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R. B. C. HOWELL AND THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR
BAPTIST PARTICIPATION IN THE BENEVOLENT EMPIRE

A Dissertation
Presented To
the Faculty of
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Charles Michael Wren, Jr.

December 2007

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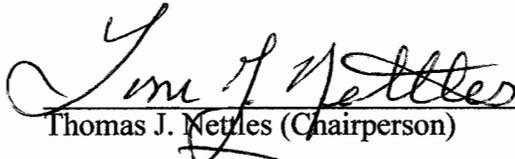
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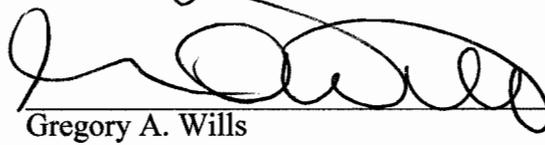
APPROVAL SHEET

**R. B. C. HOWELL AND THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR
BAPTIST PARTICIPATION IN THE BENEVOLENT EMPIRE**

Charles Michael Wren, Jr.

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Thomas J. Nettles (Chairperson)


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Date November 5, 2007

To Angela,
my wonderful wife,
whose sacrifice and dedication to her calling
have taught me the meaning of faithfulness,
and to my children
who have provided me with a precious education
which no institution could impart

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PREFACE

Bringing back to the light the theology of R. B. C. Howell from dusty shelves, old boxes, and microfilm reels has been a true joy. On one of my research trips, a librarian asked why I was interested in old volumes of sermon notes from a Baptist preacher in the nineteenth century. When I informed her that I was interested in his theology, she looked at me in a puzzled expression and said, “I guess that would be interesting.” The project has been not only interesting, but very edifying as well. My own theology, preaching, and devotion to the Lord have improved in the process. I want to thank my Lord, Jesus Christ, for the opportunity to pursue this study. May the Lord use it to advance his Kingdom.

I could not have conducted this labor of love, however, without the assistance of numerous people. Mr. Bruce Kiesling and the staff of the James P. Boyce Centennial Library at Southern Seminary were helpful and patient as I sent them up to “the cage” countless times to procure old, worn out books. Archivist Jason Fowler has also been very generous in allowing me to use the wealth of material in the Special Collections. Bill Sumners, Taffey Hall, and the staff at the Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives have also provided invaluable assistance, both in supplying the Lynn E. May, Jr. study grant, which funded some of this research, and in allowing access to numerous delicate manuscript volumes. The staff of the Manuscripts Department of the Tennessee State Library and Archives also provided access to their collection, as has Fred Anderson of the Virginia Baptist Historical Society. David L. Puckett of the Southern Seminary

Office of Doctoral Studies approved an external studies grant which also helped to fund this project. Thomas J. Nettles, Gregory A. Wills, and Gregg R. Allison served as readers of this dissertation. Their advice on style and content has helped make this dissertation far better than it could have been without them. Dr. Nettles deserves special recognition as my supervisor. I may not have implemented his advice as effectively as I should have, but I deeply appreciate it.

I must thank my wife, Angela, who has never questioned our decision to leave a pastorate in South Carolina with two children under the age of four and begin again in Louisville. Her hard work for our family, her prayers, her friendship, and her love have made this project possible. Finally I want to thank our children, William and Anna, who have encouraged Daddy to keep going and finish the race.

C. Michael Wren, Jr.

Louisville, Kentucky

December 2007

CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

An Integrated Theological Foundation

Robert Boyte Crawford Howell (1801-1868) was one of the most prominent Baptist leaders in the South during the antebellum era. He served as pastor in three significant Southern cities: Norfolk, Richmond, and Nashville. He wrote seven published books, edited a Baptist periodical for approximately twelve years, and served in numerous denominational posts. In addition to serving in various state mission, education, tract, and temperance societies, Howell was elected vice president of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1846, a post at which he served until being elected president in 1851. The Convention reelected him as president at four successive meetings, but at the 1859 meeting he declined to serve. At the next meeting the Convention again elected him vice president. Howell also served as an officer at various times on the Foreign Mission Board and the Bible Board, and was on the first Board of Trustees for the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. His denominational ministry, writing, and pastoral service placed him in an influential position.

Contemporary scholars have taken notice of Howell's influence upon the people of his day. Brooks Holifield, in his seminal work on Southern religious history, *The Gentlemen Theologians*, identified "an elite hundred" ante-bellum Southern preachers who exerted a significant influence upon Southern religion because of their educational attainments and occupancy of pulpits in important Southern towns and cities during a time when the cities began to set the pace of Southern cultural life. R. B. C.

Howell is one of twenty-three Baptists on that list.¹ Based partly on Holifield's contribution, Walter Shurden argued that these twenty three Baptist "gentlemen theologians" served a key role as denominational theologians to Southern Baptists before the advent of Southern Seminary brought professional theologians to prominence within the Convention.² R. B. C. Howell is again among eleven individuals of importance listed by Shurden. Howell's position as author, editor, denominational leader, and pastor of churches in prominent Southern cities gained him influence on the thinking of Southern Baptists in his time.

Howell used his position of influence within the Baptist denomination in order to promote among Baptists a movement that was gaining momentum by the time he began his ministry in 1828. During the first half of the nineteenth century, Baptists joined other major Protestant denominations in America, particularly the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Methodists, in organizing along denominational and inter-denominational lines for the purposes of missions and benevolent work. Historians have often referred collectively to these organizations as "the benevolent empire."³ At the same time this empire was under construction, American religious life was undergoing great change. Populist movements arose to challenge the theological and ecclesiastical hegemony of the past. Revival movements and the collision of competing

¹E. Brooks Holifield, *The Gentlemen Theologians* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1978), 24-26, 218.

²Walter Shurden, "The Pastor as Denominational Theologian," *Baptist History and Heritage* 15 (July 1980): 15-18.

³The phrase was used to describe the benevolent work of Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Episcopalians, and sometimes other denominational groups, by Gilbert Hobbes Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844* (New York: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1933), 17-18; Chard Powers Smith, *Yankees and God* (New York: Hermitage House, 1954), 359-361. More recent scholars adopting the phrase include George M. Marsden, "Christianity and Democracy: From the Revolution to the Civil War," in *Eerdmans' Handbook to Christianity in America*, ed. Mark A. Noll and others (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1983), 189-191; Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1987), 292; Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 176; Edwin Scott Gaustad and Leigh E. Schmidt, *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 170.

denominational groups on the frontier brought theological issues to the forefront of discussion. Howell used his influence to promote the work Baptists and other American Protestants were doing on behalf of missions and benevolence, while at the same time counteracting the negative influence he thought competing theological positions would have upon the movement. As he interacted with these movements, Howell kept in his sight the importance of properly integrating the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He was convinced that these movements, in each case, either distorted the biblical doctrine of God's sovereign initiative and objective work in salvation or proper role of human responsibility in accomplishing God's purposes.

This dissertation will argue that R. B. C. Howell used his position of influence to promote Baptist denominational participation in missions and benevolent work by demonstrating in his soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology the consistent connection between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in God's mission to the world. This dissertation will demonstrate this thesis by answering the following question: how did his understanding of the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and human responsibility affect the way R. B. C. Howell formulated the doctrines of salvation and the church, and the church's mission to the world? By demonstrating how the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility influenced Howell's theological formulation, the dissertation will have clarified how one important Southern Baptist theologian responded to the movements which he thought threatened the cause of missions and benevolence among Baptists, particularly the antimission movement, hyper-Calvinism, populist Arminian theology, and Landmarkism. Further, the dissertation will demonstrate how Howell constructed a theological foundation for the church's mission built upon a carefully integrated view of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

This dissertation will analyze Howell's theological writings in order to elucidate his mission theology. By doing so the dissertation will uncover the theological presuppositions Howell considered necessary for the support of missions and benevolent

work. According to Missiologist Charles Van Engen, the modern study of mission theology, which he alternately called theology of mission, began as an academic discipline with the work of Gerald H. Anderson.⁴ In a work entitled, *The Theology of Christian Mission*, Anderson expressed concern that the missionary enterprise in the twentieth century had suffered from a shift of underlying theological presuppositions. He complained, “A major cause for confusion in missions today had come from the inadequacy of the various attempts to formulate the theology of mission in recent years. There have been attempts from the culture-centered, kingdom-centered, Bible-centered, Church-centered, and Christ-centered points of view.”⁵ In a later article Anderson defined “theology of mission,” as “concerned with the basic presuppositions and underlying principles which determine, from the standpoint of Christian faith, the motives, message, methods, strategy, and goals of the Christian world mission.”⁶ A theology of mission therefore involves articulating the theological basis of the church’s mission as well as how it will implement that mission in its current context. Anderson defined the basis of the church’s mission as follows:

The source of mission is the triune God who is himself a missionary. God’s mission is to redeem this world and restore it to a unity of purpose with the divine will and way. The Bible . . . witnesses to God’s revealing and redeeming activity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, from the event of Creation onwards. In Jesus Christ . . . the meaning of history comes into focus, the total activity of God becomes coherent, and the deeper needs of human existence are fulfilled. The church as the confessing people of God is the sign and steward of God’s mission in the world and for the world. Mission is participation in the promise and purpose of God between the coming of Christ and the fulfilled kingdom of God.⁷

⁴See Charles Van Engen, “Theology of Mission,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 949; also Van Engen, *Mission on the Way: Issues in Mission Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), 17.

⁵Gerald H. Anderson, “The Theology of Mission among Protestants,” in *The Theology of the Christian Mission*, ed. Gerald H. Anderson (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1961), 15.

⁶Gerald H. Anderson, “Theology of Mission,” in *Concise Dictionary of the Christian World Mission*, ed. Stephen Neill, Gerald H. Anderson, and John Goodwin (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), 594.

⁷*Ibid.*

Understanding the basis of the church's mission involves grasping the redemptive purpose of God in the world as revealed in Scripture, consummated in Jesus Christ, applied to the redeemed by the Holy Spirit, carried out in history after Pentecost by the church, and fulfilled in the coming kingdom of God. Mission theology as a discipline arose well after Howell's death in 1868. However, Howell saw the importance of a robust theological foundation for the mission of the church and viewed the proper integration of the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility as a critical component of that foundation.

A theological examination of R. B. C. Howell's work has been needed. Despite Howell's prominence in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1840s through the 1860s and despite his prolific work as an editor, author, and preacher, most of the work done on him has been biographical. Rufus B. Spain contributed first to the biographical work on Howell with his master's thesis at Vanderbilt University. Later in his career he published much of this material in a series of three articles for the journal *Tennessee Historical Quarterly*. Linwood Tyler Horne's 1958 dissertation on R. B. C. Howell admirably narrated the major events and contributions of Howell's life. Though Horne briefly described the content of some of Howell's major works, he did not synthesize Howell's theology or attempt to put his views into the context of Baptist or antebellum American theology.⁸ One further analysis of Howell was conducted by Kenneth Vaughn Weatherford in his 1991 dissertation on the Graves-Howell controversy. Weatherford laid out in a blow-by-blow fashion all of the events of the important conflict between Howell and J. R. Graves, the editor of the *Tennessee Baptist*, Landmark Baptist leader, and a member of First Baptist Nashville. While this dissertation should be considered the definitive work on this controversy, the entire range of Howell's theology

⁸Linwood Tyler Horne, "A Study of the Life and Work of R. B. C. Howell" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1958).

was not within the scope of Weatherford's work.⁹ Finally, Joe W. Burton presented a popularly written account of important aspects of Howell's ministry in his book, *Road to Augusta* (1976), but did not provide any extensive reflection on Howell's theology.¹⁰

James Esmond Hilton, in his 2005 dissertation, began to remedy the void left by earlier scholars. He investigated two ecclesiological controversies in which Howell was involved and explained the contributions Howell made to nineteenth century Baptist ecclesiology through those controversies. Because of the scope of his work, however, Hilton only discussed Howell's views on the historical and biblical basis for mission societies and his concern for local church autonomy during the Landmark controversy. While Hilton's dissertation isolated two areas of ecclesiology in which Howell evidently made an impact upon his contemporaries, he acknowledged that a full examination of Howell's theology would be helpful.¹¹

This dissertation will examine several key areas of R. B. C. Howell's theology and most of his writings, published and unpublished, in order to explain how he formulated his mission theology in light of the need to integrate properly the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The theological examination will be laid out according to systematic-theological categories and will present Howell's thought on each issue in its historical context, taking note of the controversies and theological discussions relevant to Howell's work. The remainder of chapter one will detail the rise of enthusiasm for the benevolent empire among American Baptists, illuminate the rival groups which Howell considered a threat to the success of Baptist missions and

⁹Kenneth Vaughn Weatherford, "The Graves-Howell Controversy" (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1991).

¹⁰Joe W. Burton, *Road to Augusta: R. B. C. Howell and the Formation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1976).

¹¹James Esmond Hilton, "Robert Boyte Crawford Howell's Contribution to Baptist Ecclesiology: Nineteenth Century Baptist Ecclesiology in Controversy" (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005).

benevolence, and explain Howell's efforts to establish missions and benevolent work during his ministry. Chapter two will examine Howell's formulation of the doctrine of the divine decrees. Chapter three will explain Howell's views on total depravity and effectual calling and will close by examining how his views on these doctrines shaped his conviction regarding gospel proclamation to the lost. Chapter four will examine Howell's soteriology, including his convictions regarding the extent of the atonement, justification by faith, sanctification, and perseverance. Chapter five will discuss the doctrines of a believer's church, believer's baptism, and close communion as they relate to the sovereign work of God in regeneration and the responsibility of humans to use means to accomplish God's will. In addition, the chapter will explain Howell's conviction that the progress of Baptist principles and cooperation for missions are critical for the accomplishment of God's mission. Chapter six will explain Howell's view on the millennium and demonstrate the relationship between Howell's eschatology and his views on the mission of the church in the world. The concluding chapter will summarize Howell's understanding of the basis of the church's mission and the integral nature of the relationship between the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility for the accomplishment of that mission.

Baptist Benevolence and Its Rivals

The Rise of the Benevolent Empire

R. B. C. Howell's work to promote missions and benevolence during his ministry between 1828 and 1868 bolstered a movement which was already gaining momentum among American Protestants. Between 1810 and 1860, American evangelicals established a host of missions and benevolent organizations. The paradigm for this network of denominational and interdenominational organizations came from the voluntary societies established in England during the previous century, an early example being the Anglican Church's Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (1698), and a

later success being the British and Foreign Bible Society (1804).¹² Evangelicals intended to use these organizations to spread the gospel across the young nation and around the world and bring needed reforms to society. As historian Mark Noll pointed out, these benevolent enterprises largely served evangelistic purposes early on. By the 1830s, however, evangelical leaders began to organize voluntary societies intended to promote social change as well.¹³ Howell took an active role in promoting missionary, educational, and social benevolence organizations during his forty year ministry. Baptists were just beginning to garner widespread support for the benevolent empire from among their churches in the 1820s, and even then in the midst of significant controversy, but by the last decade of Howell's ministry Baptists had staked an impressive claim within the denominational and interdenominational network. Howell directed his attention not only toward promoting benevolent organizations, but also toward articulating theological principles which would serve as an ideological foundation for this work.

David Benedict, reflecting on fifty years of ministry among Baptists in the United States, offered this assessment of the changes which occurred in the denomination between 1810 and 1860 with respect to benevolent enterprises:

When I look back I can hardly realize the changes which have taken place in our denomination, in my day, in the means and intelligence of benevolence. It seems almost incredible that a society which so lately was so slow to engage in any new enterprise, and was so jealous of any collegiate training for its ministers, should at this early period have so many colleges and kindred institutions spread over the land; that such a flood of periodicals of different kinds should so soon be added to the old magazine; that so much should have been done by this people in the home and foreign mission departments, in the Bible cause, in the publication of Baptist literature, in Sunday Schools and Bible classes, and in kindred labors of various kinds; and all since I first began to collect the scanty and scattered materials for their history.¹⁴

¹²Barnes, *The Antislavery Impulse, 1830-1844*, 18; John R. Bodo, *The Protestant Clergy and Public Issues, 1812-1848* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1948), 18; Mark A. Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 182.

¹³Noll, *America's God*, 183.

¹⁴David Benedict, *Fifty Years among the Baptists* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1860), 27. By expressing surprise at the changes which had taken place in "the means and intelligence of

Prior to 1810, Baptist denominational life revolved mainly around the activities of the local churches and associations. After 1793, when English Baptist missionary pioneer William Carey sailed to India, associations in America that supported the missionary enterprise, both foreign and domestic, did so in several ways: by disseminating information about missionary needs, setting up missionary committees within the association, and inspiring people to support the cause of missions during their annual meetings.¹⁵ However, no organization outside the local association existed for American Baptists prior to the formation of the Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Society in 1802. Georgia Baptists from the Georgia and Savannah associations organized the General Committee of Georgia Baptists in 1803 in an effort to spearhead mission work among the Creek Indians and found a Baptist academy. Both the Massachusetts and Georgia organizations, however, were only regional in nature. Baptists in America had started numerous small societies for the support of itinerant preaching, but as Benedict said, as of 1810, “this large and increasing body seemed to have had no idea that they had either the call or the ability to send out missionaries to foreign lands.”¹⁶ Certainly no national organization existed for that purpose. With regard to educational endeavors, Baptists could claim only Rhode Island College (eventually to be named Brown University), though numerous small academies existed. *The Massachusetts Baptist Missionary Magazine* was the Baptists’ only periodical. Though in the not too distant future Baptists would use periodicals extensively for the spread of their principles and the promotion of benevolent enterprises, they operated in 1810 in what Benedict called “an intolerable state of privation.”¹⁷

benevolence,” Benedict was referring to the dramatic proliferation of benevolent societies and to the great improvement in organization and strategy of those institutions between 1810 and 1860.

¹⁵Walter B. Shurden, “Associationalism among Baptists in America, 1707-1814” (Ph.D. diss., New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 1967), 176-77, 181-82.

¹⁶Benedict, *Fifty Years among the Baptists*, 112.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 26.

In that same year, however, Congregationalists in America formed the first national organization for the promotion of foreign missions—the first outpost for the benevolent empire among Baptists—the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. Adoniram Judson and Luther Rice were appointed as missionaries of this body and set sail for India in February 1812. Knowing they would meet William Carey, they both studied the subject of baptism and came to the conviction that the Baptist doctrine of believer’s baptism by immersion was the only scriptural practice. Subsequently, they both resigned their appointment by the Congregationalist board and Rice returned to the United States to recruit Baptist support for their mission. In the fall of 1813 Rice began a tour of the United States, calling for the formation of a national denominational structure for the support of foreign missions. On 18 May 1814, Rice’s dream materialized as delegates meeting in Philadelphia formed the “General Missionary Convention of the Baptist Denomination in the United States for Foreign Missions.”¹⁸

From where David Benedict sat in 1860, the situation in the Baptist denomination was dramatically different than it had been in 1810. The General Missionary Convention, known popularly as the Triennial Convention and the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, had operated successfully as a foreign missionary agency since 1814, first as a nationwide body and after 1845 as a society for the northern churches. The Baptist General Tract Society, later renamed the American Baptist

¹⁸The story of the beginnings of the mission movement among Baptists is told within the context of the emerging antission dissent by James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 35-64. See also Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People, 1607-1972* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974). Baker details the rise and development of the institutions associated with the mission movement in nineteenth century America. For an account of the history of missions in America, see Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity*, vol. 4, *The Great Century in Europe and the United States of America, A. D. 1800-A. D. 1914* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), 175-476. For recent essays dealing with the history of North American missions, see Daniel H. Bays and Grant Wacker, eds., *The Foreign Missionary Enterprise at Home: Explorations in North American Cultural History* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2003); Wilbert R. Shenk, ed., *North American Foreign Missions, 1810-1914: Theology, Theory, and Policy*, Studies in the History of Christian Missions (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

Publication Society, was formed in 1824. The American Baptist Home Mission Society was formed in 1832. Numerous Baptist colleges were founded. The South Carolina Baptist Convention was formed in 1821 and numerous state conventions followed. Baptist periodicals were in circulation in nearly every state. In 1845 the Southern Baptist Convention was organized with both a Foreign Mission Board and a Domestic and Indian Mission Board under its umbrella, and a third board was added in 1851, the Bible Board. The Southern Baptist Publication Society was formed in 1847 as a publishing agency for Baptists in the South but was independent of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Southern Baptist Sunday School Union was formed in 1857, and the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary opened its doors in 1859. During the fifty-year span of Benedict's ministry Baptists added numerous benevolent organizations to the evangelical network, inevitably bringing change to the denomination.

Antimission Dissent

Not all Baptists agreed with the changes that were taking place in the denomination in the United States, however. Starting in 1813, Luther Rice traveled the country visiting churches, associations, and mission societies in order to communicate information about the Triennial Convention and collect funds for its support. He visited the Concord Association in Middle Tennessee at its annual meeting in 1815, but the association postponed the decision regarding support until the following year. An animated discussion regarding support of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions ensued at the associational meeting in 1816. Daniel Parker, the moderator and pastor of Hopewell church, threatened, in the words of historian John Bond, to "burst the association" if it did not drop its correspondence with the board and cease its missionary operations. Fearing division, the association resolved not to support the movement.¹⁹

¹⁹John Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association of Middle Tennessee and North Alabama* (Nashville: Graves, Marks, and Company, 1860), 26; Dan B. Wimberly, *Frontier Religion: Elder Daniel Parker, His Religious and Political Life* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 2002), 18-19.

Resistance to the work of the General Missionary Convention arose predominantly in the South. As Wyatt-Brown points out in his seminal article on the antimission movement, Baptists voiced their protests against the General Missionary Convention in various areas of the North and Northwest, but antimissionism was most prominent in the South, particularly in remote and sparsely settled areas.²⁰ In Kentucky, the South Kentucky Association voted in 1816 not to correspond with the Board, referring to the General Missionary Convention. The Licking and the Green River Associations initiated opposition in 1820 and 1824 respectively.²¹ In Georgia, the Hephzibah Association voted in 1819 not to correspond with the Board.²² In 1827, in a move which proved to be very influential, the Kehukee Association in North Carolina reversed its course and repudiated “all Missionary Societies, Bible Societies and Theological Seminaries, and the practices heretofore resorted to for their support.”²³ The document which fueled this repudiation, referred to in the association minutes for 1826 as “A paper purporting to be a Declaration of the Reformed Baptist Churches of North Carolina,” became known as “The Kehukee Declaration.” This stand by the association and the document which served to justify it became so well known that missionary advocates at times referred to the entire antimission movement as “Kehukeeism.”²⁴

²⁰Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture,” *The Journal of Southern History* 36 (November 1970): 514-15.

²¹J. H. Spencer, *A History of the Kentucky Baptists from 1769 to 1885* (Cincinnati: J. R. Baumes, 1885), 2:108, 140, 241-42.

