowledges that Witherspoon did “endeavor to correct some irregularities and imprudences, which usually take place when youth are under the excitement of strong religious feelings, but, that he rejoiced in the revival itself, instead of opposing it, there is every reason to believe.” While both Burr and Green have their biases, the fact that Witherspoon maintained a close relationship with a promoter of the transatlantic awakening like John Erskine and with a revivalist preacher like George Muir suggests Green’s assessment is more accurate. In his Lectures on Eloquence, Witherspoon notes that George Whitefield “acquired and preserved a degree of popularity to which the present age never saw anything that could be compared,” and that “happy ends” were “promoted by this in providence.”

He still concerned himself with churchly activity. One of the principal reasons Witherspoon came to America was that he might be “instrumental in sending out ministers of the New Testament” across the continent. Whether his zeal lagged in this area is open to debate. Green admits that one of Witherspoon’s three “defects”—the other two being his failed land speculations and the errant letter he wrote trying to refute Newtonian ideas about the divisibility of space—was that “the fervency of piety suffered some abatement during our revolutionary war.” And yet, while there is no doubt Witherspoon turned Princeton into a nursery for the Republic, he never lose sight of the institution’s original gospel aims. At the 1791 Assembly, Witherspoon remarked with

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33 Howe, p.77. Similarly, Landsman claims Witherspoon “would long be noted for his skeptical view of the emotional dimension of popular religion” (“Presbyterians and Provincial Society: The Evangelical Enlightenment in the West of Scotland, 1740-1775,” Eighteenth-Century Life 15 [1991], p.200).
35 Life, p.144.
39 Life, pp.271-72. Green is quick to suggest that this abatement was more in appearance than reality, and that if it did occur, it was no more than affected most religious men during the revolution. Elsewhere Green maintains that “During the whole period in which [Witherspoon] was occupied in civil life, he never laid aside his ministerial character, but always appeared in every relation as became an ambassador of God” (Sprague, 3:295).
joy that a majority of ministers present had been his students.\textsuperscript{40} Collins records that at the first General Assembly, the entire Presbyterian church consisted of 188 ministers, 97 of which were from Princeton, 52 of those being Witherspoon’s former pupils.\textsuperscript{41}

He still railed against putting on airs in the pulpit. Although Witherspoon taught on polite manners at Princeton, it was not without reservation and not as an end in itself. He warned against “Carrying taste to a finical nicety”\textsuperscript{42} and argued that the “plainest or shortest road to real politeness” is simply “to think of others just as a Christian ought.”\textsuperscript{43} Witherspoon was a strong proponent of simplicity in style, both in speaking and in writing.\textsuperscript{44} He wanted the minister to eschew “pomp or foppery of style” and “finery of language” in favor of “experimental knowledge” of the doctrines preached and an ardent for the glory of God.\textsuperscript{45} Above all, the minister must be evangelistic: “Remember this then, in a single word, that there is neither profession nor station, from the king on the throne to the beggar on the dunghill, to whom a concern for eternity, is not the one thing needful.”\textsuperscript{46}

And he still disapproved of the theater. In his final composition—dictated in early 1794 and intended for publication in the Philadelphia National Gazette—Witherspoon once again took up the cudgel against the evils of the stage (and also, it turns out, against his former student, and the Gazette’s editor, Philip Freneau).\textsuperscript{47}

**On Divinity and Moral Philosophy**

More evidence of theological continuity can be found in Witherspoon’s *Lectures on Divinity*. Completed soon after arriving in Princeton and delivered annually thereafter, these lectures give us the clearest window into Witherspoon’s aims and commitments as a theologian. Like Pictet, Witherspoon tries to reconcile differing opinions wherever possible and does not like to get bogged down in technical terminology. His lectures are consistently apologetic in nature, laboring to defend the uniqueness of Christianity, the appropriateness of God’s wrath, the truth of the resurrection, the reality of miracles, the trustworthiness of Scripture, the necessity of the doctrine of the Trinity, and the positive

\textsuperscript{40} *Life*, p.130.
\textsuperscript{41} *PW*, 2:223.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 3:563, 565, 567.
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid., 3:563.
effects of the gospel on individuals and on society. Witherspoon’s “peculiar talent,” observed Green, was “presenting the Calvinistic doctrines in popular form, and in a manner the least offensive to those who do not hold them; while he maintained them firmly in their substance.”

Although he was more interested in debating contemporary writers and controversies than in sifting through old disputes from his own tradition, Witherspoon’s conclusions were reliably evangelical and Reformed. He continued to affirm human depravity, repeating his favorite line that “the history of the world is little else than the history of human guilt” and insisting that “every sin deserves God’s wrath and curse, both in this life and that which is to come.” Elsewhere, Witherspoon does not hesitate to upbraid Thomas Paine—just months after the publication of Paine’s wildly popular Common Sense—for being “ignorant of human nature” and “an enemy to the Christian faith” in rejecting the doctrine of original sin. Throughout the Lectures on Divinity, we see Witherspoon doing the work of a traditional Reformed systematician, going into considerable detail on the divine decrees, explaining supralapsarianism and infralapsarianism, citing the Westminster Confession on divine sovereignty and human responsibility, working through the administration of the covenants, and distinguishing between legal obedience and evangelical obedience. He even agrees with “protestant writers, very generally” that “the Pope and the Roman Catholic system of superstition” seem to “quadrate” with the “anti-christ.”

In an important section in Lecture VI on the “truth of the Christian religion,” Witherspoon explores the relationship between reason and revelation. On the one hand, revelation is most necessary, given “our blindness and ignorance in the things of God.” Wherever revelation speaks, we must accept it “immediately and without challenge.” Human reason will not lead us to God and must never be the standard by which we judge divine revelation. On the other hand, reason need not be opposed to revelation: “I confess

48 Life, p.265.
49 Collins and Green reach the same conclusion: “His theology was plainly one which would find favor with his American ecclesiastical colleagues, being essentially that of Old School Presbyterians on the fundamental Calvinistic dogmas” (PW, 2:200). “Dr. Witherspoon’s theology was Calvinistic, according to the system of Calvin himself; subject only to the modifications which it has received in the Standards of the Presbyterian church” (Life, 264).
50 “Lectures on Divinity,” Works, 4:25, 26, 97. Years later, Witherspoon sounded the same note: Those philosophers who speak of [human nature] in such exalted terms as to contradict the truth of religion have present experience and history of past age directly against them” (“The Druid, Number 1,” Works, 4:427).
51 In a lengthy footnote in “The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men,” Works, 3:23-24.
52 “Lectures on Divinity,” Works, 4:82-91, 93, 115, 123.
53 Ibid., 4:57-58.
it is agreeable to me to shew that the truths of the everlasting gospel are agreeable to sound reason and founded upon the state of human nature; and I have made it my business through my whole life to illustrate this remark.”\textsuperscript{54} Not surprisingly, Witherspoon considered moral philosophy, history, eloquence, and languages—the exact courses he taught at Princeton (along with divinity)—to be the four “assistant studies to theology.”\textsuperscript{55} For Witherspoon, just as it was for Turretin and Pictet (or for Rutherford or for most of the Reformed tradition), reason and revelation were not enemy combatants, but allies appointed by God, each in its own sphere, to support and strengthen the other. To appeal to nature and nature’s God was not an Enlightenment idea, but a thoroughly Reformed one. As Stephen Wolfe puts it, “Witherspoon and other theological orthodox Founders were not ‘schizophrenic’ at all. Nor did they compromise their Calvinism. They were simply being consistent with their theological tradition.”\textsuperscript{56}

This is why Witherspoon taught moral philosophy the way he did and why he felt free, as an orthodox Reformed minister, to teach it in the first place. Recall that both Turretin and Pictet had a category for natural theology (alongside supernatural theology) and believed that philosophy, as a separate discipline guided by reason instead of revelation, could be a useful handmaid to theology. Witherspoon makes the same point at the beginning of his \textit{Lectures on Moral Philosophy}, disagreeing with Cotton Mather’s contention that moral philosophy is “just reducing infidelity to a system” and arguing instead that moral philosophy may be “an illustration and confirmation of the inspired writings.”\textsuperscript{57} Witherspoon had no qualms in advocating the “Union of Piety and Science” (the title of his Latin inaugural address at Princeton). After all, he believed “that the whole Scripture is perfectly agreeable to sound philosophy; yet certainly it was never intended to teach us everything.”\textsuperscript{58}

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 4:47.  
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 4:20. Cf. “Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica and other West-India Islands,” \textit{Works}, 4:193, 203). The \textit{Lectures on History and Chronology} are not included in Witherspoon’s \textit{Works}, but Robert Null has examined the lost \textit{Lectures} and provided a critical manuscript of the text (see ’John Witherspoon’s Forgotten ‘Lectures on History and Chronology’: Recognizing the Important Role of History in the Development of His Thought and Theology for Navigating Eighteenth-Century Late Protestant Scholasticism, Revivalism, and Enlightenment” [Ph.D. dissertation: Westminster Theological Seminary, 2011]). Null concludes that “Witherspoon’s use of history is also more original than the common scholarly theory that he predominately represented a synthesis of Christian faith and Scottish common sense philosophy” (p.325).  
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 3:369.
Much has also been made of Witherspoon’s line at the end of the Lectures that “perhaps a time may come when men, treating moral philosophy as Newton and his successors have done natural, may arrive at greater precision,” as if Witherspoon was trading in Bible based morality for a naïve Hutchesonian optimism and a strict Baconian empiricism. But the line comes from Witherspoon’s “Recapitulation” where he makes five summary points, the last of which states, “There is nothing certain or valuable in moral philosophy, but what is perfectly coincident with the scripture, where the glory of God is the first principles of action, arising from the subjection of the creature—where the good of others is the great object of duty, and our own interest is the necessary consequence.” In other words, Witherspoon wanted to make clear in his conclusion that there is no true virtue where the glory of God is not in view, and that there is nothing worthwhile in moral philosophy except for what supports the assured truths of revealed religion. Although he put moral philosophy on a largely parallel track to theology, Witherspoon still insisted that questions of human salvation were more important and that theological answers were more certain. “We must conclude therefore,” Witherspoon wrote, “that however stable a foundation there is for the other attributes of God in nature and reason, the way in which, and the terms on which, he will shew mercy, can be learned from Revelation only.”

If Witherspoon did not give himself over to Hutcheson and Shaftesbury when it came to assessments of human nature (specifically) or the approach to moral philosophy (more generally), what of the common conclusion that the “Common Sense method” of philosophy was “first introduced to America by President John Witherspoon”? To be sure, the Lectures on Moral Philosophy commend Common Sense reasoning as an effective antidote to the metaphysical objections of infidel writers like David Hume. And no doubt, in ridding Princeton of Berkeleyan metaphysics, Witherspoon was asserting his straightforward belief—against the “wild and ridiculous” proposition of the “immaterial system”—that there was a physical world and that it could be reliably

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60 Ibid., 3:471; see also 3:368. “Certain” is a technical term referring to the longstanding debate about whether we can be as confident about the truths of moral philosophy as we can about the axioms of mathematics or the observations of the natural sciences. Chapter 2 of Samuel Pufendorf’s seminal Of the Law of Nature and Nations (Oxford: L. Lichfield, 1710 [Second Edition]) was on the “Certainty of Moral Science” (pp.11-19).
But we must not exaggerate Witherspoon’s role as the conduit for the Common Sense Realism. Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine did not need Witherspoon to incorporate Common Sense philosophy into their thinking. Neither did Francis Alison (1705-1779), who “trained a whole generation of students in the inductive empiricism of Scottish Common Sense realism” quite apart from whatever Witherspoon did or did not do.  