²²W. L. Kilpatrick, *The Hephzibah Baptist Centennial 1794-1894* (Augusta, GA: Richards and Shaver, 1894), 38-41. For a detailed account of the antimission movement in central and south Georgia, see John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists in the Wiregrass South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), 55-85.

²³Cushing Biggs Hassell, *History of the Church of God, from the Creation to A. D. 1885; Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (Middletown, NY: Gilbert Beebe’s Sons, 1886), 736.

²⁴For a recent account of the antimission movement within the Kehukee Association and an analysis of the views of Joshua Lawrence, author of the Kehukee Declaration, see Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 83-101.

Opponents to mission societies were motivated by a number of factors. Economic turmoil followed the War of 1812. This, coupled with concern over the centralization of financial power in the Bank of the United States, had caused uneasiness on the part of many lower class farmers and workers. Strongly distrusting the motives of the mission organizations, which were headquartered in the aggressive financial centers of the Northeast, leaders of the antimission movement decried the missionary preachers for their continued appeals for money.²⁵ Beyond economic issues, however, antimission leaders also reacted to challenges to their religious beliefs and practices. The disestablishment of Christianity after the American Revolution led to a burgeoning denominational pluralism. The Great Revival which swept the South soon afterward brought religious fervor and methodological changes into an increasingly diverse landscape. The movement to found and support benevolent societies among Baptists brought the threat of further changes to the Baptist denomination. Antimission leaders, such as John Taylor, Daniel Parker, Gilbert Beebe, and Joshua Lawrence, sought to preserve and defend what they viewed to be traditional Baptist practices by appealing to the example of primitive Christianity.²⁶ A primitive impulse, appealing to the paradigmatic example of the New Testament Church, had long been a part of Baptist rhetoric in America. Baptists desired to maintain the purity of the church by remaining faithful to the pattern for church life set in the New Testament.²⁷ Under this rubric, the antimission leaders argued that mission societies were unscriptural institutions. The New Testament gives no command for their formation and provides no example of their formation. Furthermore, as agencies operating outside the local churches, they threatened

²⁵Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South and West," 510-11; Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 73-75.

²⁶Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 4-11.

²⁷Richard T. Hughes and C. Leonard Allen, *Illusions of Innocence: Protestant Primitivism in America, 1630-1875* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 90-92; Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 36.

to usurp the prerogative of the local church as the sole scriptural agency for the propagation of the gospel to the world.²⁸ This primitive impulse provided the theological rubric for responding to the vast changes encroaching upon Baptists' religious life.

Controversy with antimission Baptists raged throughout the 1820s and 1830s. In some associations, such as the Mississippi Association, pro-mission forces were virtually unopposed early on in the movement, only to suffer setbacks due to antimission opposition late in the 1830s.²⁹ The Concord Association in Tennessee saw the mission effort defeated under the leadership of Daniel Parker in 1816. The movement experienced a resurgence, however, under the leadership of James Whitsitt in the early 1830s and controversy again erupted.³⁰ The Ochlocknee Association in South Georgia, organized in 1827, was predominantly antimission from the start.³¹ Despite differences in timing and numbers, however, by 1840 antimission opposition had been raised in nearly every Baptist association in the South and West and in some cases gained the victory.³² Following the example of the Kehukee Association, a significant number

²⁸Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 77-78; Tom Nettles, *The Baptists: Key People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity* (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2005), 2:229-31. Key primary texts expressing early antimission opposition are Daniel Parker, *A Public Address to the Baptist Society and Friends of Religion in General, on the Principles and Practice of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions for the United States of America* (Vincennes, IN: Stout and Osborn, 1820); John Taylor, *Thoughts on Missions* (n.p.: Franklin, KY, 1820); Joshua Lawrence, *The American Telescope, by a Clodhopper, of North Carolina* (Philadelphia: Printed for the Author, 1825).

²⁹Benjamin Griffin, *History of the Primitive Baptists of Mississippi, from the First Settlement by the Americans, up to the Middle of the XIXth Century* (Jackson, MS: Barksdale and Jones, 1853), 118-25.

³⁰John Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association*, 52-60. Also R. B. C. Howell, "A Tribute to the Memory of Rev. James Whitsitt, of Tennessee, Continued," *The Baptist Memorial and Monthly Record* 9 (May 1850): 150-53.

³¹Crowley, *Primitive Baptists in the Wiregrass South*, 68.

³²Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists*, 101.

decided to “come out from her, and be separate.”³³ By 1847, according to *The Baptist Register*, antimission Baptists totaled 68,068 while “Regular” Baptists totaled 655,536.³⁴

An Emerging Populist Theology

During the time of the emergence of the benevolent empire and the modern mission movement, and along with the crisis brought by the antimission movement, America also experienced a crisis of religious authority among its various denominations. Historian Nathan Hatch noted the concern expressed by leaders such as New England Congregationalist Timothy Dwight and Presbyterian Lyman Beecher over the proliferation of uneducated men in the pulpit. Unfortunately for these educated religious leaders, America’s rapid expansion into frontier areas did not coincide with a rapidly expanding economy in those areas. Many of the churches in these areas, Baptist, Methodist, and the churches of the growing Restoration Movement under the leadership of Alexander Campbell, consisted of people without the means of an education and received the services of preachers likewise uneducated. Many of these frontier leaders, Hatch explained, espoused egalitarian Jeffersonian ideals and reacted against the Calvinism that characterized the New England establishment.³⁵

Numerous anti-Calvinist groups flourished after the American Revolution. Most notable among these groups were the Methodists, who grew from a size of 712 churches in 1790 to 19,883 churches in 1860. Baptists, who outnumbered the Methodists in 1790 with 858 churches, had 12,150 churches in 1860—a distant second. Methodists

³³2 Cor 6:17. Antimission writers often cited this text.

³⁴The total given for “Regular Baptists” could be deceptive. Simply because a church chose not to associate with the antimission movement does not mean that the church actively supported missionary enterprises either. The figures are taken from H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987), 376. See also Wyatt-Brown, “The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South and West,” 527.

³⁵Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 17-22, 170-83.

during the same time period increased from comprising 1.5 percent of the U. S. population to comprising 5.5 percent.³⁶ Methodists were a significant presence in Tennessee in particular. The Tennessee Conference, occupying Middle Tennessee, recorded 22,326 members in 1830, a net gain of 13,321 members in six years.³⁷ Methodist itinerants, along with opposing Calvinist theology, tended to lack a college education and found success by conducting a ministry of rugged self-denial and by preaching popular discourses and uttering passionate exhortations.³⁸

Another major group opposed to the Calvinistic orthodoxy of the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Baptists was the Restoration movement. Some of the key leaders of this movement, Barton W. Stone, Elias Smith, and Alexander Campbell, came out of Calvinistic backgrounds and opposed what they viewed as the destructive tendencies of the Calvinist system upon churches. Their preaching emphasized sin, conversion, and grace, and instead of touting a theological system they called upon all Christians to discard such traditions and return to primitive Christianity. Armed with the Bible, these reformers circumvented the sophistication of the theological elite and called upon common Christians to interpret the Bible without the accretions that had accumulated over time. The impact of this movement was substantial, particularly in western states such as Kentucky, Ohio, and Tennessee, though Pennsylvania and Virginia also experienced a significant impact. According to available statistics, Baptists in Kentucky numbered 45,442 members in 1829. After three years of division, Kentucky Baptist records indicate a total membership of 35, 862 in 1832. Based on these statistics, J. H. Spencer estimated that the Baptists of Kentucky lost approximately 9,580 people,

³⁶Statistics are drawn from Mark A. Noll, *America's God*, 166, 169.

³⁷John B. M'Ferrin, *History of Methodism in Tennessee* (Nashville: Southern Methodist Publishing House, 1873), 3:375.

³⁸See John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 48-79.

approximately one-fifth of its membership, to the Restoration movement between 1830 and 1832.³⁹ Baptists were not alone in suffering loss, however, for defections to the Disciples came from Methodist, Presbyterian, and Universalist churches, and occasionally from Episcopalian and Lutheran churches as well.⁴⁰

The church over which Howell assumed pastoral duties in 1835 had been particularly influenced by the Restoration Movement. Philip S. Fall, who came to Nashville, Tennessee from Louisville, Kentucky, in January 1826, had embraced Campbell's views while serving the Baptist church in Louisville. Despite his support for Campbell, he was invited to the Nashville Baptist Church, in 1826. In less than two years, at the 1827 annual meeting in fact, the church announced to the association that it was leaving its fellowship to embrace the Restoration movement.⁴¹ In 1830, having realized that the church could not be persuaded to discard the Restoration Movement's teachings, five members of the church left and reconstituted themselves as Nashville Baptist Church.⁴²

³⁹J. H. Spencer, *A History of the Kentucky Baptists from 1769 to 1885* (Cincinnati: J. R. Baumes, 1885), 1:642. Also Frank M. Masters, *A History of Baptists in Kentucky* (Louisville: Kentucky Baptist Historical Society, 1953), 222.

⁴⁰Errett Gates, *The Early Relation and Separation of Baptists and Disciples* (Chicago: The Christian Century Company, 1904), 68.

⁴¹ Five members of the Nashville Baptist Church received permission to withdraw after the church adopted Campbell's principles and in 1830 these former members reconstituted the Nashville Baptist Church. See also Herman A. Norton, *Tennessee Christians: A History of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Tennessee* (Nashville: Reed and Company, 1971), 19-25. For more on Philip S. Fall, see Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, From its organisation July 22d, 1820 to July 22d, 1862," vol. 2. First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee. Typescript 2: 107-11. A typescript version of the original 2 volume manuscript of this work was prepared under the direction of Prince E. Burroughs and was microfilmed by the Historical Commission of the SBC. Because Howell did not number the pages on his original manuscript, the typescript version will also be referenced each time the source is cited.

⁴² Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 1. Typescript 1:42-78. The Christian Church in Nashville was quite large in 1835, with over 600 members. See Herman A. Norton, *Tennessee Christians*, 25. Howell's congregation in September 1836, by comparison, nineteen months after his arrival, numbered 160 members, though no doubt more were in attendance. See *The Constitution, Declaration of Faith, and Covenant of Nashville Baptist Church*, (Nashville: W. Hasel Hunt & Co., 1836), 16.

A third group to modify the Calvinism of their theological heritage were the Cumberland Presbyterians. Following the advent of the Second Great Awakening in Kentucky, the Cumberland Presbytery experienced opposition from the Synod of Kentucky over the licensing of exhorters who did not meet the educational requirements and who had expressed concern over certain articles in *The Westminster Confession of Faith*. Several prominent ministers in the Presbytery refused to submit to the Synod and left to form the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in 1810. *The Westminster Confession*, the guardian of Calvinist orthodoxy for the Presbyterians from whom they had seceded, became the basis for their own confession. The committee drafting the confession, however, explained: “they have endeavored to erase from the old Confession the idea of fatality *only*, which has long since appeared to them to be taught in part of that Book.”⁴³ The new denomination was particularly prevalent in Kentucky and Tennessee. By 1829, seven out of the seventeen Presbyteries that constituted the church had territory in Tennessee.⁴⁴ Considering the impact of the Methodists, Cumberland Presbyterians, and churches of the Restoration Movement in the west, the churches with a more populist, egalitarian mindset espousing anti-Calvinist theology were flourishing in Tennessee. This situation made the prospect of success for the Baptist mission movement discouraging when Howell arrived in the state. Establishing a benevolent empire for Baptists in Tennessee would be a daunting task.

⁴³*The Constitution of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church in the United States of America: Containing the Confession of Faith, A Catechism, the Government and Discipline, and the Directory for the Worship of God* (Nashville: M. & J. Norvell, 1815), iii-iv.

⁴⁴*Ibid.*, 159-64; Ben M. Barrus, Milton L. Baughn, and Thomas H. Campbell, *A People Called Cumberland Presbyterians* (Memphis: Frontier Press, 1972), 50-82; for a chart of the Cumberland Presbyteries in 1829 see 115. John V. Stephens, after assembling many of the key documents related to the formation of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, summarized the differences between the Cumberland Presbyterians and the Presbyterian Church thus: “The founders of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church were standing for a modified type of Calvinism, which the Presbyterian Church then was not willing to concede,” Stephens, *The Genesis of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church* (Cincinnati: The Lane Seminary Building, 1941), 120.

The Progress of Missions in Tennessee

The Founding of the State Convention

The turmoil of debate and division certainly took its toll on the Baptist churches of Tennessee. As Robert Boyte Crawford Howell, pastor, newspaper editor, and leader of the mission party in the state, later assessed:

The cause of missions was brought almost to an entire pause. In many large portions of the state it had never been presented, or at all advocated. Only the firmly decided and intrepid, in the small circles where they had influence, dared to join its supporters. All the remainder and all the great middle class many of whom were eminently pious and devoted christians, but capable of being led by the dominant party, continued with the antimissionaries.⁴⁵

The churches of Tennessee had already endured a decade of controversy before the resurgence of the mission movement in the state. Debate over the doctrine of predestination and the rise of Campbellism had resulted in division and defection.⁴⁶ After a decade of controversy which had weakened the churches in the state, a few “decided and intrepid” leaders began to call on Tennessee Baptists to support missions. This move would not prove to bring immediate healing to Baptists in the state.

An invitation to organize for missions came when Baptist pioneer Garner McConnico, pastor the Big Harpeth Church in Williamson County, invited interested individuals from the Cumberland Association to assemble at his church in May 1833. At the meeting, McConnico proposed the formation of a convention for domestic missionary purposes. Though the association eventually rejected the plan, determined leaders pressed forward and assembled at Mill Creek in October to form the convention.⁴⁷ Given

⁴⁵Howell, “Missions and Anti-missions in Tennessee,” *The Baptist Memorial and Monthly Record* 4 (November 1845): 308. Citations of Howell’s work will occasionally have misspellings and improper comma placement, particularly in his newspaper editorials and unpublished manuscripts. These idiosyncrasies will be maintained in the quotations. Furthermore, Howell consistently used the lower case “c” when writing “Christians,” though modern usage demands capitalization. The word will occur frequently in quotes throughout the dissertation and will remain despite modern usage.

⁴⁶See Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association* for an account of this turmoil in Middle Tennessee.

⁴⁷Howell, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee,” vol. 1. Typescript 1:42-63.

the vastness of the territory, the convention decided at its first annual meeting to divide the Executive Committee “so that there could be a quorum obtained in each of the natural divisions of the state,” providing for conventions in East, West, and Middle Tennessee.⁴⁸ Despite these organizational milestones, the antimission party hampered the success of the convention, preaching and speaking against it when opportunities arose.⁴⁹ The Baptist churches in Tennessee were divided and unorganized when R. B. C. Howell entered the state in 1834.

The Early Ministry of R. B. C. Howell

Robert Boyte Crawford Howell was born on 10 March 1801, in Wayne County, North Carolina.⁵⁰ The son of a yeoman farmer, Howell received a limited English education. During his own reading of the Bible and the *Book of Common Prayer* he experienced a work of the Holy Spirit on his heart and adopted the view that the immersion of believers is the only true mode of baptism. Robert T. Daniel of Raleigh baptized him on 6 February 1821, and he joined the church in Naughunty, which was close to his home. According to his own testimony, Howell was pressed by the congregation and the pastor to deliver his first religious discourse, which he preached the Sunday following his baptism. He was licensed by the church to preach the gospel three weeks later. Over the next three and a half years, Howell preached to his friends and

⁴⁸*Minutes of the Third Annual Meeting of the Baptist State Convention for West Tennessee and of the Second Annual Meeting of the West Tennessee Baptist Education Society* (Nashville: Carpenter & Co., 1837): 15.

⁴⁹Howell, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee” vol. 1. Typescript 1:114. See also Albert W. Wardin, Jr., *Tennessee Baptists: A Comprehensive History, 1779-1999* (Brentwood, TN: Executive Committee of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1999), 123-136.

⁵⁰Howell’s own account of his background, from which this account is largely drawn, is found in Howell, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee,” vol. 1. Typescript 1:79-92. See also Linwood Tyler Horne, “A Study of the Life and Work of R. B. C. Howell”; Rufus B. Spain, “R. B. C. Howell, Tennessee Baptist, 1801-1868” (M.A. thesis, Vanderbilt University, 1948); idem, “R. B. C. Howell: Virginia Baptist Tradition Comes to the Old Southwest,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 14 (1955): 99-119.

relatives in his neighborhood. He entered Columbian College in November, 1824, as a student in the preparatory department. Though he later gained admission to the theological department, he withdrew for unknown reasons on 19 May 1826, without earning a degree.

On his way home to North Carolina Robert B. Semple, then president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, urged him to accept an appointment as missionary to the Portsmouth Association. He agreed and preached for the remainder of the year to the twenty-two churches in the area assigned. At the end of 1826, the pastor of the church in Norfolk, one of the cities in his circuit, died, and the church asked Howell to serve as interim pastor. Thus, in January 1827 Howell was ordained and his relationship with the Cumberland Street Church began. After a year of labor as its interim, Howell accepted the call of the Cumberland Street Church to serve as its pastor, a position he retained until May 1834.

In that same month, Howell received a letter from the First Baptist Church of Nashville, Tennessee, urging him to consider accepting the pastorate of that church. For some time Howell had been considering the great need of the churches in the Mississippi Valley. The offer of First Baptist, combined with an offer by the American Baptist Home Mission Society to receive support for service in Nashville, seemed providential, and Howell set off in June 1834 to visit Nashville.⁵¹ He visited for several months and returned to Norfolk to move his family.

⁵¹This is precisely how Howell told the story of his departure from Norfolk in "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee" and how subsequent biographers have related it, but this is not the entire story. The church had reelected Howell as pastor on 17 April 1834. Howell, however, declined the offer, and a notice appeared in *The Religious Herald* on 9 May that he had resigned. Howell himself preserved a memo he had written (apparently not for public distribution) on 1 May 1834, detailing his reasons for resigning. According to the memo, the church was plagued by division, partly as a result of the preaching of Alexander Campbell. In light of the divisions, the already troubled financial state of the church had grown worse and Howell himself had been the target of numerous accusations. As a result, Howell said, "I cannot, under such circumstances expect the blessing of God. The community around us see and are disgusted with the proceedings among us. I am discouraged. I therefore have declined longer to serve the church as her Pastor." Howell, "My Reasons for Resigning the Church in Cumberland Street

R. B. C. Howell's Efforts for the State Convention

Howell arrived in Nashville with his family by boat on 3 January 1835, and immediately set to work addressing the problems that plagued Baptists in the state. The first number of his new periodical, *The Baptist*, appeared that same month. In the March issue he described the state of the churches this way:

These are eventful times. The elements of discord, are in active commotion. The Church, like an army without concert, or any very definite object, moves rapidly in all directions. At what point she will finally take her stand, it is impossible to determine. Will the effervescence of the mass, dash asunder its bonds and destroy itself, or only work off its impurities! The present is indeed, a time for prayer. Every lover of Christ should look with deep anxiety, to the existing condition and prospects of the Church in Tennessee.⁵²

Howell sought to remedy the discord that plagued the churches of Tennessee by convincing them to support the cause of mission and benevolent societies.

This was not a new project for Howell. During his pastorate in Norfolk he had actively supported the Baptist General Association of Virginia, the Virginia Baptist Education Society, the Baptist General Tract Society, and the Virginia Society for the Promotion of Temperance.⁵³ He was also well acquainted with the principles of the antimission movement. The Portsmouth Association, of which Cumberland Street Church was a member, was formed out of the Kehukee Association in 1790. In 1829, the minutes of the Portsmouth Association record that its mother association had declared non-fellowship “with churches or individuals who promote Bible, Mission or Tract Societies, and Theological Seminaries.” In response, the Portsmouth Association resolved “that we regard this measure as opposed to the spirit of the gospel, and

Norfolk Va,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, vol. 14, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville. The letter from Nashville arrived after Howell had already resolved to leave.

⁵²Howell, “The Church in Tennessee,” *The Baptist*, March 1835.

⁵³Horne, “The Life and Work of R. B. C. Howell,” 69-70; William L. Lumpkin, *First Baptist Church Norfolk, 1805-1980* (n.p.: Privately Published, n.d.), 20-25.

undeserved by the institutions to which it refers, they being preeminently calculated, in our opinion, to promote the kingdom of the Redeemer.” R. B. C. Howell had been a prominent figure at this meeting.⁵⁴

Howell also addressed the controversy in *the Religious Herald* in a letter to the editor in 1832. Union Church near Smithfield, North Carolina, an area in which Howell had preached before leaving for Columbian College, had later excluded supporters of mission societies and benevolent causes in accord with the principles of the Kehukee Association. Those who had been excluded formed a church which had subsequently experienced revival. Howell rejoiced in his letter that the Lord had brought revival, “but also, that the brethren at Union may see, and feel that in the course which they have pursued, they have been fighting against God; for how shall they condemn those whom God has blessed, and how shall they oppose those institutions which Jehovah has appointed to further his kingdom and glory!”⁵⁵

When he arrived in Nashville, R. B. C. Howell exhibited the same conviction that the promission forces were experiencing the blessing of God. He began the process of bringing harmony to the discord which existed among the churches through the medium of a monthly paper, *The Baptist*. In his first editorial, he declared his intention to use *The Baptist* as a medium of communication through which he would report the activities of Bible, tract, and mission societies. He also intended, however, that the paper serve as a medium of communication for Baptists across the state, through which both those in favor of and those opposed to mission and benevolent societies could express their opinions regarding “their correctness and utility.”⁵⁶ This first issue also contained a report of the activities of the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, the American Baptist

⁵⁴Reuben Jones, *A History of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards, Broughton, & Co., 1881), 13, 35.

⁵⁵Howell, “Revival at Smithfield, N. C.,” *The Religious Herald*, 28 September 1832.

⁵⁶Howell, “Our Paper,” *The Baptist*, January 1835

Home Mission Society, and the Baptist General Tract Society, as well as a notice regarding the death of William Carey.

In subsequent months Howell was even more direct in his advocacy of the modern mission movement. In the February issue, Howell printed a letter from a correspondent named John Blodgett in which Blodgett argued for the mission cause. Commenting upon the letter, Howell stated, “The doctrine so affectionately taught in the letter before us, must and will prevail in the West as it has every where else. Four-fifths of all the Baptists in this country and in Europe, and the whole church in every other quarter not only advocate it but act upon it with energy and success.”⁵⁷ The cause of missions must prevail, Howell explained in the same editorial, because moral darkness and death hover over millions like an unbroken cloud. The commission to preach the gospel to every creature has been issued by Christ, and the one impediment that stands in the way of its fulfillment is covetousness. As long as churches are more concerned about their daily bread than about the fulfillment of this command of Christ, the work of mission societies will be necessary.