More to the point, outside of a retrospective comment related by Green and the infrequent commendation of Reid or Beattie in his Lectures on Moral Philosophy, there is little evidence that Witherspoon drank deeply of common sense realism. Later in life, Witherspoon penned an entire essay on “plain common sense,” but the discussion had nothing to do with Reid’s philosophical ideas and everything to do with a more colloquial use of the term whereby Witherspoon advocated the virtues of prudence, sobriety, and patient industry.  

In the end, Peter Diamond’s analysis of Witherspoon is correct: “Neither his 1753 letter to the Scots Magazine, in which he sought to refute the Berkeleian idealism he believed underlay Lord Kames’s necessitarianism, nor his Lectures on Moral Philosophy, penned almost two decades later, had much in common with Reid’s philosophy besides their opposition to philosophical skepticism and a commitment to moral improvement.”  

One other line from Lectures on Moral Philosophy deserves special mention. Witherspoon concludes Lecture IV with these oft quoted lines:

The result of the whole is, that we ought to take the rule of duty from conscience enlightened by reason, experience, and every way by which we can be supposed to learn the will of our Maker, and his intention in

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64 Ibid., 4:377. In his lifetime, and in the years that followed, Witherspoon was renowned for flushing Edwardsean idealism out of Princeton (Life, 132-33). See also the favorable opinions of John Cosens Ogden (“Doctors Witherspoon and Smith hunted the [Edwardsean] system out”) and Charles Chauncey (“He is no friend to the distinguishing Tenets of Mr. Edwards”) who had other disagreements with Edwards besides his idealism (see John Cosens Ogden, An Appeal to the Candid, Upon the Present State of Religion and Politics in Connecticut [Litchfield, CT, 1798], p.12; Chauncey is quoted by Collins in PW, 1:114). Moreover, Ebenezer Bradford commented to Joseph Bellamy in 1772 that Dr. Witherspoon and “Mr. Spencer of Trenton” were both “great enemies to what they call Eastward, or New Divinity.” Letters to Bellamy suggest that his True Religion Delineated (1750) was being passed around in secret in hopes that pro-Edwards sentiment might regain a foothold at Princeton (see Proceedings of the New Jersey Historical Society, Vol. 6, 1851-1853 [Trenton, NJ: Daily Advertiser Office, 1853], pp.169-77). Given the frosty air between Witherspoon and the Edwardseans, historians must be careful not to judge Witherspoon’s views on revival or his allegiance to the Reformed tradition with Jonathan Edwards as the measuring stick.


creating us such as we are. And we ought to believe that it is as deeply founded as the nature of God himself, being a transcript of his moral excellence, and that it is productive of the greatest good.  

Noll cites this passage as evidence that Witherspoon’s understanding of personal virtue and social well-being had changed, so that piety was now “a product more of human nature more than of divine grace.” But we must keep in mind this is the conclusion of a section on the foundation of virtue that begins, “If I were to lay down a few propositions on the foundation of virtue, as a philosopher, they should be the following.” Witherspoon is deliberately arguing according to natural religion as opposed to revealed religion. In the next section on the obligation of virtue, Witherspoon insists that “As the being and perfections of God are irrefragably established, the obligation of duty must ultimately rest here.” And we have already seen how the last summary point of the entire course affirms that moral behavior counts for nothing unless “the glory of God is the first principle of action.”

Witherspoon consistently taught that God’s grace was necessary for the cultivation of true virtue. In September 1775, and in again in September 1787, Witherspoon preached a sermon to the senior class at Princeton entitled “Christian Magnanimity.” In this sermon, he differentiates between “worldly virtue” and “Christian virtue,” arguing that we must not confuse one for the other. Moral virtue or “worldly politeness” has value, but it is “only an imperfect imitation of Christian charity.” Christian magnanimity requires “divine grace,” which “cometh from God, who is no respecter of persons.” We see the same point made even more forcefully in the accompanying address to the senior class:

Do not think it enough to be prudent, cautious, or decent in your conduct, or to attain a good character formed upon worldly principles and governed by worldly motives. I am not against (as you all know) introducing every argument against sin, and shewing you that loose practices are ruinous to name, body and estate. Neither is it wrong that you should fortify every pious resolution by the addition of these motives. But alas! the evil lies deeper. ‘Except a man be born again, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God.’ True religion must arise from a clear and deep conviction of your

71 Ibid., 3:390.
72 Ibid., 3:471.
73 “Christian Magnanimity,” Works, 3:98-99. It is in this section that Witherspoon again repeats his favorite line: “the history of the world is little else than the history of human guilt” (3:92).
lost state by nature and practice, and an unfeigned reliance on the pardoning mercy and sanctifying grace of God.\textsuperscript{74} Witherspoon goes on to explain that though the maxims of Rochefoucauld and the manners of Chesterfield can be useful when viewed properly, on their own they amounted to a “digested stem of hypocrisy.”\textsuperscript{75} The standards of polite culture were never to be confused for Spirit-wrought regeneration and holiness. In the end, Witherspoon exhorted his students, like he had exhorted his Scottish parishioners, to pursue a “a strict, universal and scrupulous regard to truth,” for “there is no virtue that has a more powerful influence upon every other, and certainly, there is none by which you can draw nearer to God himself.”\textsuperscript{76}

Clearly, Witherspoon did not leave his theological commitments or his preaching priorities back in Scotland. We must resist the tendency to reconstruct the American Witherspoon solely (or even mainly) through the lens of his \textit{Lectures on Moral Philosophy}. Witherspoon never intended the lectures to be published (and once when they were going to be published without his knowledge, he threatened prosecution if the publisher did not desist). Witherspoon viewed the lectures as little more than a syllabus, an outline from which he would teach at greater length in the classroom.\textsuperscript{77} It was only after Witherspoon’s death that the \textit{Lectures} were published using the notebooks of former students.

This is not to suggest that Witherspoon was not influential as an educator or an instructor in moral philosophy. Indeed, it is arguably his fame as Madison’s teacher that helped forge Witherspoon’s reputation as an Enlightenment thinker rather than a Calvinist one. But whatever we are right to remember about Witherspoon the president and revolutionary, Witherspoon the theologian has been too easily forgotten. Witherspoon’s \textit{Treatise on Regeneration}, for example, was especially well regarded. John Newton said it was the best he had read on the subject,\textsuperscript{78} Wilberforce raved about the book and gave away copies to friends,\textsuperscript{79} and Green considered it Witherspoon’s most interesting and most valuable work.\textsuperscript{80} Even the \textit{New Statistical Account of Scotland} gave

\textsuperscript{74} “An Address to the Students of the Senior Class,” \textit{Works}, 3:103.
\textsuperscript{75} Ibid., 3:119.
\textsuperscript{76} Ibid., 3:120.
\textsuperscript{79} John Witherspoon, \textit{Treatises on Justification and Regeneration} [Glasgow: William Collins, 1830], ix.
\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Life}, p.95.
the treatise special mention: “[Witherspoon’s] fame did not die with him, as his theological writings, particularly his celebrated ‘Essay on Regeneration,’ are quoted as works of great merit.”

For someone whose theology has been largely neglected, in Witherspoon’s own day, he was considered an expert theologian. Within the first year of Witherspoon’s arrival at Princeton, Francis Alison sized up the Princeton faculty quite negatively, “save only that [Witherspoon] is constituted a Professor of Divinity; this they greatly wanted, & this Department he will as I expect, convince the world was fittest for him.” More impressively, the Gentleman’s Magazine (1789), in citing a list of lawyers, physicians, historians, and philosophers in the New World who were “threaten[ing] to surpass the Old,” mentioned Witherspoon in divinity alongside the likes of Franklin in politics, Rittenhouse in mathematics, and Benjamin West in painting. Perhaps Ezra Stiles was on to something. After Witherspoon’s visit to Yale in the fall of 1773, Stiles noted in his journal that President Locke of Harvard was the most learned of American college presidents, with the exception, he added, of Witherspoon in theology.

True Religion and Civil Liberty

On May 17, 1776, John Witherspoon delivered what would become his most famous address. It was a General Fast day, appointed by Congress for prayer and humble supplication before God in the face of an unknown, and possibly war-filled, future. Witherspoon’s sermon, based on Psalm 76:10, was entitled The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men. It is widely regarded as one of the principal sermons that prepared the way for the Declaration of Independence.

Many scholars have drawn attention to the second half of the sermon where Witherspoon, for “the first time” introduced a “political subject into the pulpit.” But before he got to talking about independence, the Presbyterian minister had a more important point to make. “In the first place,” he began, “I would take the opportunity on this occasion, and from this subject, to press every hearer to a sincere concern for his own soul’s salvation.” His argument was as simple as it was forceful: if you are right to care about your earthly affairs, how much more your eternal state? “I do not blame your

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82 Butterfield, p.83.  
84 PW, 1:155.
ardor in preparing for the resolute defense of your temporal rights,” he declared. “But consider, I beseech you, the truly infinite importance of the salvation of your souls.”

In urging his hearers to attend to the day of salvation at hand, Witherspoon did not call men to pursue a general interest in deistical benevolence. He did not hold out the prospect of human betterment according to refined manners and an enlightened moral sense. Just as he had on the Royal Mile almost twenty years earlier, Witherspoon called his hearers to the particulars of evangelical Christianity:

Suffer me to beseech you, or rather to give you warning, not to rest satisfied with a form of godliness, denying the power thereof. There can be no true religion, till there be a discovery of your lost state by nature and practice, and an unfeigned acceptance of Christ Jesus, as he is offered in the gospel. Unhappy they who either despise his mercy or are ashamed of his cross! Believe it, “there is no salvation in any other. There is no other name under heaven given amongst men by which we must be saved.” Unless you are united to him by a lively faith, not the resentment of a haughty monarch, but the sword of divine justice hangs over you, and the fullness of divine vengeance shall speedily overtake you.

Even in preaching about politics, Witherspoon did not lose his Calvinist sense of the human predicament. “Nothing can be more absolutely necessary to true religion than a clear and full conviction of the sinfulness of our nature and state,” he declared. “Others may, if they please, treat the corruption of our nature as a chimera: for my part, I see it everywhere, and I feel it every day.” Witherspoon may have come to talk about freedom from England, but not before he talked about freedom from sin and judgment.