Debate over the propriety of mission organizations in general and over the Tennessee Baptist Convention in particular became a regular feature of *The Baptist* for the next several years. In an effort to avoid division or the dissolution of the Convention, several ministers on both sides of the issue agreed to call a meeting whose object was to heal dissension and preserve the harmony of the churches. Held at Bethesda meeting house in Rutherford County on 27 March 1835, messengers from Concord and from other associations discussed the issues cordially. The report issued from the meeting stated that churches had been “very unwise in supporting ministers, in violation of plain scriptural precepts and example, seeing that the minister should live of the Gospel, and that the church should support him.” Churches should instead support their ministers financially

⁵⁷Howell, “Editorial,” *The Baptist*, February 1835.

and provide for ministers who feel it their duty to preach the gospel “at destitute places in this country, or in foreign lands.” In spite of the perceived success of the meeting, many on both sides considered the report to be unsatisfactory. From Howell’s perspective, the report stopped short of proposing a course of action which would heal the current division of sentiments and therefore left action up to the individual churches.⁵⁸

Events after the Bethesda meeting did little to avert the inevitable division. At the fall meeting of the Concord Association, three churches dissented from the majority that favored the report. At the 1836 meeting of the association a motion was made to dissolve the association due to a lack of harmony. Despite vigorous efforts by Howell, James Whitsitt, and others, the motion passed and the association was effectively dissolved. Eleven churches gathered to form the Stone’s River Association, which maintained antimission principles from the beginning. Ten churches, under the leadership of Howell and Whitsitt, declared the act of the majority unconstitutional and disorderly and maintained the Concord Association.⁵⁹

As the dispute over the correctness of the mission movement hit the Concord Association and consumed the editorial pages of *The Baptist*, the work of the Tennessee Baptist Convention continued. Howell was named president of the convention at its October 1835 meeting. At the 1837 meeting, twice as many delegates were present as had been at any earlier meeting. Howell contributed to the success of the convention not only by his leadership as its president, but also through a series of letters published in the pages of *The Baptist*, addressed to John M. Watson, an antimission leader and pastor of a

⁵⁸Howell, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee,” vol. 1. Typescript 1:114-15, 128-30. A report of the meeting appeared in *The Baptist* in the April 1835 issue and Howell offered his thoughts on the resolution approved at the meeting in “The Bethesda Meeting,” *The Baptist*, May 1835.

⁵⁹Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association*, 52-58; Horne, “A Study of the Life and Work of R. B. C. Howell, 137-38; Spain, “R. B. C. Howell: Progressive Baptist Minister in the Old Southwest,” *Tennessee Historical Quarterly* 14 (1955): 208-09.

church in the Concord Association.⁶⁰ Beginning in 1838 a movement surfaced to remove the name “convention” and replace it with “association.” After several years of investigation not only the name but indeed the structure of the body itself was changed. The Baptist General Association of Tennessee was constituted in 1842 with Howell as moderator. He retained this post until he removed to Richmond, Virginia, and also contributed to the formation of Bible, education, foreign mission, and publication societies within the state.⁶¹

When in the spring of 1850 resigned the pastorate of First Baptist Nashville to accept the call of the Second Baptist Church of Richmond, Virginia, he left behind a field of ministry that had been fruitful. Many of the goals he set out to accomplish had been realized. The convention was strong. The antimission dissenters had gone their own way, and many leaders had emerged throughout the state to carry on the objectives of the General Association. In his farewell discourse to his church, Howell concluded,

Sixteen years have passed since our labors commenced. At first, except in the department of Domestic Missions, I was emphatically alone. As time wore away, able coadjutors, in advocacy of the other enterprises, came in slowly one after another. Intelligence was disseminated, and the scene gradually brightened. At last our people everywhere were aroused and now they are united in “every good word and work.”⁶²

Howell remained in Richmond as pastor of Second Baptist Church until the summer of 1857. The Southern Baptist Convention was in Louisville that year, and during the Convention, members of First Baptist Nashville met with Howell, then president of the Convention, about the possibility of returning. Howell took the trip to Nashville after the Convention, but writing to his wife during the trip he said, “I

⁶⁰Howell’s ten letter series began in the 9 January 1837 issue of *The Baptist* and continued until 15 June 1837.

⁶¹Howell, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee” vol .1. Typescript 1:307.

⁶²Ibid. Typescript 1:307.

determined before I left home not to accept this church. I shall not accept it.”⁶³

Nevertheless, he did accept it and returned with his wife to Nashville in July. He served the church throughout the Civil War, despite imprisonment during the Federal occupation of Nashville, and resigned in 1867 after suffering a debilitating stroke. He died the following year, Sunday, 5 April 1868. The church received the news immediately after its morning worship service.

Though Howell’s public ministry ended in 1867, followed shortly by his death, he left behind the fruits of a prolific career as a theological writer and polemicist. During his ministry in Norfolk, Howell published two pamphlets, the first a review of the baptismal theology of the Episcopal rector of that city and the second a series of sermons on the doctrine of believer’s baptism.⁶⁴ After moving to Nashville he published his first book, *The Terms of Communion at the Lord’s Table*, in 1841. His second book, *The Deaconship*, appeared in 1846. This was followed by *The Way of Salvation* in 1849. After moving to Richmond, he published three more books. *The Evils of Infant Baptism* came off the press in 1851. *The Cross* was published in 1854, and *The Covenants* appeared in 1855. After returning to First Baptist Nashville in 1857 his writing continued even though he did not publish another book in his lifetime. He wrote his historical works, *The Early Baptists of Virginia*, which appeared in print posthumously, and “A Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville Tennessee,” which has never been published, between 1857 and his death in 1868. Also during this time he revised *The Covenants* into a new work “The Christology of the Pentateuch,” though this revision

⁶³R. B. C. Howell, Nashville, to Mary Ann Morton Toy Howell, Richmond, VA, The Morton Boyte Howell Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville. Why Howell changed his mind is unknown.

⁶⁴Howell, *A Review of ‘The Office of Sponsors in Baptism, Explained and Vindicated, in a Letter to the Congregation of Christ Church, By Henry W. Ducachet, A. M. Rector of that Church.’ By R. B. C. Howell, in a Letter to the Church in Cumberland Street, Norfolk, VA. of which He is the Pastor* (Norfolk: Shields & Ashburn, 1831); idem, *Three Sermons, on the Sacrament of Baptism, Preached in the Baptist Church in Cumberland Street, Norfolk, on the Morning, Afternoon, and Evening of 13th of January 1833* (Norfolk: J. C. West, 1833).

was not published. He also prepared a practical book entitled “The Family,” though it, too, remains in manuscript form. Aside from these books he published several pamphlets containing discourses given on public occasions, edited *The Baptist* for approximately twelve years, and published nearly fifty sermons. In his historical works, his published books on theology, his editorial work, and his published sermons, the doctrines of salvation and the church are major subjects, and the integration of the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility constitutes a major theme. All of his work falls within Howell’s overall purpose to strengthen the church for the work God had given it—missions and benevolence.

Resolving a Theological Dilemma

As one of the chief promoters of the benevolent empire among Baptists in Tennessee, R. B. C. Howell understood that resolving controversy and strengthening the churches entailed more than successfully passing motions in associations and increasing participation in the work of state and national conventions. A true resolution would come only when the theological confusion which contributed to the disagreements that plagued the Baptist churches had been dispelled. This confusion was propagated by the ministers themselves. In his third issue of *The Baptist*, Howell explained, “From this source [i.e., the ministers] have originated strange and unheard of doctrines, of which a mind in any other quarter of the world would never have conceived, and which are equally at variance with reason and the word of God.” These problematic doctrines revolved around two extremes. Howell continued, “Some are found who hold the doctrine of divine sovereignty in such a way as to exclude addresses and exhortations to sinners; and others to avoid this extreme renounce the doctrine of divine sovereignty, and make man the arbiter of his own destiny.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵Howell, “The Church in Tennessee,” *The Baptist*, March 1835.

The theological dilemma that needed to be resolved was how to integrate the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility so that neither is obliterated in the process. On the one hand, advocates of an ultra-predestinarian position, which Howell defined as Calvinism, hold that God predestines all the actions of men. He asserted, "This view of the case at once exonerates all sinners from blame, and makes God the prime author of all the crimes in the world." Arminians, on the other hand, arrogantly claimed human free will to be the turning point in salvation.⁶⁶ Neither extreme was acceptable to Howell.

Though he was convinced that the theological situation among Baptists in Tennessee was unsatisfactory, he was not blind to the historical circumstances which contributed to it. Many Baptists in Tennessee had embraced an ultra-predestinarian doctrine in reaction to the Arminianism that characterized the Methodists and, to a certain extent, the Cumberland Presbyterians who had cultivated the religious soil before the Baptists became numerous. Howell concluded, "It is not surprising, that in these circumstances, the Baptists became insensibly ultra-predestinarian." In this context the extreme "two seeds" predestinarian doctrine of Daniel Parker had taken root and Parker became "the general favorite."⁶⁷ A decade after Parker's departure from the state, the presence of Arminian teaching increased again as Alexander Campbell's followers began to proliferate. As Howell complained later in his ministry, "Any it seems who can get up a novelty and has sufficient unscrupulousness, can lash our people into a fury."⁶⁸

A tendency to embrace extremes and respond to the notions of demagogues does not provide very fertile soil for sound theology, however, and sound theology was

⁶⁶Howell, "To Rev. John Rushing. Letter No. IV. Predestination," *The Baptist* 15 September 1837.

⁶⁷Howell, "Missions and Anti-missions in Tennessee," 308.

⁶⁸Howell, "A Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, vol. 2. Typescript 2:168.

what Baptists needed in order to resolve this crisis. In Howell's view, no doctrine could stand alone, and no preacher or theologian should so highlight one doctrine that other truths connected with that doctrine undergo distortion. Howell explained this in a series of essays on predestination. He argued, "And here let me say, that a perfect conception of any one doctrine of the Bible cannot be obtained, without a lucid knowledge of its bearing upon every other, and the exact relations which it has to practical and experimental religion." In other words, a doctrine cannot be understood properly without first understanding how it influences and is influenced by other doctrines, and how that doctrine influences Christian devotion and spirituality. This understanding, Howell lamented, is not always exhibited by preachers and theologians. He continued, "Many a Gospel truth has been murdered by an attempt to separate it or by so preaching as to sever it from some other truth with which it was vitally connected." As an illustration, Howell explained that just as the light which comes forth from a prism will not illuminate objects in the same way "as when [the light is] blended in its own perfect connections," so the gospel is distorted when one severs the proper connections between its doctrines. "Hence," Howell concluded, "the impenetrable ambiguity of much of the preaching we have on the subject before us."⁶⁹

A proper connection between the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility was important to Howell. If pastors severed the proper connection between these doctrines, they would compromise the truth of the gospel and undermine the basis of the church's mission. Thus the benevolent empire would lose its footing. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Howell found numerous groups to be in error regarding the integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility and thus to pose a threat to Baptist missions and benevolence. The antimission Baptists, hyper-Calvinism,

⁶⁹Howell, "To the Rev. John Rushing. Letter No. III.—Predestination," *The Baptist*, 1 September 1837.

populist Arminianism, infant baptism, Landmarkism, and premillennialism all presented a threat to one pole or the other. Howell worked to formulate an integrated view of divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the midst of these various theological controversies which he considered threatening to the cause of missions and benevolence.

CHAPTER 2

“AN INFINITELY WISE, HOLY, AND PERFECT DESIGN”: THE DIVINE DECREES

Troubles in Zion

R. B. C. Howell considered a proper understanding of the divine decrees to be crucial during the turbulent time in which he strove to establish missions and benevolence in Tennessee. The issues that confronted American religion during the early national period influenced the controversies that plagued the Baptists of the state and further contributed to their intensity. The Second Great Awakening, the crisis of religious authority following the American Revolution, and the beginning of the missionary movement all exerted pressure upon the Baptists of the state and contributed toward the division that Howell discovered as he began his ministry in Nashville. In this environment, he discovered that the doctrine of unconditional election was under attack, on the one hand, and the use of means was under attack, on the other. In response, he sought to establish a solid foundation for both. By establishing both unconditional election and the use of means for conversion, Howell endeavored to avoid the errors that were dividing Baptists and hampering the construction of the benevolent empire in Tennessee. At the same time, he attempted to remain faithful to the doctrinal heritage of his Baptist forbearers.

Howell addressed the need for a proper integration of the doctrine of election and the use of means as he preached a sermon on behalf of the Tennessee Baptist Convention. On 4 September 1841, he ascended the pulpit of his congregation in Nashville to preach a missionary sermon. The church had set aside that day for missions emphasis. They had called on Howell to preach a sermon on the work of the Tennessee

Baptist Convention and afterward intended to take up a collection. According to Howell's notes, the congregation was thin and the sermon did not succeed as he had hoped. Nonetheless, he drew the attention of the slim crowd to Psalm 48:12-13 and offered a comparison between the ancient city (and sometimes merely temple) called Zion and the Christian Church.

God, as he anciently did in the Temple, now dwells in the Church, and governs its worshippers. The Church, as Zion was, is a holy place, into which Gentiles—otherwise the unholy and profane—are not permitted to enter. There his pure worship is conducted; his children serve him; and receive his blessing. It is a place of moral beauty, and of heavenly joy.¹

The Christian Church, and especially the churches of the Baptist denomination, is the true Zion of God. Howell stated that he would like to expound in detail on how “the substance of all the types and shadows which characterised the dispensation of the law, and especially those that were proper to the holy Temple” were found in the church. Since his assigned task was to explain the objectives of the State Convention, however, he called on the congregation to “walk about Zion, and go round about her,” surveying the evils which afflicted the progress of the churches in the state, the causes which produced them, and the remedies that would be appropriate.²

Howell began to survey his “Zion” by pointing to the evils which afflicted the Baptist churches of Tennessee. As editor of *The Baptist* and president of the State Convention for a number of years, his travels had afforded him the opportunity to survey the scene personally. Regarding the doctrine of baptism, he was glad to assure the

¹R. B. C. Howell, “A Survey of Zion,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:449, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville. Most of the sermons found in Howell's “Manuscript Notes of Sermons” volumes were intended to be used only when preaching, not for publication. For this reason his notes contain errors and include abbreviations such as “etc.” and “enl.” “Etc” will remain in the quotes, partly because even his published sermons contain this abbreviation at times. “Enl” presumably is short for “enlarge” and was used to indicate places in the manuscript where Howell intended to expound extemporaneously. This dissertation is only concerned with what Howell planned to say on those occasions and thus will not indicate the presence of “enl” in quotations.

²Ibid., 451-53.

congregation that the proper doctrine was being preserved by the churches even though the brethren in general did not study it “with sufficient care to be able with sufficient perspicuity to defend baptism from the unscriptural purposes to which some of our neighbors seem disposed to apply it.”³ Despite this positive report, numerous evils afflicted the doctrine, practice, and polity of the churches.

Howell began the body of the sermon by stating his three chief doctrinal concerns, all of which involved the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility and threatened to hamper the progress of missions and benevolence: “1. In relation to the doctrines of grace,” “2. In relation to the connection of means with ends,” “3. In relation to the kind of means used, and our obligations to use them.” By the doctrines of grace he meant primarily the doctrine of unconditional election. The doctrines of grace, he argued, were sometimes preached “as to weaken the impression of moral responsibility,” while in other cases moral responsibility was preached to the extent that the doctrines of grace were weakened. Some preached that “the desired end will be produced whether means are employed or not.” In other cases disagreement existed over what kind of means ought to be used.

The picture, as Howell described it, is one in which some preachers, though they were proclaiming that God unconditionally chooses certain sinners, either neglected to impress upon their congregations the need for personal response, believing that God would produce the work of conversion in his own time, or they openly refused to call upon their congregations to respond. Other preachers, according to this analysis, were emphasizing the importance of personal response to the extent that salvation by grace alone seemed compromised. As he closed this section, Howell offered this important caveat regarding the doctrinal troubles of the churches of the state: “They are not such, I admit, as to destroy the souls of those who hold them. Still they are most pernicious to

³Ibid., 455.

the interests of others, and to the advancement of the Church, because they withhold important truths &c, and important instrumentalities.”⁴ The absence of a proper understanding of the doctrine of election and its relationship to human responsibility, in Howell’s estimation, left the churches and the mission they were supposed to advance in a troublesome position, even if it did not destroy the souls of those who were in error.

Other evils, of course, afflicted the Tennessee churches as well. Howell perceived a lack of devotion among many ministers, a lack of understanding among deacons regarding their role, and a lack of spirituality in the churches. Moreover, many associations opposed to the work of the convention, in Howell’s view, attempted to assume legislative authority and control the churches, and the sin of schism was lightly regarded. Furthermore, both ministers and laypeople were indisposed toward the cooperation necessary to do “the great work contemplated in the Gospel—the conversion of the world.” As Howell continued the message, he pointed to some of the causes of these evils and the means which they could employ to remedy them. He also reminded his Nashville congregation that they had struggled with many of these issues not long ago. In light of this, he urged, they ought to be willing to contribute “something for the relief of others.”⁵

Howell addressed many of the practical concerns which plagued the churches of the state throughout his ministry of preaching and publishing. The doctrinal concerns involving the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility, however, received first place in the organization of this missionary sermon and constituted an important component in Howell’s work to establish cooperation among Baptists of the state for the cause of missions and benevolence. This chapter will describe the pressures exerted upon Tennessee Baptists due to the competing

⁴Ibid., 455-56.

⁵Ibid., 468.

formulations of the relationship between the divine decrees and human responsibility. Further, it will explain and assess Howell's efforts to integrate them and bolster the Baptist missions and benevolent movement.

The Antimission Baptists

Howell's concern over the proper understanding of the relationship between divine sovereignty and human responsibility appears to be justified given the state of discussion regarding the doctrine of predestination in Tennessee. Led by Daniel Parker, the antimission Baptists in the Concord Association had succeeded in removing the General Missionary Convention from consideration in 1816. Despite the fact that Parker moved to Illinois the following year and despite the fact that he labored primarily in the Concord Association during the time of his residence, Howell still considered Parker the father of the antimission movement in Tennessee.⁶ Howell argued that Parker first became popular in Tennessee as a champion of the doctrine of predestination in an atmosphere in which the Methodists and Cumberland Presbyterians, both Arminian groups, outnumbered the Baptists. Parker's popularity was enhanced, Howell thought, by his plain dress and manners and by his "astonishing ability and untiring industry." He taught a peculiar version of the doctrines of election and reprobation, known as the doctrine of "the two seeds," and only a few men opposed him. After he left for Illinois he

⁶For a biography of Howell and an assessment of his relationship to the antimission movement, see Dan B. Wimberly, *Frontier Religion: Elder Daniel Parker, His Religious and Political Life* (Austin, TX: Eakin Press, 2002), especially 146-160. Whether Howell was right to consider Parker the "father" of antimissionism in Tennessee, the next paragraph will explain that Parker was at least influential on the movement in that state. It is possible, contrary to Howell's assessment, that though Parker was an early leader of antimissionism in Tennessee, his leadership during 1816 and 1817 and his later writings served merely to encourage antimission opposition rather than generate and mobilize it. Parker's later writings did, at the very least, find a warm reception among some antimission Baptists in Tennessee. Howell gave his assessment of Parker's role in initiating and inspiring the antimission movement in Tennessee in Howell, "Missions and Antimissions in Tennessee," *The Baptist Memorial and Monthly Record* 4 (November 1845): 306-7; idem, "A Tribute to the Memory of Rev. James Whitsitt, of Tennessee," *The Baptist Memorial and Monthly Record* 9 (May 1850): 151.

began to write pamphlets against the missionary enterprise, and “in these, as well as his sermons, he appeals successfully to the sympathies of his Tennessee brethren.”⁷

Howell was not the only Baptist leader to consider Parker influential among Tennessee Baptists. John M. Watson, antimission leader and professor of medical science at the University of Nashville, also took seriously the prominence of Parker’s views. Though Watson and Parker agreed in opposing mission societies, Watson did not share Parker’s views on the two seeds. Because he viewed this disagreement to be of a serious nature, Watson wrote on the subject: “We would be very far from proposing such things [controversial topics] for your consideration and discussion, did they not already prevail among you, as topics of painful controversy.”⁸ For this reason Watson included a refutation of “the Manichaeo Parkerite Heresy” in his book, *The Old Baptist Test*. Parker’s views on the two seeds were already the subject of controversy among the antimission Baptists of Tennessee. Watson continued to explain his reasons for including a discussion of this subject, saying,

This will account for the seeming want of method in this address, as our course will be to discuss such things as are producing distress and divorcement among us; for it is both well known and painfully felt by the Baptists of this Association, and the Old Order generally, that many hurtful and untenable notions, unsustained by the word of God, with nothing for their support, but mere Parkerite perversions, have been, for a long time, gaining strength and consideration among us.⁹

Even as late as 1855, when Watson published the first edition of *The Old Baptist Test*, the antimission Baptists of Tennessee were divided over Parker’s views.¹⁰

⁷Howell, “Missions and Antimissions in Tennessee,” 306-07.

⁸John M. Watson, *The Old Baptist Test; or Bible Signs of the Lord’s People* (Nashville: Republican Banner Press, 1855), 59.

⁹Ibid., 60.

¹⁰In his master’s thesis on the Primitive Baptists of Tennessee, Lawrence Edwards pointed out that the “two seeds” doctrine continued to be a source of controversy in East Tennessee in the 1870s and 80s. In 1889, the Powell Valley Association split over the doctrine. See Lawrence Edwards, “The Baptists of Tennessee with Particular Attention to the Primitive Baptists of East Tennessee” (M.A. thesis, University of Tennessee, 1940), 57-63.

Parker's concern as he articulated his doctrine of "the two seeds" involved the proper relationship of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He published the view which had been the subject of such controversy in his 1826 pamphlet, *Views on the Two Seeds*. After circulating a few copies, however, he concluded that his views were being misunderstood by friend and foe alike. For this reason he included a supplement in his next printing of the pamphlet. In this he explained his reasons for holding the two seeds doctrine and gave more defense.