As a preacher, Witherspoon was doing nothing different than he had done on the other side of the Atlantic. He had always believed that “national prosperity” and the “revival of religion” were “inseparably connected” (to quote from one of his Fast Day sermons in Scotland). And essential to the well-being of any nation—whether Britain or its colonies—was the virtue of its people. “He who makes a people virtuous, makes them invincible,” Witherspoon wrote. Which is why Witherspoon preached that “He is the best friend to American liberty, who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion. . . . Whoever is an avowed enemy to God, I scruple not to call him an enemy to his country.” Witherspoon was convinced that preaching personal regeneration

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86 Ibid., 3:32-33.
87 Ibid., 3:20.
88 Ibid., 3:21.
89 “Druid, Number 1, Works, 4:430.
was good for the nation, just as he was convinced that his interest in the formation of a new government was an exercise in loving his neighbor.\textsuperscript{90} Freedom was necessary on both accounts—spiritually and nationally. “There is not a single instance in history,” he announced, “in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire.”\textsuperscript{91} Witherspoon believed this in Scotland under patronage, and he believed this in America under British mismanagement. In both places he preached for conversion, and in both places he threw himself into current events, never doubting that only Scripture taught all that was true, only regenerate Christians could practice true virtue, and only true religion could provide the foundation for a people to regain its glory, or, as the case may be, to embrace it for the first time.

\textsuperscript{90} Cf. “Address to the Natives of Scotland Living in America,” \emph{Works}, 3:57.
\textsuperscript{91} “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men,” \emph{Works}, 3:36-37.
Appendix 1
Ashbel Green’s Biographies of Witherspoon

The story of Green’s various biographical sketches is a tangled one. In his introduction to the 1973 publication of Green’s long lost biography, Henry Lyttleton Savage notes that Green wrote the chapter on Witherspoon in Sanderson’s Lives of the Signers, but he provides no evidence for this claim. At the close of Green’s biography, Savage notes the same thing, this time referencing a line from Green to the effect that an English version of the Latin epitaph on Witherspoon’s tombstone can be found in the Appendix to Sanderson’s Biography. The Sanderson Biography itself makes no mention of Green as supplying the Witherspoon material. Further, Sprague’s entry on Green, written by Jacob J. Janeway, notes that Green edited Witherspoon’s works and “left in manuscript a somewhat extended biography of that eminent man, designed to be prefixed to a new and more complete edition of this works,” but does not say anything of the Sanderson volume when providing a long list of Green’s writings. His autobiography, The Life of Ashbel Green, does not list the Sanderson chapter in Green’s list of publications. In fact, it is hard to imagine when Green would have written the nearly hundred page chapter prior to 1823, considering he was president of the College of New Jersey from 1812 to 1822 and soon after retiring was busy editing the Christian Advocate for the next twelve years. Only after stepping aside from the Christian Advocate does Green start talking about his work—in 1835 and 1836—to write on the life of Dr. Witherspoon.

Nevertheless, there is good reason to think Green wrote the 1823 chapter. In many places the writing in Sanderson’s Biography and in Green’s Life of the Rev. John Witherspoon show signs of being related. For example, in the former we read: “This eminent individual was born in the parish of Yester, near Edinburgh, on the fifth of February, 1722. His parentage was respectable, and his family had long possessed a considerable landed estate in the east of Scotland.” And in the latter we find almost the

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1 Life, p.7.
2 Ibid., pp.276-77.
3 Sprague, 3:487.
4 Ashbel Green and Jones Joseph Huntington, The Life of Ashbel Green, V.D.M., Begun to Be Written By Himself in His Eighty-Second Year and Continued to His Eighty-Fourth (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1849), pp.627-28.
5 Ibid., pp.451, 460, 465.
6 The nine-volume Biography was initially published in 1820-1827 under the direction of several different authors, beginning with James Sanderson (hence, it often goes by his name). The quotation on Witherspoon’s birth can be found in Robert Waln Jr., Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of
same: “In this parish, a son John Witherspoon, probably the first child of his parents, was born, on the 5th of February 1722. His parentage and family connexions were, highly respectable. The Witherspoons had long possessed a valuable lease in the East of Scotland.” It is possible Green lifted material from the earlier Sanderson chapter written by someone else, but considering how explicit Green is about borrowing in places from Crichton’s Memoir, it seems more plausible that Green failed to mention his source in this instance because he was using his own material. The line Savage references (see above) concerning the English translation of the Latin epitaph further suggests that Green wrote both accounts. Most convincing is the 1877 record of the Massachusetts Historical Society, which, in listing the authors of the various biographies in the Sanderson volumes, notes Ashbel Green as the author of the chapter on John Witherspoon. While it is still difficult to know when Green wrote the chapter prior to the close of 1823 and why he never made mention of it, the fact that the biographers were not widely known by 1877 suggests anonymity was desired for the project. Perhaps working on the life of Witherspoon was one of the “other considerations not necessary to be specified” Green referenced when resigned from the presidency in 1822.

The chapter in Sprague’s Annals is easier to trace. Unlike most of the entries, no author is explicitly given at the end of the Witherspoon chapter. Sprague notes in the opening Chronological Index that the chapter on Witherspoon comes from “never before published” material from Ashbel Green. At the head of the chapter itself, there is a footnote indicating three sources: the biographical sketch from Stanhope Smith, the funeral sermon from Rodgers, and the manuscript memoir by Green. The last three pages in the Sprague chapter are verbatim quotations from the final chapter in Green’s biography on the summary of Witherspoon’s character and talents. The rest of the

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*Life*, p.25. Collins notes that Witherspoon’s birth date of February 5, 1722 is mistaken (or more likely, simply according to the Old Style calendar). Parish baptismal records indicate John Witherspoon was baptized on February 10, 1723. Scottish children were normally baptized within a week or two of birth, a practice the minister of Gifford (John Witherspoon’s father) would have certainly followed. That means he must have been born in 1723 and likely on the fifth of February, given the universal attestation of that date (PW, p.11).

*Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Vol. 15:1876-1877 (Boston: Published by the Society, 1878), p.393. There is no evidence in the minutes for Collins’ later claim that Stanhope Smith also supplied material for Sanderson’s *Biography* (cf. PW, p.273).