The problem, as Parker understood it, involved why God condemned the reprobate. Parker began, "This doctrine of election, has puzzled a number of good, dear children, even while their own experience, with the word of God has taught them that it was sovereign grace which had brought them to trust in, admire and love the Saviour."¹¹ Parker firmly believed that prior to creating humans God had elected part of Adam's progeny for salvation through Christ. What about those not chosen? Parker explained one option as follows:

Yet for some purpose of his own, not revealed to man, he has not given them to Christ in the covenant of redemption, and therefore these beings, not being elected or chosed [*sic*] in Christ, notwithstanding their equal claims on the expression of the divine perfection of God, their creator, they are left without a saviour, or a sovereign power to bring them to a saviour.¹²

Parker had no problem with the doctrine of election as articulated by Calvinists; rather, his problem was with the doctrine of reprobation. He could not accept that God would elect to save some individuals and reprobate others "notwithstanding their equal claims" on the creator. Parker responded to this problem by arguing that the reprobate do not have equal claims on the creator: "the question now is, did Christ stand in the same flesh and blood relationship to the non-elect, which he did to the elect?" He answered, "I think

¹¹Daniel Parker, "A Supplement or Explanation of My Views on the Two Seeds," in *Views on the Two Seeds: Taken from Genesis 3d Chapter and Part of the 15th Verse* (Vandalia, IL: Robert Blackwell, 1826), 1. The supplement is included at the end of the pamphlet and is paginated separately. The page numbers indicated refer to the supplement.

¹²*Ibid.*, 2.

not.” The elect, he argued, were created by God in his image. The non-elect, while they were nonetheless created by God’s power, were not created in the image of God. Rather, they were created in the image of the Devil, seeds sown by the serpent, and are according to his likeness. By distinguishing between the seed of Adam and the seed of the serpent, Parker attempted to avoid the possibility that God had compelled creatures in his own image to sin. He said, “thus, without any compulsion to sin on the part of God, but completely consistent with the nature of the Devil, (their father) they sin against God. . . . Now who can dispute the justice of God in their eternal condemnation.[sic]”¹³ Parker, who at the very least encouraged the antimission movement in Tennessee, left a distinctive mark upon it through a unique method of integrating divine sovereignty and human responsibility in the doctrines of election and reprobation.

Though Parker was influential upon Tennessee Baptists, not all antimission Baptists in Tennessee agreed with Parker on the “two seeds” doctrine, as John M. Watson’s critique demonstrates. Despite his disavowal of Parker’s doctrine, however, Watson, as had Parker, still found the missionary Baptists guilty of misconstruing the doctrine of predestination. In defending the preaching ministry of the antimission Baptists, Watson described the preaching of those outside the antimission churches as deficient, saying, “All other preachers with a few exceptions are Arminians; *their* gospel leaves out the sovereignty of God, his *full* foreknowledge; his election, for instance, according to it; also his predestination as revealed in agreement with it.” He further asked, “Who, besides the Old Order of Baptists ‘declare all the counsel of God?’”¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., 4. Howell briefly critiqued Parker’s doctrine in a sermon preached to his congregation in Nashville by asserting that the devil is not in any way equal with God: “No argument is needed to prove to you that the Devil is not a God, nor co-ordinate with Jehovah.” The doctrine, he argued, had a long history with Persian philosophers, the Gnostics, and probably the Egyptians. He continued, “It cannot, surely, be necessary for me to stop now to refute this pagan absurdity. To state it simply is a sufficient refutation. As to Parker himself, if he had never read the System of the Persian Philosopher Zoroaster, or of the Gnostics, and Manicheans, the invention of the doctrine is proof that he possesses a vivid imagination, and some genius.” See Howell, “The Character of the Devil,” *The Baptist*, 25 January 1845.

¹⁴ Watson, *The Old Baptist Test*, 157.

Watson considered the preaching of all other denominations, with few exceptions, to be Arminian. Certainly the missionary Baptists were no exception. Lamenting over the division brought about by the missions controversy, Watson asked if the missionary Baptists would return to the doctrine, ordinances, and commandments of the Lord and abandon human institutions. He asked, “Will our Missionary brethren meet us here? Have they *kept* the faith of God’s elect? Have they become tired of their Arminian Institutions?”¹⁵ Watson argued that he was not opposed to the spread of the gospel, but that “we have made a broad issue with Arminianism, even in its fascinating Missionary forms.”¹⁶ Missionary Baptists, Watson argued, failed to preach the doctrine of predestination properly, and their doctrinal laxity had led them to embrace unscriptural institutions.

R. B. C. Howell had heard the accusation that the supporters of the State Convention were Arminians. He responded, “Those who have no acquaintance with any of us, may possibly believe this to be true, but all who know any thing on the subject, know it to be false. We consider the imputation a slander.”¹⁷ Not only did Howell object to being called an Arminian, he also hurled an accusation of his own. While missionary Baptist theology seemed to Watson to tend toward Arminianism, antimission theology tended toward antinomianism according to Howell.¹⁸ In another article in which Howell editorialized on the evils which plagued Tennessee, he made this connection clear. Many of the incompetent ministers in Tennessee prided themselves “in their ability to flay the

¹⁵Ibid., 45. Emphasis original.

¹⁶Ibid., 48.

¹⁷Howell, “Arminianism,” *The Baptist*, July 1836.

¹⁸The term “antinomianism” typically has reference to the tendency (or explicit assertion) of a theological system to provide no proper ground for the responsibility of the believer toward their own sanctification. Howell understood the antimission position to leave inadequate ground for human responsibility. Thus, in his estimation, their churches encouraged a weak commitment to personal responsibility. See, for instance, Howell, “A Dialogue,” *The Baptist*, April 1836.

Methodists,” and they “not unfrequently called themselves ‘*Arminian Skinners*.’” “Their horror,” Howell explained, “had already driven them into hyper-Calvinism.” The introduction of benevolent enterprises turned their energies against the advocates of the convention. “This,” he concluded, “has driven them into hopeless Antinomianism.”¹⁹ In reacting against the threat of Arminianism, the antimission Baptists, according to Howell, had so distorted human responsibility as to obliterate it almost completely. In his understanding, this distortion led them not only to oppose missions organizations, but also the financial support of ministers and temperance. Howell addressed this perceived distortion as he articulated his understanding of the divine decrees.

The Regulars and the Separates

Historian John Boles, in his analysis of the Second Great Awakening in the South, argued that the doctrine of election was both the most divisive issue among participants in the Great Revival and the doctrine which endured the greatest change as a result of the revival. The three major denominations in existence in the South when the revival began in the first decade of the 1800s, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists, were all committed to a theology that stressed the importance of personal conversion. All were convinced of human depravity, the necessity of Christ’s atonement, and the critical role of the Holy Spirit in conversion. The disagreement between the denominations arose when considering God’s decree of predestination and the nature of the Holy Spirit’s work in conversion. Despite these differences, however, Boles explained that most revival preaching avoided discussing these distinctives and merely stressed the importance of conversion. As a result, Boles concluded, “Once orthodoxy was relaxed, ever so slightly, modification was inevitable.”²⁰

¹⁹Howell, “Our Southern Trip,” *Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 8 August 1839.

²⁰John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1996), 128-37.

The Southwest, then, provided a unique arena for the discussion of the doctrine of election. Denominations affected by the revival, and particularly those that rejected or modified their Calvinism, thrived in Kentucky and Tennessee. The Cumberland Presbyterians, having an altered understanding of the doctrine of election, originated in Kentucky and flourished more, perhaps, in Tennessee than in any other state. Another major participant in the revival, the Methodists, also boasted of a significant concentration, particularly in Tennessee. The strong presence of less Calvinistic preaching helps clarify R. B. C. Howell's observation that hyper-Calvinism in Tennessee arose as a result of pressure from the Methodists. This pressure combined with the pressure brought on the Baptists by the followers of Alexander Campbell. Like the Cumberland Presbyterians and the Methodists, the Disciples opposed certain aspects of Calvinistic doctrine as well. Howell, as he surveyed "Zion," perceived the doctrine of unconditional election to be under attack from his major denominational competitors in the region. Though unconditional election had once been the dominant position for America's leading clergy, Howell lived in an environment in which that doctrine was the subject of debate and reformulation.

The issues thought through by Parker and used as a rallying cry by Watson as they reacted against this trend away from certain aspects of Calvinist doctrine were discussed by other Baptists in Tennessee more sympathetic to the missionary cause. In the midst of the dispute over predestination occasioned by the rising strength of the Methodists and Presbyterians, Arminian teaching began to circulate among Baptists as well. As early as 1803 Baptists in Kentucky divided over the issue when a group of churches left the South Kentucky Association to form the South Kentucky Association of Separate Baptists.²¹ Howell associated the beginning of the crisis in Tennessee with the arrival of two preachers from Virginia, Calvin Curlee and a man named Boze. Howell

²¹See J. H. Spencer, *A History of the Kentucky Baptists from 1769 to 1885* (Cincinnati: J. R. Baumes, 1885), 2:80-88.

described them as “very respectable in talents, but in prudence exceedingly deficient,” since Curlee later joined Alexander Campbell’s Restoration movement and Boze was apparently excluded from his church “for intemperate drinking.” Nonetheless, soon after their arrival they began “an open war upon their predestinarian brethren.”²²

Controversy indeed erupted at the 1824 meeting of the Concord Association, though John Bond does not mention Boze or Curlee as helping initiate the controversy. At the 1824 meeting, the Cumberland Association met with Concord to consider a merger. The committee appointed to consider the terms of union reported that they had adopted the form of government and rules of decorum of the Concord Association, including its declaration of faith, which was strongly Calvinistic. According to Bond, controversy erupted because some objected that the document was too strongly Calvinistic, while others defended it. After “a protracted and heated discussion” between those with more Calvinistic and those with more Arminian leanings, the associations concluded that a merger could not be effected.

The decision not to merge the two associations did not end the controversy for Concord. Despite disagreement over the doctrine of election and the extent of the atonement, both sides had agreed, in 1824, to cooperate for the time. In 1827, eleven churches within the association indicated their dissatisfaction with the present state of the association as they met and passed a resolution expressing their concern over the conflict expressing approval of the declaration of faith referred to in 1824. These Calvinistic churches were under the impression that “the same peaceable course would have been pursued by our brethren as was pursued by the Separates in Virginia; but we have been

²²Howell, “A Tribute to the Memory of Rev. James Whitsitt, of Tennessee, Continued,” 149. Curlee was present at the Concord Association in 1827 when the association divided over Calvinism. See John Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association of Middle Tennessee and North Alabama* (Nashville: Graves, Marks, and Company, 1860), 40. Boze is not mentioned in this account, in J. H. Grime, *History of the Middle Tennessee Baptists* (Nashville: Baptist and Reflector, 1902), or in J. J. Burnett, *Sketches of Tennessee’s Pioneer Baptist Preachers* (Nashville: Marshall & Bruce, 1919).

disappointed in our expectations.”²³ Though Bond does not state this, the Arminian party apparently continued to indicate their disagreement with the Calvinistic articles of the association.

At a called meeting of the association in 1827, a circular letter by James Whitsitt was read and approved in which Whitsitt reminded his hearers that the body had agreed to maintain the terms of union on which the Regulars and Separates of Virginia united. Instead of experiencing peace, however, the controversy continued. Whitsitt explained, “But the doctrine of the union of 1824, has been associated with a number of opprobrious names, from the Devil to Mahommed.”²⁴ In place of Calvinistic doctrine, the association was being urged to adopt another doctrine “which is urged on us with as much earnestness as if our salvation depended on the belief of it.” This new doctrine included general atonement and a denial of effectual calling. Peyton Smith, a leader of the Arminian party, pointedly called the doctrine of unconditional election, in Whitsitt’s words, “the doctrine of men and devils, and those who held it were tyrannical in their neighborhoods and families, and generally made bad masters.” Against all of this “new” teaching, Whitsitt defended the original Calvinistic articles of the association. Despite this circular, though, in the annual session, the third of the year, a majority of the association agreed to amend the constitution to expunge “the last vestige of Calvinism.” As a result the missionary Baptist association split in two, with each party claiming the name Concord. The more Arminian group called themselves Separate Baptists and

²³Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association of Middle Tennessee and North Alabama* 37. The “peaceable course” followed by the Regulars and Separates in Virginia occurred in 1787. The Regular Baptist (Ketocton) and Separate Baptist associations of the state agreed to fellowship with the Philadelphia Confession, adhered to by the Regulars, as “the ground-work for such union.” They furthermore stated that they did not desire the confession to hold “a tyrannical power over the conscience of any,” but only to assert that it holds forth the essential truths of the gospel. Robert B. Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of Baptists in Virginia*, ed. G. W. Beale (Richmond, VA: Pitt & Dickinson, 1894), 99-102.

²⁴Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association of Middle Tennessee and North Alabama*, 38.

became known as “Concord no. 1” while the Calvinistic group referred to themselves as Regular and became known as “Concord no. 2.”²⁵

The Restoration Movement in Middle Tennessee

The fate of the Concord Association in 1827 was intertwined with another movement causing waves throughout the South, the Restoration Movement of Alexander Campbell. Reflecting back on this period, John Bond explained that the Separate Baptists and the “Campbellites” “moved on together for four or five years” after rupturing the Concord Association in 1827.²⁶ Several of the key leaders of the Arminian party—Peyton Smith, Calvin Curlee, and Philip S. Fall—eventually left the Baptist denomination altogether because of their support for Campbell’s restoration principles. According to Bond, the Campbellites coexisted within the Separate Baptist Concord Association until “Campbellism had become so odious and offensive to the Separates, they being in the majority, pushed the Campbellites off to the woods.”²⁷

That the Separate Baptist movement in Tennessee should become intertwined with Campbell’s movement is not surprising. Campbell, after all, was a Baptist during the 1820s. Campbell, along with his father, led a congregation that had been part of the Redstone Baptist Association in Pennsylvania. He later moved along with a number of members to Wellsburg, Virginia, and formed a church that became a member of the Mahoning Association. Campbell was well known for opposing Calvinism. In a meeting in Warren, Ohio, in June, 1821, Campbell commented upon the perceived weakness of Calvinism. An observer reported:

²⁵Ibid., 39-41. See also Albert W. Wardin, Jr., *Tennessee Baptists: A Comprehensive History* (Brentwood, TN: Executive Committee of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1999), 112-116.

²⁶ Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association of Middle Tennessee and North Alabama*, 42.

²⁷ Ibid., 43.

The subject of *election*, a doctrine held by all the Baptist ministry, came up for remark, as one of the sermons was under review. Mr. Campbell affirmed "that preaching the doctrine of election never converted a single sinner to God." Astonishing!" retorted Elder Freeman, "Astonishing!" "Where, are they?" inquired Mr. Campbell. Mr. Freeman replied, "all around you!" "I very much doubt it," responded Mr. Campbell; adding, "you have preached election, foreordination, effectual calling and perseverance; and along with it you have held up the love of God to lost sinners, the death of Christ for their salvation, his resurrection for their justification, the final judgment and eternal glory: sinners were converted, and you have attributed it to the Calvinistic 'doctrines of grace.'"²⁸

A similar point was made by Walter Scott, one of Campbell's supporters, in the pages of Campbell's paper, *The Christian Baptist*. Scott said, "After preaching the ancient gospel for a long time, I am finally convinced nothing, not even the grossest immorality, is so much opposed to its progress, as the scholastic election, which, indeed, is just the old fatalism of the Greeks and Romans."²⁹ Supporters of Campbell's teaching brought their opposition to Calvinism to the churches. In the Bracken Association in Kentucky between 1827 and 1829, John Smith preached "opposing Calvinism, as he termed it, and advocating Campbellism," and also spoke against the Calvinistic *Philadelphia Confession*.³⁰ Peyton Smith, Calvin Curlee, and Philip Fall preached similar themes in Middle Tennessee during this time. Associational records do not indicate whether their sympathies toward an Arminian view of election came as a result of Campbell's influence or rather made them more amenable to his views.³¹ Either way, the two movements coexisted within Tennessee Baptist life for a number of years prior to Howell's arrival in the state.

²⁸A. S. Hayden, *Early History of the Disciples in the Western Reserve, Ohio* (Cincinnati: Chase & Hall, 1876), 39.

²⁹"Philip" [Walter Scott], "Migrati Coloni," *Christian Baptist*, 2 March 1829. By the term "scholastic election," Scott undoubtedly referred to the doctrine of unconditional election espoused by Calvinists.

³⁰J. H. Spencer, *A History of the Kentucky Baptists* (Cincinnati: J. R. Baums, 1885), 1:619.

³¹Historian J. H. Grime blamed Campbell for the introduction of Arminian views into Baptist life in the South. See Grime, *History of the Middle Tennessee Baptists*, 539.

Given the divided state of affairs among Baptists in Tennessee upon his arrival in the summer of 1834, Howell comfortably characterized the Baptist churches of Tennessee as “an army without any concert [which] moves rapidly in all directions.”³² Baptists were divided over the propriety of supporting the missionary enterprise and divided over predestination and reprobation. Some followed the “two seeds” doctrine of Daniel Parker. Some held to a more traditionally Calvinistic view of the doctrine of predestination and considered the missionary Baptists to be in violation of it. Others supported the missionary enterprise and believed the Calvinistic understanding of predestination was consistent with it. Still others who supported the missionary enterprise rejected certain aspects of Calvinism, and had only recently rejected Campbellism. As Howell surveyed the Tennessee Baptist “Zion” of 1841, he considered a misunderstanding of “the doctrines of grace” to be a chief impediment hindering the progress of the missionary enterprise in the state.

Overtures toward Reunion

Howell attempted to remedy this situation through his own editorial and pastoral labors. Beginning with his very first editorial in *The Baptist*, and consistently thereafter, Howell worked to bring the antimissionary, missionary, Regular, and Separate Baptists of the state together. Efforts to reconcile the antimission and missionary factions ultimately did not succeed despite the efforts of Howell and others. The Regular Baptist associations of the state split, the Concord Association dividing in 1836. Despite this failure, however, Howell still wanted to see the Regular, Missionary Baptists and the Separates reunited. Based upon comments he had read and overheard, he perceived that the climate was favorable for reconciliation.³³

³²Howell, “The Church in Tennessee,” *The Baptist*, March 1835.

³³Howell made a brief comment in this regard in “Separate Baptists,” *The Baptist*, July 1836.

Howell was not the only one to make overtures toward reunion in the pages of *The Baptist*. I. J. Roberts of Clinton, Mississippi, sent a letter to Howell in January 1836 arguing that reunion should take place between the those calling themselves Regular and those calling themselves Separate. He explained that he had been present at the Elk River Association meeting in 1826 when that association split. Though he was a Regular, and was in the majority when the vote came to exclude the Separates, he considered himself in a position to speak confidently about the issues involved and the character and doctrine of the Separates. The problems, originally, “commenced in small things such as hard speeches, hard spirit, opposition in the pulpit and in the association, until the minority felt themselves aggrieved above forbearance.” In the division that ensued, neither side was exempt from blame. Despite this split, however, Roberts had found the Separates to be moral, upright, and God-fearing in character, and had noticed that their churches had “become numerous and respectable.” Furthermore, he concluded, “I would merely say that they hold the very same doctrine, precisely, of the wise and good among the Baptists generally, throughout the United States.” In Roberts’ analysis, the division between Regulars and Separates that was prevalent throughout the region was the result of a factious spirit rather than significant theological differences.³⁴

Another letter from a Regular Baptist a few months later expressed similar sentiments. J. G. Hall informed Howell of the pleasure he received from reading these overtures toward reunion. Like Roberts, he concluded that the Separate Baptists “are a pious and devoted people whom the Lord has greatly blessed; and in their sentiments and doctrines not so far removed from us as to create any immovable barrier to our union.” Both in character and doctrine, Hall found plenty of grounds for reunion. He also thought he found precedent as well. The Kehukee Association, he argued, had been successful in bringing together General and Regular Baptists, had been successful at

³⁴I. J. Roberts, “Letter V,” *The Baptist*, March 1836.

bringing into its union the Separates, and had been peculiarly blessed by God.³⁵ The only real obstacle that remained for the churches involved laying out a plan for reunion that was acceptable to both parties.

Not everyone was convinced, however, that the differences were minimal. John Rushing, a Separate minister in Bedford County, Tennessee, agreed with Roberts that both sides were in error, and that as far as they agree in doctrine “a reunion could be easily effected; for I know of no separate that would not agree to a union where there was no difference in doctrine.” Nonetheless, he disagreed that there was no difference. He argued, “There was a difference in doctrine among us at that time, and that difference in some instances I apprehend still exists.” In order to facilitate better communication between the two parties over the doctrinal differences that may have existed, he included the articles of faith of the Duck River Association, his own association, with his letter to the editor.³⁶

Howell responded to the letter by giving his general approval to the declaration of faith, which “appears to us quite well enough,” except that the fourth article “is not quite so definite as might be desired.”³⁷ The fourth article, as Rushing included it, reads as follows: “We believe that Jesus Christ, by the grace of God, tasted death for every man, and through his meritorious death, the way of salvation was made possible, for God to have mercy upon all that come unto him on gospel terms.” The language “made possible” would certainly trouble a Calvinist, who would argue that Christ not only made

³⁵J. G. Hall, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Baptist*, July 1836. The situation does not provide the fitting precedent Hall seemed to think. The General churches had been converted to Calvinistic doctrines by Regular preachers, and after the union with the Separates the association published a thoroughly Calvinistic statement of faith. In this case, Arminians and Calvinists were not united. They were all apparently Calvinists. See William Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1969), 353-57.

³⁶John Rushing, “Letter I,” *The Baptist*, May 1836.

³⁷Howell, “Separate Baptists,” *The Baptist*, May 1836.

salvation possible, but actually effected salvation for the elect. This seemed to be classic Arminian language, the kind of language that had been an issue between the two groups from the beginning. The article, according to Howell, would need clarification. While some Regular Baptists were willing to minimize doctrinal differences, the same issues troubling both parties in the 1820s were still present among them when they looked carefully.

Rushing had noticed. When the Concord Association split in the fall of 1836 over the propriety of uniting for missionary endeavors, the “effort Baptists” supported the convention, while the “anti-efforts” opposed it. In terms of relating to the two groups, Rushing concluded that Separates would not unite with the anti-effort brethren, “for among them are Parkerites, Calvinists, and a mixed multitude too tedious to mention.” With respect to the other group, he was unsure. They could not, he presumed, be Parkerites or Calvinists. “If they were true believers in either,” he asked, “would it not exclude from their minds the necessity of sending out missionaries to preach the gospel to every creature[?]”.³⁸ Rushing did not fully understand the differences between the two groups, though he had some confidence about the opinions of the anti-effort contingent. His question concerned what the Regular Baptists, the Baptists of the Convention, believed concerning predestination, the extent of the atonement, moral responsibility, and the free offer of the gospel.

In an effort to make plainer the views of the Regular Baptists, the new editor of *The Baptist*, Matthew Lyon, offered a proposal. On 9 July 1836, First Baptist Nashville, under the leadership of Howell, had adopted a declaration of faith. This declaration, Lyon thought, expressed well the Regular Baptists’ views on predestination. Lyon urged Rushing to study that document.³⁹ He did just that, but found that the article in question,

³⁸Rushing, “Letter II,” *The Baptist*, 16 March 1837.