*Life of Ashbel Green*, p.429.

Sprague, 3:xix-xx.

Ibid., 3:288.

Ibid., 3:297-300.
Sprague chapter follows closely the order of Green’s fuller biography, and in many places repeats the exact wording.

If Green finished the Witherspoon manuscript by the end of 1840 or the beginning of 1841—as Savage convincingly argues based on diary entries, correspondence, and a footnote in the third chapter of the manuscript\(^\text{13}\)—then the evolution of Green’s biographical sketches went something like this: He first wrote up a historical piece on Witherspoon sometime prior to 1823 for the publication of Sanderson’s *Biography*. After that, in preparation for a third edition of *Works* which never came to be, Green, utilizing Crichton’s *Memoir* (1829), expanded his initial sketch into a full-fledged biography (completed in 1840 or 1841). This *Life of the Rev. John Witherspoon* passed into the hands of Green’s executors upon the latter’s death on May 19, 1848.\(^\text{14}\) Sometime prior to the third volume of the *Annals* in 1858, Sprague received permission from James S. Green (the son of Ashbel Green) to make use of his father’s manuscript,\(^\text{15}\) which Sprague closely summarized (in shortened form) and from which he directly quoted.

\(^{13}\) “Introduction” to *Life*, pp.5-7.

\(^{14}\) See *Life of Ashbel Green*, p.483.

\(^{15}\) Sprague, 3:297.
Appendix 2
Witherspoon’s List of Systematic Theologies

The “List of Books of Character” is six pages long in Tait’s appendix and includes Theology, Controversy, Moral Philosophy, History, Belles Lettres and Criticism as main categories, each of which has several subcategories. There are twelve “Systems” listed under Theology:

Calvini Institutiones
Limborchi Theologia
Theses Ludovici le Blanc
Pictate Theologie Chretienne
Pearson on the Creed
Burnet on the 39 Articles
Wittenbachii Theologia
Doddridge’s Lectures
Witsii OEconomia Foederum
Cameronis Opera
Episcopii Opera
Forbesii Instructiones historico-theologiae

Several brief comments are in order. First, it should not be assumed that these works necessarily reflect Witherspoon’s theological commitments. The “List of Books of Character” was designed to help students in being well read on the subject and in furnishing their libraries. The goal was well-rounded reading in the most significant literature, which is why Lord Shaftesbury can be included under “Moral Philosophy,” even though Witherspoon despised Shaftesbury.

Second, it is worth noting that all twelve works are from writers working from, or in conversation, with the Reformed tradition, albeit some more squarely than others (e.g., John Cameron taught at Samur and influenced Moses Amyraut; Simon Episcopius and Philipp Von Limborch were of the Remonstrant party in the Netherlands; Gilbert Burnet was also an Arminian).

Third, although the geographical representation is diverse, every theologian (after Calvin) labored in the time of Reformed Orthodoxy, mostly in the second half of High Orthodoxy or in the first part of Late Orthodoxy. John Calvin (1509-1564) and Benedict Pictet (1655-1724) ministered in Geneva; Simon Episcopius (1583-1643) and Philipp Von Limborch (1633-1712) taught in Amsterdam; Herman Witsius (1636-1708) taught

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at Leiden; Ludovici Le Blanc (1615-1675) instructed Huguenots in France; John Pearson (1613-1686) was an Anglican scholar; Philip Doddridge (1702-1751) was an English Nonconformist pastor and educator; Daniel Wytttenbach (1706-1779) was a Swiss theologian who labored in Bern and Marburg; John Cameron (c. 1579-1625), John Forbes (1593-1648), and Gilbert Burnet (1643-1715) were all Scottish by birth, though Cameron taught in France, Forbes was exiled to the Netherlands, and Burnet became a Bishop in England. Other Reformed theologians from High and Late Orthodoxy in Witherspoon’s library include William Ames (1576-1633), Moise Amyraut (1596-1664), Richard Baxter (1615-1691), John Flavel (c. 1627-1691), Walter Marshall (1628-1680), Frederick Spanheim (the younger, 1632-1701), J.H. Heidegger (1633-1698), and Matthew Henry (1662-1714). Theodore Beza (1519-1605) and Zacharias Ursinus (1534-1583) are also present.

Fourth, of the twelve theologians listed under “Systems,” only five are mentioned by name in Witherspoon’s writings (and these only a handful of times): Calvin, Pictet, Pearson, Doddridge, and Burnet. Even though Witherspoon was clearly influenced by scholastic sources and showed evidence of relying on scholastic distinctions, he differed from the conventions of scholasticism in that he did not practice the copious citation of authorities.
Appendix 3
Sermons: *Practical Discourses on the Leading Truths of the Gospel*


Sermon 1: All Mankind by Nature under Sin (Rom. 3:23)
Sermon 2: The Sinner Without Excuse before God (Psalm 130:3)
Sermon 3: Hope of Forgiveness with God (Psalm 130:4)
Sermon 4: The Nature of Faith (1 John 3:23)
Sermon 5: Christ’s Death a Proper Atonement for Sin (1 John 2:2)
Sermon 6: The Love of Christ in Redemption (Rev. 1:5)
Sermon 7: Redemption the Subject of Admiration to the Angels (1 Peter 1:12b)
Sermon 8: Glorifying in the Cross (Gal. 6:14a)
Sermon 9: The World Crucified by the Cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14b)
Sermon 10: The World Crucified by the Cross of Christ (Gal. 6:14b)
Sermon 11: Fervency and Importunity in Prayer (Gen. 32:26)
Sermon 12: Fervency and Importunity in Prayer (Gen. 32:26)
Sermon 13: Obedience and Sacrifice Compared (1 Sam. 15:22)

Note that Sermons 10 and 12 were second sermons on the same text. From Witherspoon’s 1768 Almanack we can determine when the five Action sermons (i.e., Communion messages) in the collection were preached:

Sermon 4: July 27, 1766
Sermon 5: July 26, 1767
Sermon 6: July 25, 1762
Sermon 7: January 10, 1761
Sermon 8: July 24; 1763

The *Discourses* were meant to “form a little system of the truths of the gospel.”

In introducing the collection, Witherspoon remarked, “I commit them to the candour of the public, with very little concern as to the judgment of those who read only to pass sentence upon the ability of the writer, but earnestly praying, that God may make them instrumental in turning sinners from the error of their ways, and promoting the sanctification and peace of those who have known the truth as it is in Jesus.”

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1 The two quotations come from the prefatory “Advertisement” written by Witherspoon.
Appendix 4
Satirical Poem to the Presbytery of Paisley (c. 1764)

The following poem spans five pages in *The Papers of John Witherspoon* held by the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.). In keeping with the practice of the time, names are rendered with the first and last letter (and occasionally other letters) and a line in between. Where I am confident of the intervening letters, I have included the names in a footnote, along with other explanatory notes. Difficult words are marked with a (?)

Many thanks to Ronald Crawford, an expert on the Snodgrass Affair, for using his expertise to improve my initial transcription and for confirming that the writing is in Witherspoon’s hand.

********

Epistle of Thanks from J—n Sn—s to the Rev’d P—y of P—y

Most reverend Fathers of the church
accept this humble boon
As you’ve not left us in the lurch
a Prey to W—n

[next stanza was written in the margin]

In spite of publick declarations
and our nocturnal Riot
You undertook our Vindication
and we lost little by it

That Furious Zealot in his Rage
will pardon no man’s Crimes
But you know something of the Age
and spirit of the times.

You know it is in vain to think
that men of sense and spirit
Will ever cease to swear and drink
While as their Purse will bear it.

Nay even when the money’s scarce
We drink to bear down sorrow
For all the World’s but a farce
And we may die tomorrow

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1 “Epistles of Thanks from John Snodgrass to the Rev’d Presbytery of Paisely”
2 “Witherspoon”
Must there be no indulgence given
in liquid Consolation
To a poor sinner who is driven
almost to Desperation

As for the sacramental Feast
of which we were accus’d
You knew the Matter was a jest
So kindly be excus’d

For this we are in duty bound
to give you many thanks
And this shall make your healths go round
When we renew our pranks

If we were man of Ready wit
amidst your Panegyrick
We'd give this W—n³ a hit
in Style and Phrase Satyrick

And was he not an animal
in hopes for your Assistance
Who to his coming here at all
made such a stout Resistance⁴

Nay was he not a tenfold fool
to look for a confession
When Ballie P—k that holy soul
for us made intercession⁵

We knew there was nought to fear
for H—r & W—Il W—Is—n⁶
Since H—y & J—n W—r⁷ were
to sup with Mr. N—n⁸

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³ “Witherspoon”
⁴ The Presbytery objected to Witherspoon’s call to Laigh Kirk because he was reputed (correctly) to have authored the anonymous satire against the Moderates Ecclesiastical Characteristics.
⁵ Likely a reference to Robert or George Pollock, members of the town council who published a notice in the Caledonian Mercury (June 7, 1762) disclaiming Witherspoon’s sermon and narrative as “highly injurious to the characters of several gentlemen whom we have reason to think well of” (Ronald Lyndsay Crawford, The Lost World of John Witherspoon: Unravelling the Snodgrass Affair, 1762 to 1776 [Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 2014], p.72).
⁶ Robert “Hunter” and “William Wilson” were manufactures in Paisley and part of the group that profaned the Lord’s Supper along with John Snodgrass.
⁷ On July 7, 1762, the Presbytery appointed a committee of four ministers to draw up an overture regarding the Snodgrass ordeal. Their overture, approved by the Presbytery, rebuked Witherspoon (though not by name) as vengeful, vindictive, and as behaving in “a measure highly unsuitable to the Ministerial Character.” The four ministers on the committee were all Moderates: Henry Millar, John Warner, John Fleming, and James Hamilton. The reference here is to Henry Millar (or perhaps James Hamilton) and John Warner, Witherspoon’s leading opponent in the Presbytery (see Crawford, Lost World, pp.97-107).
⁸ Possibly the merchant and grocer John Neilson, whose wealthy son of the same name endowed a school in Paisley and is celebrated as a generous benefactor of the city. Or it could be a reference to Henry Millar
The way for Clergymen to win
a sacred delicious Dinner
is still to wink & spare the sin
or justify the sinner

While you the Charms of Virtue trace
most humbly we adore it
But for this Doctrine of free Grace
we perfectly abhor it

Go on with Eloquence divine
The same great Ends pursue
And let your heavenly doctrines in
a noble Point of View

Altho it cost a dreary time
We'll go about by Campbletown⁹
To pay our Compliments in Rhyme
unto your Brother H_______n¹⁰

We wish we could assure (?) him in
Grammatical Construction
How much he charmed us with his fine
Poetical production

How sweetly did Miss Betty sing
of J____ny S_____ss Marriage
and truss them all up in a string
who thought of a Miscarriage¹¹

The Parson and his Sister Sue
and eke(?) his lovely Wife
And Mistress B—y C—n too
and zealous Mistress F—e

Miss G—s that Sly and Saucey slut
Mischief & shame light on her

of Neilston, in which case the previous line would reference James Hamilton. Witherspoon normally references last names, so Hamilton makes more sense, except that the ending of the H name looks more like a “y” than an “n.”