³⁹Matthew Lyon, “Editorial,” *The Baptist*, 1 April 1837. Lyon took over the editorial duties of *The Baptist* in January 1837 but resigned at the end of the year. Howell resumed editorial duties in January

article five, was in fact not sufficiently clear to satisfy his questions. He asked for clarification, and Lyon requested that Howell, the pastor of the church (and Lyon's pastor) provide the needed explanation.⁴⁰ Howell's explanation came in a series of four letters on the doctrine of predestination, the first appearing in the pages of *The Baptist* in the 15 July 1837 issue.

Howell's efforts to clarify the issues must have had some effect, for reconciliation eventually occurred. In November 1842 Concord no. 1 and Concord no. 2 met in a special called session and proposed a new constitution "of the Concord Association of United Baptists." It contained a ten article confession which depended heavily upon the Declaration of Faith of Nashville First Baptist Church. Much of the language of the latter document was used, with key changes made for clarification at important points. Article four of the new confessional statement covers election: "That the election taught in the scriptures is through sanctification of the spirit unto obedience . . . and that none are authorized to consider themselves elected to salvation until they repent and believe the gospel."⁴¹ The article avoids specific reference to the nature of election, but asserts the importance of the agency of the Holy Spirit both in calling and in bringing sanctification, and the necessity to repent and believe.

1838. Regarding the declaration of faith, the declaration, the church minute book, nor the editorials in *The Baptist* specify who wrote the document. Given Howell's leadership of the church and the fact that the document was written after his arrival, his influence on the document was undoubtedly large. The original statement of faith, written in 1820, was far briefer. See *Minutes and Records of First Baptist Church Nashville, Tennessee, 1820-1939* (Nashville: Historical Commission of the SBC, 1956).

⁴⁰Rushing, "Letter III," *The Baptist*, 1 July 1837. Lyon's request for Howell's input was inserted after Rushing's letter. The article under analysis, article five of First Baptist Nashville's statement of faith, reads as follows: "We believe that all those who are the subjects of faith, and repentance, become such in consequence, not of their own merit, but 'of God's own purpose and grace, which was given us in Christ Jesus before the world began.' That the Holy Ghost, without whose influence none would repent and believe, performs the work of regeneration in the heart; and that such, and such only, who are truly converted, and 'become new creatures,' are proper subjects of membership in the Church of Christ." *The Constitution, Declaration of Faith, and Covenant, of the Nashville Baptist Church, Adopted July 9th, 1836* (Nashville: W. Hasel Hunt & Co., 1836), 7-8.

⁴¹Bond printed the confession in full. See Bond, *History of the Baptist Concord Association of Middle Tennessee and North Alabama*, 70-72.

Howell emphasized these very points in his articles. At the beginning of the first article, he asserted that both he and Rushing would agree that salvation is the work of God, not a result of human merit. To do this, Howell emphasized the work of the Holy Spirit. He argued, "If religion is the work of God by his Holy Spirit, in the heart, as I suppose all evangelical christians believe, and not the reward of our merit, then faith and repentance, which are the essential parts of religion, must be gifts of God, and fixed in the heart by the operations of the Holy Ghost." Faith and repentance are necessary to salvation and are given by the agency of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, by defining and refuting antinomianism, Howell asserted that the scriptural doctrine of election does not preclude the necessity of personal holiness. He concluded, "No legitimate Baptist, therefore, can be an Antinomian; and if any man, minister or layman, has imbibed such a sentiment, and settled down irreclaimably in the pernicious error, he has no business in the Baptist Church."⁴² Although the article on the doctrine of election found in the terms of union of the two Concord associations remained general on the nature of election, it reflected several of the major emphases of Howell's articles and retained much of the language of the statement of faith adopted by Howell's church in 1836.

In the predestination articles Howell did more than clarify the role of the Spirit in salvation and sanctification, issues which were no doubt of concern to both sides in the controversy. He also put forward positively his own view on predestination, but this element is not reflected in the terms of union. Howell intended to strengthen the missionary cause in the state by clarifying for his fellow Baptists what ought to be important about the respective roles of God and man in salvation. This undoubtedly helped to bring about the reunion of two Baptist groups divided over the issue of predestination. However, Howell had much more to say on the subject which had relevance beyond the immediate controversy with the Tennessee group calling

⁴²Howell, "Letter to Mr. Lyon," *The Baptist*, 15 July 1837.

themselves Separate Baptists. In his sermons and articles on predestination, Howell laid out his understanding of the role of God in predestination in a way which he thought protected the sovereignty of God and the free agency of man and thus avoided the errors of Parker, Watson, and the more Arminian Separate Baptists.

Howell on the Divine Decrees

Howell considered the doctrines of predestination and reprobation to be key issues in reconciling the differences that hampered the progress of Baptists in Tennessee. One of his foremost concerns as he defined these doctrines was to articulate properly the free agency of man. In establishing his position, Howell sought to distance himself from both sides of the Calvinist-Arminian debate, thus undermining the positions of both the antimission Baptists and the more Arminian groups, such as the one-time Separate Baptists, Methodists, and followers of the Restoration Movement. He rejected what he defined as Arminianism and what he defined as Calvinism because he considered their positions faulty with respect to human free agency. Having rejected both views of free agency, Howell sought to uphold the doctrine of unconditional election on terms somewhat different from that of the traditional Calvinist presentation.

The Arminian View

In both his articles and sermons on predestination, Howell began by describing the two prevailing views on the subject, which he argued were present in the early church.⁴³ Chrysostom taught the position which came to be known as Arminianism, namely that predestination is conditional and is based “entirely upon the qualities and

⁴³Two unpublished sermon manuscripts have survived, both of them following closely the structure of argument used in the 1837 predestination letters. The first sermon, dated 17 February 1839, is found in *Manuscript Notes of Sermons*, vol. 7. The later sermon, dated 22 August 1852, is found in *Manuscript Notes of Sermons*, vol. 10. While each sermon contains useful points of clarification, the same argument is made in each document. Citations will be drawn at each point from whichever document presents Howell’s view most clearly.

actions foreseen in *the creature*.”⁴⁴ The Greek Church, Howell argued, largely followed Chrysostom. The Latin Church, however, followed Augustine, and from him Calvin, Knox, and the other Reformers inherited their views. Assessing the situation, Howell concluded, “Between *these two* (and which I must consider) *extreme theories*, every shadow of opinion has, at various times, and by numerous persons, had its defenders, and perhaps its brief day of popularity.”⁴⁵

Both the side that became Calvinism and the side that became Arminianism, Howell argued, seem to forget that “the doctrine of predestination is revealed to illustrate the great truth, that every part of the conduct of God towards his creatures, is the result of an infinitely wise, holy, and perfect design.”⁴⁶ The Arminian view, in Howell’s opinion, compromised the sovereign design of God by concluding that Jesus Christ made atonement “for the sins of all mankind in general, and of every individual in particular.” If this were true, the conclusion would be inevitable that “‘all mankind, in general, and every individual in particular,’ will be saved.” Howell could not conceive of God’s design in election in conditional terms. What God decrees, God does. “*To commence work shows intent to finish,*” he concluded.⁴⁷ A further weakness of Arminianism, according to Howell, was that the scales may be overbalanced in favor of salvation by “any holy aspirations which may be supposed to exist in wicked and depraved hearts.”⁴⁸ Such “holy aspirations” toward faith in God cannot be found in depraved human hearts.

⁴⁴Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:961, The Robert Boyte Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville. Emphasis original.

⁴⁵Ibid., 963.

⁴⁶Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:278, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville. This sermon is dated 17 February 1839 and was preached in Nashville.

⁴⁷Ibid., 279. The emphasis in Howell’s manuscripts is original.

⁴⁸Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:969.

Howell therefore rejected both conditional election and election based upon foreknowledge of future faith. Arminianism was wrong according to Howell because it misunderstood the nature of God's sovereign decree and because it placed a capability in sinful human hearts which could not possibly exist.

The Calvinist View

Having rejected Arminianism, however, Howell did not therefore embrace Calvinism. He stated, "I do not like to be called a Calvinist; while, on the other hand, I protest against the hackneyed charge of Arminianism." One reason he did not like being called a Calvinist was because the term "Calvinism" is used to express the views held by John Calvin, views which include "not merely the *doctrine*, but particularly the *church government* and *discipline* established at Geneva." Howell would not assent to be called by a label which he associated with infant baptism.⁴⁹

Howell's discomfort with Calvinism went deeper, however, than objections regarding ecclesiology. He stated that he had read Calvin's *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, "and though I find much to believe and admire, yet there is much with which I cannot agree." Rather than targeting that which he found objectionable in Calvin's writings, however, Howell used a summary of Calvinism found in Charles Buck's *Theological Dictionary*. Buck stated, and Howell quoted,

That God has chosen a certain number of the fallen race of Adam, in Christ, before the foundation of the world, unto eternal glory, according to his immutable purpose, and of his free grace and love, without the least foresight of faith, good works, or any conditions performed by the creature: and that the rest of mankind he was pleased to pass by, and ordain to dishonour and wrath, for their sins, to the praise of his vindictive justice.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Howell, "Letter to Mr. Lyon."

⁵⁰Howell, "Letter to Mr. Lyon"; Charles Buck, "Calvinists," in *A Theological Dictionary, Containing Definitions of All Religious Terms; A Comprehensive View of Every Article in the System of Divinity; and an Impartial Account of All the Principle Denominations Which Have Subsisted in the Religious World from the Birth of Christ to the Present Day: Together with an Accurate Statement of the Most Remarkable Transactions and Events Recorded in Ecclesiastical History* (Philadelphia: J. J. Woodward, 1832), 72.

Briefly summarizing this quote, Howell concluded, “Here is evidently a heterogenous mixture of truth and error.” He said nothing to condemn the representation of the doctrine of unconditional election in the first part of the summary. Targeting the latter half of the quote, Howell asks, “Did God *ordain a certain number to destruction*, as he ordained others to glory? Then it is no more of merit in one case than in the other.” Howell interpreted Calvinism, as represented by Buck’s summary, as stating that God unconditionally reprobated certain individuals to destruction. If this were true, the doctrine of unconditional reprobation would destroy moral accountability. The sin of the reprobate would be unavoidable and irreversible, and therefore God could not justly punish them. Howell further objected to the use of the word “vindictive,” which he associated with the word “vengeful,” an attribute unworthy of divine justice.

His objections to Calvinism are brought into clearer focus in a sermon he preached on reprobation. Here he used the *Westminster Confession* to represent the Calvinist position. He gave the following selective quotes from chapter three of the Confession:

God from all eternity did by the most wise and holy counsel of his own will, freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass. By the decree of God, for the manifestation of his glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death. . . .These angels and men, thus predestinated and foreordained, are particularly and unchangeably designed; and their number is so certain and definite that it can not be either increased or diminished. . . .Neither are any other redeemed by Christ, effectually called, justified, adopted, sanctified, and saved, but the elect only. The rest of mankind, God was pleased, according to the unsearchable counsel of his own will, whereby he extendeth or withholdeth mercy as he pleaseth, for the glory of his sovereign power over his creatures, to pass by, and to ordain them to dishonor and wrath for their sin, to the praise of his glorious justice.⁵¹

In response, Howell disagreed with the Confession’s presentation of God’s decrees. He argued, “If God has ordained unchangeably whatsoever comes to pass, the acts of every man are inevitably what they are. They can possibly be nothing else. . . . Both the wicked

⁵¹Howell, “Reprobation,” *The Baptist*, 8 March 1845. See *Westminster Confession* 3.1, 3-4, 6-7.

and the righteous, therefore, do exactly the will of God.”⁵² For this reason, Howell regarded as inconsistent the assertion of the *Westminster Confession* as well as the affirmation found in Buck’s summary that the reprobate are condemned for their sin. If the decree of reprobation is issued prior to the sins of men and is made “without any reference to their future character” (as Howell interpreted the Confession’s statement), how could the reprobate be condemned “for their sin?” By “ordaining whatever comes to pass,” God would inevitably be the author of sin and man’s condemnation would be unjust.⁵³ Taking a shot at one wing of the New Divinity movement, Howell concluded that if he held to the Calvinist position, “I should feel myself obliged to conclude with the celebrated Dr. Emmons, that God (I speak it with reverence) is as much the author of all sin, as of all holiness!”⁵⁴

If Howell rejected the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation as taught by the *Westminster Confession* and as summarized by Buck, how did his views cohere with traditional Baptist doctrine? J. B. McFerrin, editor of the Nashville Methodist newspaper, *The Southwestern Christian Advocate*, provoked a lengthy editorial exchange with Howell over this very issue. McFerrin understood Baptists to be Calvinists, claimed

⁵²Howell, “Reprobation,” *The Baptist*, 8 March 1845.

⁵³What Howell was attacking as a Calvinist view of God’s decrees is a supralapsarian view which some Calvinists hold and have held—that God decreed election and reprobation before he decreed the Fall. Many of Howell’s critiques of the supralapsarian view would be well received by infra- or sub-lapsarian Calvinists, who hold that God decreed election and reprobation after he decreed the Fall. Howell, however, did not address this nuance within the Calvinist tradition and thus one could critique him for misrepresenting Calvinism at least partially.

⁵⁴Howell, “Reprobation.” Nathaniel Emmons (1745-1840) was a Congregationalist pastor in Massachusetts who tutored some ninety students during his ministry and taught, according to historian Brooks Holifield “some of the boldest speculative theology written in eighteenth-century America.” Emmons taught that since God maintains the world at each moment by his sovereign power, every thought, word or deed comes from an immediate act of divine power. For this reason Howell quipped that Emmons considered God the author of all sin as much as he is of all holiness. See E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 144-45. For more on the New Divinity movement, see Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of New England Theology* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963); Robert C. Whittemore, *The Transformation of the New England Theology* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987); Douglas A. Sweeney and Allan C. Guelzo, eds., *The New England Theology: From Jonathan Edwards to Edward Amasa Park* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

to have heard Baptists preach the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation, and found the doctrine approved by the *Philadelphia Confession*. Howell responded by pointing out first that the *Philadelphia Confession* does not speak authoritatively to the theological views of the entire Baptist denomination. Secondly, he argued that when Baptists call themselves Calvinists, they do not necessarily intend to approve the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation. Regarding the term “Calvinist,” he said, “The idea was intended to be conveyed by it, and this only, that in some of the prominent doctrines of grace, Calvin coincided with our opinions.” The doctrine of reprobation is not necessarily referenced by the use of that term. Baptists, in fact, do not hold to the Calvinistic doctrine of reprobation. Howell concluded, “We never yet saw a Baptist who believes the doctrine.” More properly speaking, Howell thought, Baptists are “Calvinistical,” which he defined thus: “that in some things our opinions are like the Calvinists, but that we are not Calvinists, especially in the main feature of that system.”⁵⁵ Howell had rejected Arminianism because it framed God’s sovereign work as conditional upon the actions of humans and thus understood human capability to be something that it was not. He rejected Calvinism because he understood it to present a view of God’s sovereignty (that God ordains whatever comes to pass) which undercut human responsibility and appeared to make God the author of sin in the case of reprobation.

Howell’s View of Free Agency

In order to illuminate God’s “infinitely wise, holy, and perfect design” in the doctrine of election, as much as is humanly possible using the revelation given in Scripture, Howell argued that “we must begin by throwing off entirely, the shackles both of Arminianism and Calvinism and assume the word of God as our sure and only

⁵⁵Howell’s analysis of Calvinism suggests that he considered the assertion that “God ordains whatever comes to pass” to be the “main feature of that system.” Howell, “Reprobation Again,” *Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 31 March 1842. The controversy with McFerrin began in the pages of the *Baptist Banner* in January 1842, and continued through June of that year.

guide.”⁵⁶ Having distanced himself rhetorically from Arminianism and Calvinism, Howell offered a view of the doctrines of election and reprobation which he thought more consistently integrated divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Howell considered the proper understanding of human free agency to be a top priority. No matter what else might be said on the issue, “no truth can be more certain than that, without regard to any decrees of election and predestination whatever, man is certainly a free agent.” The mere fact that religion is propagated by moral persuasion, he thought, made the free agency of man self-evident.⁵⁷ No man, he explained, ever becomes a Christian unwillingly. In fact, the first emotion of which an individual becomes conscious when he or she is converted is “a determination of mind *toward* religion.”⁵⁸ The prophets Moses, Joshua, and Elijah called the Israelites of their day to make a clear choice in religion, and Jesus, as he dined with Mary and Martha, commended Mary for “choosing the better part” in sitting to listen to him. The apostles also assumed the freedom of choice as illustrated by Paul’s preaching on Mars Hill and Peter’s sermon on the day of Pentecost. Howell concluded that “the freedom of choice in religion, is a great principle taught clearly, both by reason, and by divine revelation.”⁵⁹

While the bare fact of human free agency may be self-evident, Howell thought, understanding the doctrine in connection with other doctrines revealed in Scripture can be difficult and has often been done poorly. “Predestination has been rendered abstruse and difficult,” Howell said, “because it has been improperly amalgamated with those doctrines which relate to the freedom of the will, and consequently to *ability* and

⁵⁶Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:969.

⁵⁷Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:971-74.

⁵⁸Howell, “Moral Responsibility,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 12:724-25, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

⁵⁹Ibid., 729-35.

inability.”⁶⁰ Following terminology used by Jonathan Edwards in his 1754 treatise, *A Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of the Will*, New England theologians such as Samuel Hopkins, Joseph Bellamy, and Nathaniel Emmons distinguished between natural ability and moral ability with regard to the human will. Edwards argued that the human will always responds to the strongest motive. Humans are said to be naturally able to come to Christ when no natural or physical cause serves as an impediment. Humans are said to be morally unable to come to Christ when they are not morally inclined to do so; they do not come to Christ because their wills are bent upon evil.⁶¹ Humans are therefore naturally able, but morally unable to come to Christ. In considering why sinners do not come to Christ for salvation, Howell saw no usefulness in making this distinction. He said,

It is useless to attempt to explain by a resort to the popular Hopkinsian sophism regarding natural and moral ability, and inability. *You say*, perhaps, “sinners can come to Christ if they they [*sic*] will. But they will not. Therefore they cannot.” They have the natural, but not the moral ability. But it is very evident, that if a man can do a thing if he will, he can do that thing whether he will or not. The ability is one thing, and the will or inclination, another and wholly different thing. That you can come to Christ makes you responsible for doing so. That you will not is your crime, and for which you must be condemned.⁶²

Howell preferred to think of will and ability separately when considering human responsibility. To speak of inability existing in the will in any sense clouded the discussion. Howell took another approach which accounted for total depravity while avoiding the terms natural and moral ability.

Howell stressed that humans were free moral agents but that the will operated under certain limitations. The will is finite and has its bounds. Nonetheless, “the limits which confine it do not take away its inherent powers of free action.” Though human

⁶⁰Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:971-72.

⁶¹For discussions of Edwards’ theory on the will in connection with later New England thought, see Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of New England Theology*, particularly 224-72; Holifield, *Theology in America*, 210-11.

⁶²Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:977.

sight has its limits, Howell argued that he could still see. Finitude itself does not destroy freedom. Neither, he said, does depravity. He argued, “If man while a sinful, carnal and perverse transgressor, wills to *do evil only*, and that *continually*, no one will pretend, therefore, that he could not have willed and acted otherwise than he does, since in that case he would have willed and acted of *necessity*.”⁶³ Simply because the will chooses evil always and continually does not mean the will does not have the power of free action. The sin of Adam could not alter the inherent freedom of the will. Adam, in his state of innocence, was free to choose good or evil. This situation has not changed in Adam’s posterity because of his sin. Howell reasoned,

If *perfect holiness* did not, as in the case of Adam previous to the fall, destroy the power of *wrong action*, or of free action, wrong or right, how should *perfect sinfulness*, by which he was characterized after the fall, and which so painfully attaches to us all, destroy the power of right action, or of free action wrong or right, and especially since neither does sinfulness destroy any faculty of the mind, nor holiness add any faculty.⁶⁴

Adam’s sin had not destroyed any faculty of the mind and thus had not altered the inherent power of the will. Given this state of affairs, Howell argued, theologians are incorrect to deny to the human will “the power of contrary choice.” He said, “But the power of choice, if it exists at all, implies in its very nature, the power of an opposite choice, or a choice different from that which is made.”⁶⁵ The human will, therefore, is finite and is inclined to do evil because of the fall, but this state of affairs does not impair the inherent power of choice natural to the will. No faculty has been removed from humans because of the fall, and no power exists to prevent humans from choosing what is good instead of what is evil.

⁶³Howell, “Moral Responsibility,” 721-23.

⁶⁴Ibid., 727.

⁶⁵Ibid.

After having explained these details in his 1855 sermon entitled “Moral Responsibility,” preached to his congregation in Richmond, Virginia, Howell still felt the need to clarify why humans do not come to Christ. Their inherent power of free choice has not been altered since the creation of Adam. For what reason do people reject Christ? In clarifying these details about the fall of Adam, Howell explained, “I ask not what you may be *inclined* to do, but what you have the *power* to do. . . . Total depravity does not therefore conflict with your power to choose the good part.”⁶⁶ The human will may have the power to choose what is good, but it is inclined toward evil because of the fall and always chooses what is evil. The fact that the will is always inclined toward what is evil does not diminish the reality that humans now have the same power Adam had.

Howell’s understanding of the power and inclination of the will set him at odds with the Arminian definition of the will as he understood it. In his articles on predestination, he tackled this issue. Quoting Buck’s *Theological Dictionary*, he defined free agency as “the power of following one’s inclination, or whatever the soul does, with full bent of preference, or desire.”⁶⁷ The Arminian doctrine of free will, however, he argued, differs from the scriptural doctrine of free agency. Howell explained, “Free agency consists, merely, in the power of following our prevailing inclination; free will is the supposed power of acting contrary to one’s inclination, or the desires and preferences of the soul.” The differences between the two are stark. He concluded, “The one goes merely to render us accountable beings, the other arrogantly claims the turning point of salvation.”⁶⁸ The Arminian doctrine of free will explained that the soul must have the power to act contrary to its inclination. According to Howell, free agency consists in

⁶⁶Ibid., 736.

⁶⁷Howell, “To the Rev. John Rushing. Letter No. III—Predestination,” *The Baptist*, 1 September 1837; Buck, *A Theological Dictionary*, 191.

⁶⁸Howell, “To the Rev. John Rushing. Letter No. III—Predestination.” Howell drew this last remark almost word for word from Andrew Fuller, “Dialogues and Letters between Crispus and Gaius,” in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), 2:658.

humans having the power to follow their inclinations. This, despite the fall, humans still had the power to do.

Thus, despite rejecting the classic Edwardsean language regarding natural and moral ability and inability, Howell's defense of free agency is remarkably similar to Edwards's. Instead of distinguishing between natural and moral ability, Howell distinguished between inclination and power. Nonetheless, like Edwards, Howell located the freedom of the will in what he called the inclination. In explaining what he meant by natural and moral ability, Edwards argued, "that moral inability consists in the opposition or want of inclination. For when a person is unable to will or choose such a thing, through a defect of motives, or prevalence of contrary motives, 'tis the same thing as his being unable through the want of an inclination, or the prevalence of a contrary inclination, in such circumstances, and under the influence of such views."⁶⁹ Edwards identified moral ability with the inclination toward what is good, while moral inability consists in not possessing an inclination toward what is good. Howell, on the other hand, avoided talking about inability entirely. Instead, he defined free agency as the power to follow the prevailing inclination. In both Edwards and Howell, the doctrine of human free agency is sustained by the argument that the will is free as long as it has the power to follow its strongest motive. Howell explained that sinners are always inclined toward sin. Edwards explained that sinners are not inclined toward what is good and thus suffer from moral inability. The differences are semantic. Both rejected the definition of the will typically put forward by Arminians—that the will is neutral and therefore free to choose either good or evil. The will is not neutral according to Howell or Edwards. Humans may have the power of contrary choice, Howell asserted, but because of their depravity they continually choose evil, not good. While Howell rejected "that Hopkinsian sophism," he stood with the followers of Edwards in rejecting the Arminian

⁶⁹Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of the Will*, ed. Paul Ramsey, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 1, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1957), 159-60.

definition of the will while still upholding both human depravity and human responsibility.

In his treatises on the doctrine of predestination, then, Howell made a point to refute many of the abuses to “the doctrines of grace” which he thought plagued the Baptists of the state. He explained the alternatives to his view, Calvinism and Arminianism, and defined that which should be non-negotiable in any view of predestination, the free agency of man. By rejecting a conditional view of election and the Arminian definition of free will, Howell distanced himself from the prevailing doctrinal position of the Tennessee Separate Baptists, Methodists, and Cumberland Presbyterians. By rejecting unconditional reprobation and defining human free agency in terms similar to Jonathan Edwards, Howell distanced himself from the position of the antission Baptists, a position which he felt tended toward antinomianism. Along with refuting errors and setting forth the doctrine of human responsibility, Howell set forth his own view, which he thought properly integrated divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Howell’s View on Election

Only after a considerable amount of prior explanation did Howell begin to articulate his understanding of the doctrine of predestination. He told his congregation in Nashville, eighteen handwritten pages into his sermon, “Having now made the necessary explanations, and established the truths with which I desired, on every side, to fortify myself, and with the detail of which I fear I have nearly exhausted your patience, I am prepared to explain to you intelligibly, and in few words, what predestination really is.”⁷⁰ He took a similar tactic in his published articles. During the four article series, Howell spent three and a half articles establishing the truths he thought the reader would need to

⁷⁰Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:286.

grasp in order to understand his position. He went to such length making preparatory arguments because he perceived his argument for predestination to be somewhat novel. He said, “For this purpose I will announce my proposition, which, because it is entirely new, and may appear somewhat singular, you may be inclined to condemn.” This was his proposition: “God predestinates, not the actions, and doings of men, but his own actions, and only his own actions.”⁷¹

Antinomianism was a major motivating factor for Howell in crafting the doctrine of predestination into the proposition he formulated. In his discussion of Calvinism, Howell had objected strenuously to the language of the *Westminster Confession* (3.1) that “God from all eternity did . . . freely and unchangeably ordain whatsoever comes to pass.” This way of understanding God’s decrees, he thought, obliterated human responsibility. As he began to explain his proposition in his 1839 sermon, he explained that God’s predestination included “all physical causes, when uninfluenced by voluntary agents; and such of the actions of men, as produced by Jehovah, as are the natural effect of the motives, and affections, which are excited by the contemplation of his actions, and the indwelling of his Holy Spirit.”⁷² In other words, God predestines natural occurrences such as volcanic eruptions and thunderstorms, and God predestines the result of the work of the Holy Spirit upon the heart of an individual. The actions of God’s created, voluntary agents, however, God “limits and controls, but does not predestinate.” Specifying this distinction, Howell thought, allowed Christians to avoid the errors of antinomianism. Believing that all human actions are predestined, he argued, has led individuals to believe that even when they do not act well, they are nonetheless in accordance with the divine will since those sinful actions were nonetheless

⁷¹Ibid. The wording of the proposition in this sermon, from 1839, is identical to the wording of the proposition in “To Rev. John Rushing. Letter No. IV. Predestination,” *The Baptist* 15 September, 1837. The later sermon, from 1852, uses different wording but in it Howell defends the same proposition.

⁷² Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:287.

ordained by God. The evil results of this conclusion, he said, are numerous: morals have been relaxed, concern for the spread of the gospel has been quieted, sinners are not exhorted, God is made the author of sin, and God's law is rendered of no value. One benefit, he concluded, from asserting that God predestines only his own actions, is that this formulation "wholly condemns Antinomian licentiousness."⁷³ By arguing that God predestined only his own actions and the actions of non-voluntary agents, Howell created what was for him a credible avenue to avoid asserting that God is the author of sin.

Howell clarified his proposition by explaining in more detail the predestined actions of God. The acts of God alone, Howell thought, are the proper subject of the term predestination. Through his infinite and perfect foreknowledge, God predetermined "those decisions which, in his infinite wisdom, he foresaw would be holy, just, and good."⁷⁴ Predestination has reference to the acts of the Triune God, and each person of the Trinity predestines. Howell clarified, "I mean that God the Father predestinates all his actions, that God the Son predestinates all his actions, and that God the Holy Spirit predestinates all his actions."⁷⁵ Scripture reveals that God had chosen, or predestined, to use the nation of Israel to accomplish his purposes. Along the same lines, the apostles were also chosen, or predestined, "to accomplish the glorious purposes they achieved." Christians, he argued, are predestined in Jesus Christ. Here Howell referenced his text for that sermon, Ephesians 1:3-13. Throughout his discussions of predestination in Christ, Howell did not indicate that specific individuals are predestined in Jesus Christ. To do so might signify belief in limited atonement, which Howell rejected.⁷⁶ He

⁷³ Ibid., 288-89, 297.

⁷⁴ Howell, "Predestination," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:982.

⁷⁵ Howell, "To the Rev. John Rushing. Letter No. IV. Predestination."

⁷⁶ Howell's view of the atonement is clearest in "The Atonement," in Manuscript Notes of Sermons, vol. 7, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville, Tennessee. Howell's view of the atonement will be discussed in chap. 4.

concluded, “*All is in Jesus Christ, and out of him there is no blessing.*”⁷⁷ Christ is the source of salvation. This God the Father predestined.

The predestinating work of God the Holy Spirit, however, Howell understood to be more particular. The regenerating acts of the Holy Spirit are upon the hearts of individuals, he said. Furthermore, “Religion is *personal work*. It is not *what you do*, but *what God the Holy Spirit, does in you*. This is *personal election and predestination.*”⁷⁸ This fits with the exception he gave to his proposition; God not only predestines his own actions, but “in a secondary sense,” he predestines “the natural results of those motives, and affections, excited by his actions.”⁷⁹ The Holy Spirit works upon the hearts of sinners to bring them effectually to salvation. This is done in such a way that the response of the sinner is not programmed by God, but is the natural and volitional result of the work performed by the Holy Spirit.⁸⁰ Thus, the predestinating work of God has reference to his own actions and does not in any way violate the free agency of man.

Despite the innovative language Howell used, he nonetheless articulated a doctrine of unconditional election. What he defined as the Calvinist formulation, in teaching that God ordains everything that comes to pass, seemed to him to obliterate human responsibility even though the *Westminster Confession* attempts to uphold the doctrine. Howell responded by arguing that God ordains only his own actions, not the free actions of his creatures. With regard to the salvation of souls, however, Howell held that God the Father had ordained that the work of the Holy Spirit upon the hearts of sinners would be effectual. God, therefore, accomplished in salvation precisely what he intended to accomplish. Howell’s differences with Edwards’ view of the will were

⁷⁷Ibid., 984.

⁷⁸Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:993.

⁷⁹Ibid., 982.

⁸⁰Howell’s belief in the Calvinist doctrine of effectual calling will be explained in chap. 3.

semantic. Howell's differences with Calvinism were more complex. He disagreed with the view of God's decrees found in the *Westminster Confession*, particularly because he was concerned about the tendency toward antinomianism which he thought was evident among the antission Baptists who upheld that view. Nevertheless, he still sought to uphold unconditional election. Howell thought the differences significant enough to introduce them to his congregations and to his readership in the pages of *The Baptist*.

Though Howell avoided what he perceived to be antinomianism by arguing that God predestined only his own actions, he still felt the need to explain how God governs the actions of men. This, of course, would be the natural question one would expect after Howell had rejected the language of the *Westminster Confession* (that God ordains whatever comes to pass). Howell was sure that God did not predestine the sinful acts of men. For this reason, Howell said, God "limits and controls, but does not predestinate." The sinful inclinations of the human heart, he had argued, are not decreed by God; they are the responsibility of humans. Nonetheless, God does govern his creatures. To explain this, Howell used different terminology and language in each presentation, but in each case he meant the same thing. God governs his creatures by his word, by his divinely revealed law. In his predestination letters, Howell termed this "preordination" as distinguished from "predestination." In his earlier predestination sermon, he simply stated that God governs men by means of his law. He illustrated this point by arguing that God had ordained that those who preach the gospel should live by the gospel. In the churches of Tennessee this was not happening. He concluded, "These ordinations have not come to pass because their execution was submitted to his people as a test of their fidelity; it was in their power, and they have been unfaithful, for which they are accountable."⁸¹ God expects believers to put his commands into motion, and God predestines only his own acts. These two truths, Howell thought, leave humans

⁸¹Howell, "To the Rev. John Rushing. Letter No. IV. Predestination."

responsible for their sin and rejection of Christ, and thus the “use of means” for the conversion of the lost is sustained. Howell concluded, “The doctrine of predestination teaches the necessity, and efficacy, of the use of means.”⁸² This explanation of God’s providential control differs significantly from the traditional Calvinist position as articulated by the *Westminster Confession* and the *Philadelphia Confession*. Although Howell upheld unconditional election, he differed markedly from the traditional Calvinist position at this point.

Howell’s View on Reprobation

Howell dealt with the doctrine of reprobation in a manner consistent with his presentation of predestination. In both cases he was concerned to protect the free agency of man. With regard to predestination, Howell explained that God predestines his own actions and governs his free creatures by means of his law. In responding to the Calvinism of the *Westminster Confession*, Howell took issue with the statement that God ordains whatever comes to pass, and particularly that God ordains unconditionally the reprobation of specific sinners.

Antimission Baptist leader John M. Watson did not have the same reservations about God’s decrees. While Howell was interested in formulating the doctrine of divine decrees in such a way as to protect human free agency and avoid implicating God as the cause of human sin and condemnation, Watson was comfortable without such explanations. In *The Old Baptist Test*, Watson concluded,

Our doctrine, we are aware, implicates the subject of reprobation, or state of the non-elect, about which I can only make a few remarks: This is one of the deep, unsearchable things of God, which no man has fully comprehended. It pertains to infinite wisdom, foreknowledge and justice, and to the state of the non-elect both in time and eternity, as therewith connected. It will require eternity itself, and not merely time, for its exposition.⁸³

⁸²Howell, “Predestination,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:300. The “use of means” will be further discussed in chap. 3.

⁸³Watson, *The Old Baptist Test*, 57.

Watson realized that holding to the assertion that God ordains whatever comes to pass had implications for the doctrine of reprobation, implications that were uncomfortable and difficult to explain. Rather than resolve this dilemma, Watson offered this solution, “We can only speak of it in Scriptural language and terms; it would be unsafe to deal with the subject any other way.”⁸⁴

Though Howell disagreed with Watson, with a key element in the *Philadelphia Confession*'s doctrine of the divine decrees, and with what he perceived to be the implication of that doctrine, he did not jettison the doctrine of reprobation. He asked his congregation in Nashville, “Is not reprobation, I ask, a doctrine of the Bible? Who that reads our text [Jeremiah 6:30], and the multitude of other passages in which it is distinctly taught, can question it?” Reprobation, according to Howell, was the result of someone refusing the mercy of God, not the cause of the refusal.⁸⁵ In an unpublished sermon, he stated that “God offers his grace and salvation, without respect of persons, to all men, urges them by every high and noble consideration, to seek, and obtain everlasting life, and that he reprobates none—rejects, condemns, disallows none—but those who refuse, or neglect, his mercy, and die in their sins.”⁸⁶ In Jeremiah 6:30, God rejected the Jews because they forsook his law. In Romans 1:20-32, the heathen were rejected, Howell said, because they “loved sin and followed their own inclinations.” In 2 Timothy 3:1-9, professed Christians were rejected because they were “void of discernment respecting the Gospel.” They were “so confused in mind that they can neither perceive what is true, nor cast off the chains of error.” Individuals are reprobated, or rejected, because of their sin against God, but Howell preached that their status with

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Howell, “Reprobation,” *The Baptist*, 8 March 1845. Howell used Rom 1:20-32, 2 Tim 3:1-9, 2 Cor 13:5-7, and Titus 1:10-15 to help defend his understanding of the biblical teaching regarding reprobation.

⁸⁶Howell, “Reprobation,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 12:405, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

respect to God can change. If those who have been rejected will come to Christ, they “may be restored to favor with God.” In this vein, Howell also called on his congregation to “diminish, by the blessing of God, as much as possible, the number of the finally reprobate.” He soberly concluded, “We should all look, with fear and trembling to our own spiritual state, lest we may, at last, find ourselves numbered among that unhappy class.”⁸⁷ God’s decree to reprobate, according to Howell, was merely his decision to condemn those who love sin and follow their sinful inclinations. None ought to be found in this category; all should come to Christ for salvation.

An Assessment: Missionary Baptist and Calvinistic

Howell’s theology of the divine decrees represents a moderate missionary Baptist response to the pressures brought upon the missions and benevolent movement by antimission Baptists and populist Arminians in Tennessee, and by the polarities of Calvinist and Arminian theology with respect to election, reprobation, and human responsibility. Howell distanced himself from extremes which he thought compromised either the sovereignty of God in salvation or human responsibility. He distanced himself from New England Calvinism by rejecting the language of the *Westminster Confession* on God’s decrees to the point of considering chapter three of the confession antinomian. He felt that the statement undercut human responsibility. At the same time, he defended the *Philadelphia Confession*, that classic statement of Baptist Calvinism, against its detractors. Howell said regarding the Confession:

It [the confession] is far from paralyzing human effort. Look at the Philadelphia baptist confession of faith, and some would imagine them to be very far to the North [toward hyper-Calvinism]. Look at their confession of works [the evidence of their missionary actions], and some would imagine them very far to the South. . . . We are accused here with them, but the accuser and the accused, are very far behind them. They have been a missionary body, for about one hundred years.⁸⁸

⁸⁷Howell, “Reprobation,” *The Baptist*, 8 March 1845.

⁸⁸Howell, “Creeds,” *The Baptist*, July 1835.

Even if he differed with the Confession on a few points, Howell admired the missionary fervor of the association that adopted it and was far from discouraging the document's use. Moreover, despite the unusual construction he gave to the doctrine, Howell still articulated a theology of unconditional election and differed only semantically from Edwards' classic definition of the freedom of the will. He very pointedly opposed conditional election based upon foreseen faith, and the Arminian definition of free will, as adamantly as he opposed the theology of the *Westminster Confession*. These Arminian positions misconstrued human responsibility to the point of making humans the arbiter of their own destiny and undercut what Howell viewed as the biblical doctrine of God's sovereignty in accomplishing salvation. He did not, however, consider the departures of Calvinists and Arminians to be significant enough to "destroy the souls" of those that held them. Howell, then, greatly respected the Baptist heritage of the *Philadelphia Confession*, though he felt that an adjustment needed to be made in its understanding of the divine decrees in order to provide a proper theological foundation for mission work.

This adjustment in his position on election and reprobation represents a departure from the accepted Baptist standards of the past. By denying that God ordains whatever comes to pass, Howell rejected the classic statement of the divine decrees found in 3.1 of the *Philadelphia Confession*. His concern in rejecting that language had been to maintain a proper ground for human responsibility and leave room for the use of means in the conversion of souls. These issues also troubled groups such as the Methodists and the Arminian Separate Baptists, who rejected Calvinism and supported the work of the revival, but Howell did not agree with their doctrinal solution to the dilemma either. In conclusion he attempted to forge a middle ground between the two classic statements on the divine decrees in order to leave proper room for both divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This middle ground, he thought, left room for missionary endeavors and freely calling upon the lost to come to Christ. With this middle ground established, Howell hoped that the Baptist Zion of Middle Tennessee could work together for the

cause of missions and benevolence. Whether or not Howell succeeded in convincing anyone of his “somewhat singular” view of the divine decrees, his efforts did help reassure Baptists in the state that missionary efforts do not contradict the doctrine of God’s sovereignty. R. B. C. Howell maintained a similar concern for establishing a proper connection between divine sovereignty and human responsibility for the sake of the church’s missionary mandate as he addressed human depravity and the work of the Holy Spirit.

CHAPTER 3

SEEKING CHANGE: DEPRAVITY, REGENERATION, AND REVIVAL

R. B. C. Howell sought a middle ground between the of Calvinist and Arminian positions with respect to the divine decrees in order to provide solid ground the church's missionary mandate. With regard to his positions on humanity, the process by which conversion takes place in the individual, and the process by which churches experience renewal, Howell maintained more traditional Calvinist positions while still disagreeing with opponents on either side. Howell disagreed with populist Arminians such as Charles G. Finney and Alexander Campbell on the nature of human depravity and the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration and considered their positions a threat to the missionary mandate of the church. In his view, their theological error led to methods which produced unhealthy results in the life of the church. On the other hand, though Howell maintained the sovereignty of God in the process of regeneration, he differed with antimission Baptists who refused to call upon sinners to repent or refused to participate in protracted meetings aimed at the conversion of sinners and the renewal of the church. God had ordained the use of means by the church for the conversion of the world. Only by properly understanding the nature of the human predicament, the sovereign prerogative of the Holy Spirit in salvation, and the appropriateness of the use of human means for conducting the church's mission would the church fulfill its mission.

Perspectives on Conversion

Howell witnessed revival and the conversion of many souls first hand during his first pastoral charge at Norfolk, Virginia. After being ordained on 7 January 1827,

Howell baptized 137 people into membership in his first year. The First Baptist Church of the same city experienced a similar blessing, baptizing 116 during the same period of time.¹ Several years later, between August of 1830 and October 1831, Howell witnessed a similar harvest, baptizing sixty-nine. He reported the news to *The Religious Herald* and indicated that he had eight or ten more awaiting baptism, all between the ages of ten and fifteen, whose baptism the church felt the need to defer in order to ascertain “the reality of their change.”²

Howell considered the revival during 1830 and 1831 significant for several reasons. First, the characteristics of those baptized offered hope for the future prosperity of the church. The majority of them were male, not a dozen among them were married, several of them were financially prosperous and influential in the community, and many of them were brought up with the habits of temperance and industry which provided them a decent prospect of temporal success in life. Howell explained, “Young men of this class are the bone and sinew of every community, and from which the great majority of those who in after life [that is, later in life] wield the influence of the country, arise.” In this respect, “as well as from the pious example and industry to disseminate gospel truth,” the recent additions provided hopeful prospects for the future of the church. Howell also considered the characteristics of the conversions as important as the characteristics of the converts. The revival was marked, he said, by “no excessive excitement.” He said that “no noise and confusion have disturbed us, but perfect order and decorum have at all times characterised the meetings.” He further explained, “The convictions have been more of an intellectual character, and the conversions generally more clear and satisfactory, than any I have ever witnessed under similar circumstances.” Howell was encouraged by the youthfulness of the converts and the hope they represented for the

¹William Lumpkin, *First Baptist Church of Norfolk, 1805-1980* (n.p.: Privately Published), 20.

²R. B. C. Howell, “Revival in Norfolk,” *The Religious Herald*, 11 November 1831.

future leadership of the church. He was also encouraged that the conversions themselves did not appear to be the result of emotional excitement, but rather the result of serious, thoughtful conviction.³

By 1830 revival was not a new phenomenon in the South. The Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists in Virginia had all experienced periods of awakening between 1740 and 1780 and experienced simultaneously the conversion of thousands between 1787 and 1789. These regional harvests were characterized by intense emotional activity. Baptist revivalist John Leland explained, "It was nothing strange, to see a great part of the congregation fall prostrate upon the floor or ground, many of whom, entirely lose the use of their limbs for a season." Great numbers would cry out and several preachers and exhorters would be speaking at the same time, resulting in "a celestial discord among the people."⁴ Revival broke out again, this time emanating all over the South, coming to public attention with the Cane Ridge Camp Meeting near Paris, Kentucky in 1801. Again tremendous physical manifestations occurred, such as falling, rolling, dancing, laughing, and "the jerks."⁵ The revival continued in Kentucky and spread into various areas throughout the South.

Not everyone was supportive of the revival, however. The dramatic emotional and physical responses eventually brought this revival into disrepute among many, especially among the Presbyterians and Baptists. These groups complained that the revival and its associated physical manifestations seemed to thrive under the influence of less educated preachers from the Methodists, the former Separate Baptists, and the New

³Ibid.

⁴John Leland, *The Virginia Chronicle*, in *The Life and Writings of Elder John Leland*, ed. L. F. Greene (New York: G. W. Wood, 1845), 114; quoted in John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 7.

⁵Boles, *The Great Revival*, 6-8, 62-69. For a first hand account of the bodily exercises at Cane Ridge, see Thomas Cleland, "The Bodily Effects of Religious Excitement," in *Princeton Versus the New Divinity: Articles from the Princeton Review* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 323-40.

Side Presbyterians, all less inclined in varying degrees toward Calvinist orthodoxy. Furthermore, they criticized, the camp meetings seemed to thrive most among the poor and semiliterate.⁶ The preachers were bringing emotional messages to a people prone to dramatic emotional responses. Criticism came from another quarter as well, from the followers of the Restoration Movement. The movement's most important leader, Alexander Campbell, began his work after much of the excitement in Kentucky had abated. Influenced by enlightenment epistemology, Campbell defined faith as the mind's assent to credible testimony, and thus saw the emotionalism of such conversions to be a "contagion and delusion."⁷ A third party opposed to the revival was the antission Baptists. They looked upon both the revival and the benevolent institutions that had developed alongside it as a compromise with Arminian theology, which emphasized human instrumentality over divine power in salvation.⁸ Despite opposition from these quarters, many continued to use the methods which contributed to the revival, particularly the Methodists and eventually by Northeastern revivalists such as Charles G. Finney.⁹

R. B. C. Howell's perspective on what constitutes a healthy revival appears even at first glance to be different from the experiences reported during the Great Revival beginning in Kentucky in 1801. Howell viewed these differing perspectives on revival to coincide with differing perspectives on several key doctrines, namely original sin, human depravity, and regeneration. Charles G. Finney, a key leader in the Second Great Awakening, held that human depravity is the result of conscious choice and that

⁶Boles, *The Great Revival*, 94-95.