⁹ In personal correspondence, Ronald Crawford informed me that New Campbletown was a district in Paisley. Campbeltown is also a small burgh on the west coast of Scotland at the end of the Kintyre Peninsula.

¹⁰ Perhaps James Hamilton, a member of the four-person overture committee mentioned earlier and minister (first charge) at the Abbey Church in Paisley. Or perhaps George Houston who provided an alibi for Snodgrass (Crawford, Lost World, pp.131, 135)? Or, with the reference to rhyme, maybe even William Hamilton the Jacobite Poet (d. 1754)?

¹¹ Snodgrass dragged in Witherspoon’s wife, Elizabeth, claiming that he had testimony from a woman who was “with Mrs. Wotherspoon” and heard her say that “the witnesses were just now with Mr Wotherspoon in the house,” suggesting that John Witherspoon was guilty of concocting the precognition himself.
She gave so merciless aloud(?)
To Ladies of Strict honour

What tho they go to midnight Ball
upon slight Invitation
There's nothing passes them at all
but modest Conversation

Soft Touch & pleasant Innuendoes
as light as any Feather
While two are standing in the windows
and whispering together\footnote{By some accounts, Snodgrass was seen through the windows in a compromising position with a woman of ill repute.}

Perhaps a clever Nickname too
upon those ancient Lasses
Who born 'bove fifty years ago
must needs be Stupid Asses

And cannot have that Life & Fire
in Air or Conversation
Which youth and beauty do inspire
and sprightly Recreation

And what polished Gentlemen
can any Town afford
Than learned Masters of the Pen
And Heroes of the Sword

Your Daughter Parents never fear
will every Day improve
For all the Language that they hear
is blasphemy and Love

How much are we indebted then
unto this priestly Poet
We always thought him a good man
and now his works do show it

The Lord grant him a fruitful Wife
and more domestick Peace
That publick eyes(?) & private Strife
henceforth may ever cease
Appendix 5

Witherspoon’s Connection to the Sheddens and James Montgomery

The Sheddens (or Sheddans), who appear often in presbytery and session minutes—sometimes as respected leaders and sometimes as troublemakers—were one of the leading families in Ayrshire. The original Robert Shedden was a seventeenth-century merchant in Beith. He had two sons: Robert, who acquired the lands of Roughwood, and John, the ancestor of Morrishill who purchased Marshland in 1686. On the Roughwood side, the second-generation Robert married Jean Harvey (June 20, 1685) and together they had three children: John, Robert, and Elizabeth. Just to make matters confusing for historians, Elizabeth married John Shedden of Muirston, while John Shedden of Marshland (previous generation) had two sons named John (of Marshland) and Robert (of Morrishill). The third generation Robert Shedden of Roughwood also had a son named Robert, born in 1740 or 1741.¹

Both John Shedden Marshland and Robert Shedden (who could be John’s brother or cousin) were elders on the Beith session and listed among the heritors who voted in favor of Witherspoon’s call. “Mr Sheddan of Roughwood” (which could be a John or a Robert) was the one who, after the pro-Muirhead side came up short, finally “craved that Mr Witherspoon’s call may be instantly signed.”² In 1750, Robert Shedden (presumably not of Roughwood or that would have been mentioned) was nominated “Stent-Master Collector and Overseer” and charged with the task of collecting property taxes for the upkeep of the Beith Kirk manse.³

One particular episode involving the Sheddens deserves special mention. In spring of 1756, a “Robert Shedden in Morricehall parish of Beith” was caught up in a now-famous case involving a runaway slave known as James Montgomery. Years earlier Shedden had purchased Montgomery (who came to Scotland under the name Shanker) from Captain Joseph Hawkins in Virginia. After giving Montgomery an apprenticeship in Beith, Shedden was determined to sell his slave back to Hawkins, for the original sale price of £56 plus 1000 pounds of tobacco in light of Montgomery’s apprenticeship. When Montgomery refused to go, Shedden forcibly brought him to the Port of Glasgow. Montgomery escaped, but was soon captured in Edinburgh and imprisoned. Robert Gray,

² Irvine Minutes, CH2/197/5/102-4.
³ Irvine Minutes, CH2/197/5/291.
Procurator Fiscal of the Ballie Court of Edinburgh, took up the case, arguing, in part, that Shedden’s so-called possession “was instructed in the Christian Religion and was publicly Baptized in the presence of the Congregation in the parish Church of Beith and named James Montgomery Shedden, as is instructed by a certificate under the hand of John Witherspoon minister of the said parish.”\(^4\) Sadly, Montgomery died before the case could be heard before the Court of Session.

With so many Sheddens in Ayrshire, it is difficult to be certain which Robert Shedden is in view. It would appear to be Robert Shedden of Morrishall, the brother of John Shedden or Marshland, except several other brothers are mentioned in the court documents that are not listed in Paterson’s history, but he may not have taken pains to be exhaustive. Given his obvious wealth and social standing, it is quite possible the legal petitioner Robert Shedden was the same one who served on the session with Witherspoon and collected the property taxes for Witherspoon’s house. If that is the case, Witherspoon’s actions in tacit support of Montgomery, who received the certificate from his pastor the day before he was to be taken to Glasgow, are all the more striking. In this instance at least, Witherspoon seems to have taken the side of a converted slave, against the interests of one of the most powerful families in his own parish (and possibly on his own session).\(^5\)

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John Witherspoon

Note: I have not attempted to provide an exhaustive list of Witherspoon’s published materials and their subsequent editions. Such a list has already been compiled by Varnum Lansing Collins (see President Witherspoon, 2:235-66). The list below includes published works and editions used in this thesis and important for understanding Witherspoon the Scottish minister. The two editions of the Works published in Philadelphia do not list an editor, but we know from other sources that Ashbel Green edited these volumes.

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