⁷ Campbell is quoted in Pat Brooks, "Alexander Campbell, the Holy Spirit, and the New Birth," *Restoration Quarterly* 31 (1989): 151. See also Sydney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 449.

⁸James R. Mathis, *The Making of the Primitive Baptists: A Cultural and Intellectual History of the Antimission Movement, 1800-1840* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 39.

⁹Richard J. Carwardine, "The Second Great Awakening in the Urban Centers: An Examination of Methodism and the 'New Measures,'" *Journal of American History* 59 (September 1972): 327-40

regeneration is also the product of choice. Alexander Campbell, a key critic of the revival, held that though humans are guilty and depraved because of Adam's sin, his sin did not extinguish the capacity of the individual to accept the truth when it is given by a credible witness. From Howell's perspective, the antimission Baptists, as chapter two explained, undermined entirely the use of human means for the conversion of sinners. He differed from Finney and from some of the movement's most important critics. Howell articulated a view of human depravity and conversion which he thought both protected the sovereignty of God in saving sinners and the responsibility of humans to use the appropriate means for the conversion of sinners. He considered a proper understanding of the nature of the human predicament and the power needed to lift sinners out of that predicament to be critical to the missiological task of the church.

Charles Finney's New Measures

Because he was the editor of *The Baptist*, readers occasionally requested comment from Howell on recent publications. In one case, Howell's brother-in-law, a publisher in Pennsylvania, sent to him the first installment of a series of letters written by Charles G. Finney entitled *Letters on Revivals*. Though Howell had not received the entire work, he included an amiable notice in *The Baptist* and pointed out several statements in Finney's work with which he agreed. Finney's letters, Howell said, attempted "to give the reasons why (apparently) revivals of religion at this time are not so general or thorough as formerly." One reason highlighted by Finney, "whether well founded or not, we will not pretend to say," involved the subject matter selected by preachers for their sermons. Howell extracted a paragraph in which Finney complained about the paucity of preaching on human depravity. Finney observed, "The unutterable depravity of the human heart has not, I fear, been laid open to the very bottom as it

formerly was.” Howell also explained to his readers that Finney “thinks that sufficient stress has not been laid upon the doctrine of salvation by unmerited grace.”¹⁰

Though Howell in fact differed from Finney on the nature of human depravity and regeneration and the method of conducting of revivals, he perhaps found these letters interesting because they represented a reevaluation by Finney of some aspects of his ministry. At the beginning of the first letter Finney confessed, “When I first began to preach, I was without knowledge and without experience in regard to Revivals. Indeed, I had but a very limited Christian experience. The Lord led me in a way which I knew not. I can now see that in some things I erred in manner and in spirit.”¹¹ Having realized some of the fruit of his earlier inexperience, Finney pointed out in his second letter that many revivals fail because they are superficial. The preacher, he stated, does not probe the heart of the sinner, making known the depths and guilt of depravity, and does not stress the necessity of divine influence.¹² Finney did not indicate any change in his doctrinal views, but these observations resonated with Howell. Thus the editor of *The Baptist* presented them to his readers. Despite Howell’s approbation of the first installment of Finney’s *Letters*, a comparison of Finney’s theology with that of Howell’s on the subject of human depravity and regeneration will reveal how stark the differences were on the issue of revival.

Finney, one of the era’s foremost evangelists, had already made a mark upon American theological discourse by 1845 when Howell reviewed his *Letters on Revivals*. Finney was converted in October 1821, and received some theological instruction from his pastor, Presbyterian minister George Gale, but never received formal theological

¹⁰Howell, “Letters on Revival,” *The Baptist*, 29 March 1845; Charles G. Finney, *Letters on Revivals of Religion Addressed to Ministers of the Gospel* (Manchester: W. Bremer & Co., 1861), 14.

¹¹Charles G. Finney, *Letters on Revivals of Religion Addressed to Ministers of the Gospel*, 10-11.

¹²*Ibid.*, 13-16.

training. He was licensed to preach in March 1824, though he had not studied the *Westminster Confession* or *Catechism*, and began itinerating in Oneida and Jefferson Counties, New York. At this point his career as a revivalist began, for his preaching soon evoked response from his hearers. He continued his itinerant ministry until accepting the pastorate of the Second Free Presbyterian Church in New York City in 1832, where he continued until his appointment as professor of theology at Oberlin College in 1835. During his pastorate in New York he presented the lectures and sermons that became *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* and *Sermons on Various Subjects*, both published in 1835. Albert B. Dod, mathematics professor at Princeton, viewed these sermons and lectures as being so aberrant from orthodox Calvinism that he published a lengthy review of them in Princeton's *Biblical Repertory and Theological Review* that same year.¹³

Human depravity, regeneration, and the use of means to promote conversion were important themes in the ministry of Charles G. Finney, and disagreement with the orthodoxy of his day regarding these doctrines was evident early in Finney's career. Finney preached for his pastor on the Sunday following his licensing. Gale met him after he came out of the pulpit and said, "Mr. Finney, I shall be very much ashamed to have it known, wherever you go, that you studied theology with me."¹⁴ Even at this early point Finney disagreed with his teacher on the doctrines of imputation and regeneration. Finney could not accept the imputation of Adam's guilt to his posterity, could not accept the imputation of human sin to Christ and Christ's righteousness to believers, and could not accept Gale's teaching that humanity's sinful nature required a change of nature

¹³Biographical background is taken from Glenn Alden Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality: A Study of Charles Finney, Charles Hodge, John W. Nevin, and Horace Bushnell*, Chicago Studies in the History of American Religion, ed. Jerald C. Brauer and Martin E. Marty (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, 1991), 21-24; Charles G. Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989). Dod's review has been reprinted in Albert B. Dod, "On Revivals of Religion," in *Princeton Versus the New Divinity: Articles from the Princeton Review* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), 171-272.

¹⁴Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney*, 54.

wrought by the Holy Spirit. According to Finney's perception, Gale's position on human depravity and regeneration left no connection between the preaching of the gospel and the conversion of sinners, and "consequently no connection in religion between means and end." When he studied the *Westminster Confession* subsequent to his licensing, Finney said, "I was absolutely ashamed of it."¹⁵

Charles Finney's *Lectures on Systematic Theology* (1846), which provides a fuller exposition of Finney's views on the nature of humanity and the work of regeneration, demonstrates his continued rejection of orthodox Calvinism. In accordance with concerns expressed early in his ministry, Finney objected regarding the *Westminster Confession* that "the framers and defenders of this confession of faith, account for the moral depravity of mankind by making it to consist of a sinful nature, inherited by natural generation from Adam."¹⁶ Human depravity, Finney argued, did not consist of a sinful appetite or inclination inherited by all of Adam's posterity. Rather, it was voluntary and the result of individual human choice, even though the state of depravity plagues all of humanity. Depravity itself is the choice to sin, choosing self indulgence and self gratification instead of the love of God. According to Finney, an examination of Bible passages reveals that all humans are in fact sinful and go astray "from the very moment of their moral existence." This, however, does not mean that humans "have a nature sinful in itself," as Calvinists would argue.¹⁷ Since depravity is a choice and is not the result of a constitutional defect, Finney rejected the idea that any constitutional change in humanity was necessary in order to bring about salvation. He argued that the New Testament ascribes regeneration to the work of man, not the work of the Holy Spirit. Regeneration, properly speaking, is a change in moral state or moral character, not a

¹⁵Ibid., 61.

¹⁶Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, ed. J. H. Fairchild (Oberlin, OH: E. J. Goodrich, 1899), 241.

¹⁷Ibid., 244-45.

change in inclination or nature. “Regeneration, to have the characteristics ascribed to it in the Bible, must consist in a change of the attitude of the will, or a change in its ultimate choice, intention, or preference.”¹⁸ In a sermon preached at Oberlin, Finney said, “The sinner should consider that the change of heart is a voluntary thing. You must do it for yourself or it is never done. True, there is a sense in which God changes the heart, but it is only this: God influences the sinner to change, and then the sinner . . . does it. The change is the sinner’s own voluntary act.”¹⁹ This view of regeneration is very different from that of the *Westminster Confession*.

In consonance with his views on depravity and regeneration, Finney viewed revival to be an intentional work of man in response to God’s prompting. In his *Lectures on Revivals*, Finney began by stating: “*Religion is the work of man*. It is something for man to do. It consists of obeying God from the heart. It is man’s duty.”²⁰ God influences humans by his Spirit, but individuals respond in obedience and produce a revival. Furthermore, Finney insisted that a revival is not the product of a miraculous work of the Spirit over which humans have no control; rather, God produces the work of revival through the agency of human obedience. Finney explained, “There is one fact under the government of God, worthy of universal notice . . . which is that the most useful and important things are most easily and certainly obtained by the use of appropriate means.” The key to revival, according to Finney, was an adequate understanding and appropriate use of the methods and techniques appointed by God for spiritual renewal. When the proper means are employed, Finney proclaimed with confidence, “spiritual blessings have been obtained with greater uniformity than temporal

¹⁸Ibid., 282-91.

¹⁹Charles G. Finney, *Sermons on Gospel Themes* (Oberlin, OH: E. J. Goodrich, 1876), 93; quoted in Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality*, 25.

²⁰Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (New York: Fleming H. Revell, 1868), 9. The italics in the quotes that follow are original.

ones.”²¹ Finney looked to employ means which would produce nearly certain results in the congregation, and he used his revival lectures to do more than fill the heads of his New York congregants with information. He called upon them to “do your duty as fast as you can learn what it is, and to pray that [God] will pour out his Spirit upon this church and upon this city this winter.”²²

In the course of his *Lectures* Finney gave specific advice on the appropriate methods and techniques one should use in promoting revivals. In Lecture Fourteen he argued that God has established “*no particular system of measures* to be employed and invariably adhered to in promoting religion.”²³ Scripture, therefore, prescribes no specific methodology for conducting worship and evangelizing the lost. The measures in place at the present, he argued, were developed over time, often by influential leaders such as Luther and the Reformers, Wesley, Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards. Nonetheless, he advised, in the present context three means have been most effective: anxious meetings, protracted meetings, and the anxious seat. Anxious meetings were gatherings designed as an opportunity for the evangelist to meet for personal conversation with sinners who were concerned with the state of their souls. Protracted meetings were a series of meetings, sometimes lasting for a considerable period of time, in which the gospel would be preached, preferably, Finney advised, by the same minister. The anxious seat was a piece of furniture set down front in the meeting place where those who were concerned about the state of their souls could come “and be addressed particularly, and be made subjects of prayer, and sometimes conversed with individually.”²⁴ In

²¹Ibid., 14.

²²Ibid., 21.

²³Ibid., 238.

²⁴Ibid., 253.

conducting revivals, then, Finney advised using a means that was effective, whether or not precedent existed for its use.

These means, however, which Finney argued could be utilized confidently to produce spiritual blessings, needed to be used in the right manner. In his discussion of prayer meetings conducted for those anxious about their souls, Finney warned against bringing into the meeting any element which would detract from the desired effect. The minister should not read scripture as a mere formality. Congregants should not sing songs of joy for “a *great deal of singing* injures a prayer meeting.”²⁵ Ministers must possess the requisite talents, must avoid making remarks which are not calculated to lead the people to pray, and must possess spiritual discernment in order to follow the leading of the Spirit. Moreover, the minister should discourage latecomers, for persons arriving late distract those anxious for their souls. If the appropriate means are used in the appropriate manner, however, a harvest can be reaped.

Finney’s system of theology and revival received mixed reviews from the leading preachers and theologians of New England. Old School Calvinists such as the Princetonians opposed both his theology and his “New Measures.” As Douglas Sweeney points out in his recent work on New Haven theologian Nathaniel William Taylor, revivalist Lyman Beecher fiercely opposed Finney in the late 1820s, writing condemnatory letters to religious newspapers and threatening letters to Finney himself. Despite the ferocity of his earlier opposition, Beecher confessed to Finney later that he had been mistaken regarding the extent of their differences, and he fully supported Finney’s revival efforts in Boston in 1831.²⁶

Nathaniel William Taylor was one among a series of theologians self-consciously attempting to continue the theological legacy of the leading theologian of the

²⁵Ibid., 126

²⁶Douglas A. Sweeney, *Nathaniel William Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 130-31.

First Great Awakening, Jonathan Edwards. Taylor, however, began to depart from predecessors such as Joseph Bellamy, Samuel Hopkins, and Nathaniel Emmons on issues of the freedom of the will, original sin, and regeneration. He became the leading theologian among a group of theologians and revivalists beginning in the 1820s who were connected with Yale and were known as “The New Haven School.”²⁷ Taylor attempted to distance himself from Finney at times. Nevertheless, interpreters have frequently noted the similarities that existed between Finney’s thought on the nature of man and regeneration and the thought of Taylor, despite the fact that Finney never studied with Taylor and rarely demonstrated outright dependence upon anyone. For this reason Frank Hugh Foster included a chapter on “The Oberlin Theology” in his *Genetic History of New England Theology* even though Finney never studied or taught at a New England school.²⁸ Sweeney concluded, “In sum, though Finney was not a disciple of Taylor, his revivalistic emphases on natural ability and immediate repentance served to ingrain the potent dye of Taylor’s theology indelibly into the fiber of the evangelical mind.”²⁹ Unlike the notice of Finney’s *Letters on Revivals*, however, Taylor’s works and the controversies in which he was engaged received no notice from Howell, either in his papers or his sermons. The views of Finney and Taylor on depravity and regeneration

²⁷On the theology of Nathaniel William Taylor and the New Haven School, see Sweeney, *Nathaniel William Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 352-61; Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 277-81; Frank Hugh Foster, *A Genetic History of New England Theology* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), 369-400.

²⁸For assessments of Finney’s theology and his relation to the New England theologians see Sweeney, 130-31, 150-51; Hewitt, *Regeneration and Morality*, 22-23; Charles G. Hambrick-Stowe, *Finney and the Spirit of American Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 24, 32-33, 60, 72, 80, 223; Leonard I. Sweet, “The View of Man Inherent in New Measures Revivalism,” *Church History* 45 (June 1976): 206-21; Foster, *A Genetic History of New England Theology*, 467-70.

²⁹Sweeney, *Nathaniel William Taylor, New Haven Theology, and the Legacy of Jonathan Edwards*, 151.

nonetheless represent a major theological stream flowing through Antebellum America, a stream which Howell thought should not flow through the Baptist denomination.

The practices advocated by Finney, however, were also not isolated to the New York evangelist. Indeed, Finney's New Measures were nothing new to the southwestern frontier of the 1830s, where Methodists had flourished.³⁰ Camp meetings, emotional displays, and sermons calculated to provoke response had been staples of revival preaching on the frontier, both among Methodists and Presbyterians.³¹ R. B. C. Howell's review of Finney's *Letters on Revivals* may be the only instance in which the Southern Baptist leader explicitly interacted with Finney's work. Nonetheless, he was acquainted with Finney's methods and had encountered similar methods from the Methodists and Presbyterians themselves. Moreover, Howell's understanding of human depravity and regeneration put him at odds with the theology of Finney and the New Haven School, even if the Southern Baptist leader never made the disagreement a point of controversy.

Restoration Movement Leaders

Howell reviewed Finney's work kindly even if he disagreed with his views on some key issues. With regard to the Restoration Movement, he employed restraint for a different reason. He said, "Knowing that this system had been fostered and kept alive by opposition, we have avoided for some time past, noticing either the inconsistencies or progress of what is termed the reformation."³² In the case of the Restoration Movement, Howell felt that any publicity would be good publicity. Thus he remained silent.

³⁰For the growth and techniques of American Methodists, see John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

³¹John B. Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972), 110-124.

³²Howell, "A New Chapter in Campbellism," *The Baptist*, September 1835.

On certain occasions, however, he broke his silence. On one of those occasions the controversy over Campbell's views became so heated in Howell's church that he felt compelled to address the issues publicly, both in a sermon and in print. Under increasing pressure from the preachers of the Restoration Movement, Baptist associations began passing resolutions declaring non-fellowship with churches that held those doctrines and recommending the exclusion of their preachers from Baptist pulpits. The Virginia Portsmouth Association, the local association during the time Howell spent in Norfolk, had passed a resolution of this kind in its annual meeting in 1833. The resolution called Campbell's understanding of faith, baptism, and the work of the Spirit an "inconsistent and absurd heresy." The association advised churches not to countenance these sentiments and to separate from members who did.³³ Only a few months later, preachers supporting Campbell's movement arrived in Norfolk, though they were not allowed into the pulpit of the Cumberland Street Church. Restoration preacher David S. Burnet, in a letter to Campbell's newspaper *The Millennial Harbinger*, dated 16 October 1833, explained that he had been in Norfolk, had preached at the courthouse to receptive audiences, and that "the constituents of one of the religious bodies" had become so interested in the proceedings "that a large majority of them voted out and voted down a series of resolutions submitted and pleaded by their Pastor."³⁴ The church mentioned by Burnet was evidently the Cumberland Street church. Howell later explained that at this time Burnet and his associates had succeeded in persuading their Norfolk audience that "we [the local Baptist preachers] had slandered Mr. Campbell's system."³⁵ These self-styled reformers had thwarted Howell's initial efforts to oppose their work. The

³³"Portsmouth Association," *The Religious Herald*, 6 September 1833.

³⁴D. S. Burnet, "Letter to the Editor," *Millennial Harbinger*, December 1833.

³⁵Howell, "Letter to the Editor," *Religious Herald*, 31 January 1834.

sympathies of the Norfolk Baptists had been excited in favor of Campbell and they called for Campbell himself to come and preach.

Campbell did come to Norfolk and preach. In a letter to the editor of *The Religious Herald*, Robert T. Daniel, a pastor in the Portsmouth Association and the pastor who had baptized Howell in 1821, indicated this fact when he explained that he himself had been in Norfolk from 21 November to 8 December assisting Howell “in preaching the gospel and guarding against Campbellism.” Howell preached a sermon on 25 November on the destructive tendency of Campbellism. Daniel, a veteran preacher and evangelist, said regarding the sermon that Howell “displayed great talent, tenderness, and faithfulness.” Howell, he said, “unmasked the circumlocution and sophistry” of Campbell and exposed “the glaring absurdity” of his doctrine.³⁶ In the sermon itself, Howell explained and refuted four points of the doctrine taught by Campbell and the reformers. The Campbellites, he said, were wrong on the nature of repentance, faith, regeneration, and the forgiveness of sins in baptism. Beyond the doctrinal deviations, Howell urged his audience to consider three deviations in practice. As its doctrines are carnal, he first explained, so the effects of the movement, especially among its members and teachers, had been carnal in cities where the reformers had gained a foothold—Richmond, Petersburg, Fredricksburg, and Norfolk. The movement’s understanding of the role of lay members and officers, Howell argued secondly, is also confused. Lay people are allowed to administer ordinances and are empowered to withhold financial support from ministers. Finally, Howell explained, the movement showed ironic similarities to another group causing conflict among Baptists in the 1830s—the antimission Baptists. He said, “It is sometimes the case that extremes meet. So it is in the case before us—Campbellism, and antinomianism meet and harmonize on many points—

³⁶Robert T. Daniel, “Cumberland St. Church, Norfolk,” *Religious Herald*, 17 January 1834. The resolutions approved by the church are included in Daniel’s letter along with a brief quotation from Howell’s sermon. The sermon itself has been preserved in Manuscript Notes of Sermons, vol. 14, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

like Herod and Pilate,” who made friends during the trial of Jesus. Both groups, he concluded, oppose revivals of religion, an educated ministry, missions, and the right of a sinner to pray to God. Howell then reminded his audience that some of the doctrines of Campbellism have been maintained by Catholics for centuries and that a sect holding similar doctrines (Howell meant the followers of Robert Sandeman, called “Sandemanians”) had existed in Britain for approximately thirty years. The doctrines, Howell said, which had prevailed in Europe were making their way over. Speaking in tongues, which he had read was occurring in Europe, would likely come over next. Nonetheless, Howell concluded, one day the erroneous doctrines would be burned up.³⁷

Three days after Howell’s sermon, 28 November 1833, the Cumberland Street Church held a full meeting in which it debated and passed resolutions condemnatory of Campbell’s views on faith, repentance, and the operation of the Holy Spirit on the heart. Howell’s sermon had apparently made an impact. He himself, however, credited the change of opinion among the church members toward Campbell as due to Campbell’s own visit: “Campbell came; he preached; but instead of using the prudent caution of his humble precursors, he came forth with honesty, and boldly exposed many of the absurdities of his system.” The resolutions offered by the church against the Restoration movement, Howell said, would have been strongly resisted had Campbell himself not visited.³⁸

Despite the success of the resolutions offered, the effects of Campbell’s visit lingered in the Cumberland Street church. In the same letter in which he explained the results of Campbell’s visit, Howell lamented, “The convulsions through which we have passed, have left the church as cold as an iceberg.” He appealed to the preachers who

³⁷Howell, “Campbellism,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, vol. 14, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

³⁸Howell, “Letter to the Editor,” *Religious Herald*, 31 January 1834.

might read *The Religious Herald* to come to Norfolk and assist with a protracted meeting, which he was convinced “would be productive of more good than the same amount of effort could well be bestowed [with] any where else.” Help arrived and the meetings occurred. Howell concluded that “nearly all of the Campbellism that had crept in among us, has been burnt up, by the prevalence of the Spirit of God.”³⁹ Yet whatever confidence Howell had in the destruction of Campbell’s influence in the church seems to have dissolved by 1 May of that year. A private memorandum written by Howell on this day records that he declined to accept the pastorate of Cumberland Street for another year mainly due to divisions within the congregation which were exacerbated by the controversy over Campbell’s views. Influential members of the church opposed Howell’s leadership, he thought, because of his efforts to counteract the influence of the Restoration Movement. They accused him of trying to exercise an unwarranted amount of authority, of reading his sermons, of studying in preparation for his sermons, of not visiting the members of the church, and of trying “to subvert the liberties of the Baptist churches generally.”⁴⁰ Howell left Virginia for Tennessee in the wake of a frustrating confrontation with followers of the Restoration Movement.

Convinced of his need to build up the churches of the West and of his inability to work productively with the Cumberland Street Church in Norfolk, Howell came to Tennessee in January 1835, but he did not escape the influence of Alexander Campbell. Campbell had visited Nashville in 1827 and 1830 and had preached initially at Nashville (First) Baptist, before the congregation left the Baptist denomination. The church had

³⁹Howell, “Protracted Meeting in Norfolk,” *The Religious Herald*, 28 February 1834.

⁴⁰Howell, “My Reasons for Resigning the Church in Cumberland Street Norfolk Va,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, vol. 14, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville. Howell was, in fact, “guilty” of using a manuscript when preaching and of studying in preparation. He went into the pulpit many times with a somewhat full manuscript. In many places he left a note for himself, “Enl.,” presumably meaning “enlarge,” where he intended to expand extemporaneously. He responded to the criticism by writing, “all ministers, and every other speaker, of consideration, use notes in preaching.” Furthermore he made no apology for studying in preparation.

embraced the Restoration Movement under the leadership of its preacher, Philip Fall, forcing the five remaining members in opposition to Campbell's teachings to depart and reconstitute Nashville Baptist Church in 1830 with only five members. The church had lost its building and most of its members. To make matters worse for Howell, Campbell returned to the city again in March 1835.⁴¹

While Campbell was in town Howell said nothing. On 5 April, after Campbell's departure, Howell delivered a sermon to his congregation entitled, "The Reformation—or Campbellism Examined." Howell informed the church that he did not speak publicly regarding Campbell's teachings because such a statement would have been construed by Campbell as a challenge, especially since Campbell did not attempt to challenge Howell while he was in town. Aside from this, the Restoration Movement was already well established in Nashville, the residents of the city were already well aware of Campbell's teachings, and Howell's purpose was not to make proselytes from the other church. He delivered his message detailing the errors of the Restoration Movement on faith, regeneration, and the work of the Holy Spirit in order to strengthen his own church.⁴² The resolution approved by the Cumberland Street Church under Howell's leadership expressed his concern well. Campbell's teaching on faith, repentance, and the agency of the Spirit, it reads, "we believe to be unscriptural, and dangerous to the peace of the church, and the salvation of souls; destroying, as it unquestionably does, the whole spirituality of religion, and reducing it to a mere form of godliness, while it denies the power thereof."⁴³ While Howell was reluctant to address Campbellism publicly, he

⁴¹A correspondent to *The Nashville Republican* attended the meeting on 20 March 1835 and reported that Campbell preached on baptism and on faith. The correspondent was impressed but did not understand Campbell's opinions; Civitas, "A Friday Night Sermon," *The Nashville Republican*, 25 March 1835.

⁴²Howell, "The Reformation—or Campbellism Examined," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, vol. 14, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

⁴³"Cumberland Street Church, Norfolk," *The Religious Herald*, 17 January 1834.

responded in his own congregations to the doctrines of the Restoration Movement on depravity and regeneration because he considered them dangerous to the peace and doctrinal faithfulness of Baptist churches and a hindrance to personal salvation.

The Restoration Movement's Anthropology

As Baptists responded to the teachings of Campbell and his associates, they objected frequently to the movement's characterization of saving faith. Campbell described saving faith as an assent to the truth of the gospel that Jesus is the savior and submission to him. The powerful testimony of the Holy Spirit in the days of the apostles, he argued, confirmed the truth of the gospel through the working of miraculous gifts. Some, he said, do not define the work of the Spirit in this way. Campbell explained, "Some mystics in ancient times, and some of the moderns yet affirm that the infusion of the Holy Spirit into the hearts of disciples as the *spirit of adoption*—as the *Spirit of Christ*—is that *demonstration of the Spirit* which enables men to believe. But this is as unreasonable as it is unscriptural."⁴⁴ Campbell argued that the Spirit does not bring change into the heart of unbelievers to enable them to believe. The testimony given by the Spirit is sufficient and humans are able to respond to that testimony prior to regeneration.

Baptists often critiqued this position on saving faith by arguing that it indicates a weak view of human depravity. Uriel B. Chambers, editor of *The Baptist Chronicle and Literary Register*, read an article of Campbell's entitled, "The Confirmation of the Testimony," in the first issue of *The Millennial Harbinger*, and made this criticism. Campbell, he said, "seems to lose sight of one important feature in the human character," namely "that they [humans] are destitute of the organs of sight and hearing, in a spiritual

⁴⁴Alexander Campbell, "The Confirmation of the Testimony," *The Millennial Harbinger*, 1 January, 1830. Emphasis original.

point of view.”⁴⁵ Virginian Jeremiah Jeter, in his book *Campbellism Examined*, came to the same conclusion. Campbell’s theory of conversion, he said, “overlooks, or at least, under-estimates, the inveteracy of human depravity.”⁴⁶ Presbyterian Obadiah Jennings echoed the critiques of Jeter and Chambers in an impromptu debate with Campbell during the latter’s visit to Nashville in 1830. Jennings argued that the enmity and prejudice of the carnal mind against God is such that “although he may *historically* believe the scriptures, [he] will not so *receive* the truth and testimony of God, as to induce him to renounce all trust in himself, or his supposed righteousness.”⁴⁷ Jennings, like Jeter and Chambers, considered Campbell’s doctrine of saving faith to be contradictory to the scriptural testimony regarding human depravity.

Alexander Campbell did not in any way deny that humanity suffered ill effects from Adam’s sin. Regarding humanity’s condition Campbell said, “Man unregenerate is ruined in body, soul, and spirit; a frail and mortal creature. From Adam his father he inherits a shattered constitution. He is the child of a fallen progenitor; a scion from a degenerate stock.”⁴⁸ Campbell characterized Adam’s sin as the conquest of passion over reason. In paradise Adam’s happiness “consisted in the perfect subordination of his passions and appetites to reason.” Yet despite this felicitous state, passion dethroned

⁴⁵Uriel B. Chambers, “Strictures on Mr. Campbell’s ‘Confirmation of the Testimony,’” *Baptist Chronicle and Literary Register*, July 1830.

⁴⁶Jeremiah B. Jeter, *Campbellism Examined* (New York: Sheldon, Blakeman, & Co., 1856), 130.

⁴⁷Obadiah Jennings, *Debate on Campbellism; Held at Nashville, Tennessee* (Pittsburg: D. and M. Maclean, 1832), 57. Jennings’ work is his own recollection of an exchange that took place when Campbell was preaching at the church that had been Nashville Baptist Church in December 1830. Campbell opened the floor for any criticisms of his presentation and since no one stood forward to challenge Campbell, Jennings obliged. The work is entirely in Jennings own words. The “debate” can be difficult to follow in this format. By the phrase “historically believe,” given in the quote, Jennings referred to a distinction Campbell drew regarding the meaning of the biblical definition of saving faith, namely assent to the truthfulness of Scripture’s teaching. Many critics attacked Campbell’s definition of saving faith.

⁴⁸Campbell, “Regeneration,” *Millennial Harbinger Extra* 6, 5 August 1833.

reason and left humanity with guilt, shame, and fear. The great difference in Adam before the fall and his sons afterward, Campbell argued, was that while reason had ruled Adam, passion ruled his sons. The triumph of passion, he said, explains why children, for many years after they are born, are “impelled and prompted by appetites and passions.” When reason does appear in them, it is “weak and incapable of government.”⁴⁹ Because of this triumph of passion, Adam lost his personal glory, “the dazzling splendor of his body.” The image of God in Adam was lost, thus leading to false understandings of the image of God, which is idolatry. Adam further lost his understanding of and conformity to God’s moral character.⁵⁰ Thus, Alexander Campbell held that the sin of Adam in the Garden of Eden had consequences for all of humanity.

Despite the losses incurred by Adam in the Garden, however, humanity did not fall beyond reach. Campbell clarified that the punishment incurred by Adam and Eve was not the punishment of eternal death. When God stated “when you eat of it you shall surely die,” he did not mean eternal death. If this had been God’s meaning, Campbell explained, then eternal death would have followed of necessity. God would not be able to enact “any benevolent or merciful procedure” toward the sinner. If eternal death had been the consequence of Adam’s sin, humanity could never “by any device or act of his own, have been restored to the divine image and favor.” As it is, however, humanity is “susceptible of being renewed.”⁵¹ Thus while Adam’s sin brought dreadful consequences upon humanity, individuals are not so depraved by sin, according to Campbell, that they can never perform some act that would bring about restoration to God’s favor.

⁴⁹Campbell, “Essays on Man in His Primitive State, and under the Patriarchal, Jewish and Christian Dispensations.--No. II.: Primitive State,” *The Christian Baptist*, 1 September 1828

⁵⁰Campbell, “Essays on Man in His Primitive State, and under the Patriarchal, Jewish, and Christian Dispensations.--No. III.: Primitive State,” *The Christian Baptist*, 6 October 1828.

⁵¹Ibid.

The act which brings restoration to the image and approval of God, according to Campbell, is the exercise of faith. This is the point which so frequently elicited criticism from Campbell's adversaries. In numerous articles both in *The Christian Baptist* and in *The Millennial Harbinger*, and apparently in a multitude of sermons as he traveled the country, Campbell outlined his views on saving faith. The Holy Spirit, he argued, worked in the times of the prophets and apostles to confirm their testimony. Presently, the Holy Spirit works in the sinner "in presenting new objects to the faculties, volitions, and affections of men; which *new objects* apprehended, engage the faculties or powers of the human understanding, captivate the affections and passions of the human soul, and, consequently, direct or draw the whole man into new aims, pursuits, and endeavors." Grasping the truth of the gospel, which has been well attested by the Holy Spirit, the sinner submits to Christ. This exercise of faith and submission to Christ is an act of the sinner's volition and requires no internal change by means of the Holy Spirit. Rather, the Spirit is poured out upon the individual and moral renewal takes place at baptism.⁵² Faith, therefore, is exercised by the individual and is not a gift given by the Spirit.

Campbell was concerned as he articulated this understanding of saving faith to avoid what he considered to be the errors of Calvinism and Arminianism on the subject. Calvinism, on the one hand, undermined human responsibility and eliminated the use of means in the conversion of souls. He declared, "It is one of the monstrous abortions of a purblind theology for any human being to be wishing for supernatural aid to be born again."⁵³ The Calvinist position on regeneration was particularly offensive to Campbell because it undermined the means "fitted to the ends [God] designed to accomplish." The

⁵²Campbell, "Regeneration," *Millennial Harbinger Extra* 6 (5 August 1833). See also Campbell, "Essays on the work of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of men.--No. VIII," *The Christian Baptist*, 7 March 1825.

⁵³Campbell, "Reply to the Above," *The Christian Baptist*, 4 June 1827.

means established by God are “that every necessary blessing is bestowed upon all them who, believing that God is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him, ask for those favors comprised in the love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit.” The Calvinist doctrine of regeneration, according to Campbell, leads to passivity and claims that humans do not have the power to ask for the blessing of salvation and expect to receive it. Campbell asked, “For what fitness is there to produce faith in telling a man that he cannot believe?” Campbell thought that the Arminian position, on the other hand, placed too much power in the free will and “sufficient strength” of the person, denying the need for the gracious work of God. Campbell concluded, “The men who deal in those distilled truths [Calvinism and Arminianism], and those who drink those distilled doctrines, are generally intoxicated.”⁵⁴

In conclusion, Campbell was as concerned as was Finney about the need to understand the conversion process. Both of them disagreed with the Calvinistic understanding of depravity and regeneration. Moreover, while they disagreed with each other about the effects of the fall of Adam upon his posterity, both of them argued that humans possess the capacity to respond in faith without needing the prior regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Both were actively engaged in what Nathan O. Hatch called “the crusade against Calvinist Orthodoxy.”⁵⁵ While R. B. C. Howell, as a Baptist, was not

⁵⁴Campbell, “Essays on the Work of the Holy Spirit in the Salvation of Men--No. VIII,” *The Christian Baptist*, 7 March 1825. Paul M. Blowers described the efforts of the early reformers such as Campbell, Barton W. Stone, Elias Smith, and others as attempting what looked to be a *via media* between Calvinism and Arminianism, but which was often asserted to be a simple recovery of New Testament Christianity. See Paul M. Blowers, “Neither Calvinists nor Arminians, but Simply Christians: The Stone-Campbell Movement as a Theological Resistance Movement,” *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 35 (Fall 2000): 137. Nathan O. Hatch explained the movement as not a revolt against Calvinism merely, but a revolt against theology. Instead of exalting an inherited system of theology, the Restoration leaders exalted the ability of the common person “to read the New Testament as if mortal man had never seen it before.” See Hatch, “The Christian Movement and a Demand for a Theology of the People,” in *The Stone-Campbell Movement: An International Religious Tradition*, ed. Michael W. Casey and Douglas A. Foster (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002), 130, 138. For a review of Campbell’s understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit and regeneration in the context of Campbell’s philosophical commitments, see Pat Brooks, “Alexander Campbell, the Holy Spirit, and the New Birth.”

⁵⁵Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity*, 162. See especially pp. 162-79.

committed to Calvinist orthodoxy as expounded by New England Congregationalists, and while he was not committed to everything taught in the influential *Philadelphia Confession*, he stood firmly upon traditional Calvinist arguments for original sin, human depravity, and the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit in the conversion of sinners. This foundation, he thought, was the only solid foundation for the renewal of the church and the conversion of sinners.

Howell on the Conversion of Sinners

Human Accountability, Depravity, and the Fall of Adam

Critical for Howell in laying the foundation for understanding the mission of the church in the world with respect to the conversion of sinners was how to understand the nature of human responsibility and the goodness of God in exercising his sovereign power. These issues are particularly relevant with respect to the fall of Adam. How could God give to man a law if he foresaw that he would violate that law and bring sin, death, and misery upon his posterity? How could God foresee or permit the fall and hold Adam responsible for his actions? In what way is human depravity related to Adam's transgression? The answers to these questions must both protect the sovereign prerogative of God and the responsibility of sinners as free moral agents.

Howell justified God's act of giving Adam a law which he knew Adam would transgress by explaining that the existence of a law was essential to the purpose for which God created Adam. God governs his universe, Howell said, "by appropriate and fixed laws, benevolently, and wisely suited to the character, relations, and ends, of each portion of the great whole."⁵⁶ This rule applies as much to matter as it does to mind. The laws given by God, furthermore, are essential to the existence of the universe. Taking matter

⁵⁶Howell, "The Law," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 3:67, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville. This sermon is the basis for an essay published a few days later, "The Adamic Law," *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 2 May 1839.

as an example, Howell explained, if one removed even the simplest law, the law of gravitation, then the earth “and every object upon it would instantly fall into utter chaos.” The laws of the mind are equally essential, though unlike the laws of matter they are not automatically obeyed. This is so because if the mind has no ability to resist, it is “equally incapable of guilt or innocence;” hence humans would be without responsibility. Instead God created a law in order that our first parents might be “mature, intelligent, and free.” Furthermore, Howell argued, humanity could not be susceptible to pleasure or pain without the possession of a law which could be transgressed. He said, “Man cannot, in any conceivable manner, exist and be the subject of pleasure arising from holiness, or, indeed from any other cause without liability to pain, arising from transgression or some other source.”⁵⁷ The conclusion to which Howell was leading was that in order to create a humanity which is capable of holiness, God had to create a humanity which is free and responsible. Though some interposed, asking why God did not prevent Adam’s sin, Howell responded that if God had placed restraint upon the human mind, the restraint would have destroyed essential properties of that mind, its freedom and responsibility.

Above all Howell wanted to avoid the antinomian conclusion that God forced Adam to sin. This conclusion is erroneous, according to Howell, because it places God’s will in contradiction with his law and thus places humanity in an impossible position. To suppose that God would publicly command obedience and then secretly resolve to compel Adam to sin would be to charge God with insincerity. Furthermore, humanity would be in a position in which obedience is impossible. Sinning would result in a violation of God’s law, while refraining from sinning would violate God’s secret will. Finally, Howell concluded, God would have punished Adam for what he could not avoid.⁵⁸ With regard to the divine decrees, Howell opposed the proposition that “God

⁵⁷Howell, “The Adamic Law.”

⁵⁸Ibid; idem, “The Law,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 3:77-78.

ordains whatever comes to pass,” as found in the *Westminster* and *Philadelphia Confessions*. Howell’s rejection of this clause is evident in his understanding of the fall as well as his understanding of the decrees regarding election and reprobation. Howell concluded, then, that God established a law for Adam, a covenant of works, from which “unmingled delight” arose “as a perennial fountain.”⁵⁹ God provided humanity with all of the means necessary in order to live in holiness and happiness in accordance with the covenant. The nature of this covenant, however, is only a piece of the puzzle regarding the sovereign interaction of God with a free and responsible humanity.

The covenant established by God was violated, and the violation brought dreadful consequences. At this point, many in Howell’s day disagreed. Finney argued that humans were depraved but that this depravity did not consist of a constitutional defect inherited from Adam. Campbell argued that the fall had dreadful consequences, but that man’s inherent ability to respond to divine testimony had not been extinguished. Howell disagreed with both of these positions. Against Finney, Howell argued that Romans 5:12-19 indicated that human depravity is inextricably related to Adam’s sin. To assert that human sinfulness could have come from another source would be not only unscriptural, but unreasonable as well. No other cause reasonably could be asserted to account for the universal existence of human sinfulness. The influence of evil example, he argued, is inadequate to account for the scope of human sinfulness. Furthermore, sinfulness is evident in children “as soon as they are capable of moral action.” Beyond this, even infants die, and death is a consequence of sin. This state of the heart characterizes all people in every nation in every period. The cause, he argued, must be the same since the effects are the same. He concluded, “Its source, plainly, must be the

⁵⁹Howell, *The Covenants* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1855; reprint Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1994), 10.

fountainhead of all the race.”⁶⁰ Contrary to Finney’s doctrine, Howell maintained that humanity must have inherited a constitutional defect from Adam.

Unlike Campbell, Howell argued that the corruption inherited from Adam left every aspect of the human constitution tainted. Howell defined depravity as follows:

It is, I answer, a corrupt vitiated state of the heart, which is destructive of moral principle, or if you please, true holiness. It is evinced in the violation of truth, and the omission of duty; in the triumph of the animal appetites over the intellectual powers; in the dominion of selfishness over our motives and pursuits; and in the perversion of the understanding, will, and the affections.⁶¹

Like Campbell, Howell argued that human depravity resulted in the triumph of what Campbell called “passion” over “reason.” Unlike Campbell, though, Howell held that human depravity affected the rational capacity of humanity as well. While Campbell maintained that humans after the fall still have the capacity to assent to divine testimony, Howell argued that the moral corruption of the heart remains stubbornly fixed. He said regarding the sinner, “Spiritual things have no charms for him. Naturally he does not love God in this world, nor will he ever love God in the world to come.”⁶² Humans after the fall would never naturally assent to the divine testimony, no matter how credible. Howell held that human nature, or as Finney called it, the human constitution, was completely corrupted by the sin of Adam. Though Finney and many in the New Haven School had trouble with this point, Howell maintained firmly that humans are corrupted by the sin of Adam. Unlike Campbell, he argued that humans would never assent to divine testimony.

Howell recognized the difficulty involved in this transaction between God and man and did not always explain entirely how God could hold all sinners accountable for the sin of Adam. In *The Way of Salvation* he recognized that his readers might

⁶⁰Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 3rd ed. (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1852), 37-38.

⁶¹Ibid., 36.

⁶²Ibid., 167.

experience doubt regarding the fairness of God in allowing the depravity of all of humanity to originate with Adam's sin. Despite this doubt, however, Howell pointed to Romans 5:12-19 and reminded his readers, "Remember that it is a *fact* simply, after which we are now inquiring. Nor must this fact be embarrassed by uniting it with foreign considerations."⁶³ Though he did not explain in detail at this point how God could do these things, he emphasized that Adam's posterity is not guilty of his sin. He explained, "Moral acts are not transferable from one person to another. The individual action of any agent is, in its very nature, the action of that agent only. It is therefore incapable of being participated in by any other. The *guilt* of such a personal act must consequently, be equally incapable of being participated in, or transferred."⁶⁴ Howell insisted that the guilt of Adam's sin could not be transferred since guilt is always the result of a personal transgression. How, then, can humans involuntarily be the recipients of depravity from their first parents if that depravity renders them liable for punishment? Would they not be guilty in some sense? Howell did not answer this question in *The Way of Salvation*. He merely reminded his readers that their own sin was most certainly their fault: "Is your disinclination to do what you ought (this disinclination, remember, is your depravity) any just apology for your refusal? Your *depravity* therefore, is no excuse for your sin."⁶⁵

The Way of Salvation was first published in 1849. In Howell's 1851 work, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, he came closer to answering how God could hold all of humanity accountable for Adam's sin. His thesis in chapter nine of that book was that infant baptism is an evil because it perverts the scriptural truth regarding infant salvation. In order to defend this thesis, he sent the readers back to Romans 5:12-19. Here he brought

⁶³Ibid., 37. The "foreign considerations," to which Howell referred, he explained as the "inexplicableness in regard to the medium through which the transmission has been made" and "any opinions we may form of the propriety, or impropriety, of the dispensation."

⁶⁴Ibid., 37-38.

⁶⁵Ibid., 40.

out a point he had not asserted in *The Way of Salvation*, namely that humanity is related to Adam as inextricably as it is to Christ. Regarding infants he says, “In bringing *them* into this world, divine *sovereignty* has justly, and without any act of theirs, entailed on them *the depravity and corruption* of the first Adam. In taking them away from the world, the same divine sovereignty has *graciously*, and without any act of theirs, conferred on them *the salvation* of the second Adam.”⁶⁶ Howell pointed out here that humanity’s involvement in Adam’s sin is related to humanity’s involvement in Christ’s atoning work on the cross. Howell again concluded, “They are involved, it is true, on account of their connection with Adam, in the consequences of his fall.”⁶⁷ Despite asserting in *The Way of Salvation* that Adam’s descendants are not guilty of his sin, Howell asserted plainly in *The Evils of Infant Baptism* that God justly involved all of humanity in Adam’s sin in the same way that he justly involved humanity in the redemption wrought by Christ.

Howell’s clearest explanation of how God could hold humanity accountable for the sin of Adam came in an unpublished sermon on infant salvation preached the year after *The Evils of Infant Baptism* was published. In this 1852 sermon Howell followed closely the argument of chapter nine of his book. In making the point that “infants are involved in the depravity and sin of our first parents,” Howell introduced a quote he did not use in his defense of original sin in his book. It came from John Wesley’s *A Treatise on Baptism*, where Wesley argued that baptism washes away the guilt of original sin. Original sin, Wesley argued, clearly has corrupted infants, “for they too die, therefore they have sinned, but not by *actual* sin, therefore by *original* sin.”⁶⁸ Though Howell did

⁶⁶Howell *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 3rd ed. (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1852), 179-80.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, 186.

⁶⁸John Wesley, *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 10:190; quoted in Howell, “Infant Salvation,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 15:16, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville. Howell did, in fact, use this quote in *The Evils of Infant*

not comment on this quote, he did introduce the emphasis, which was not in Wesley's text.⁶⁹ Howell apparently accepted from Wesley the validity of distinguishing between actual and original sin. Perhaps this distinction allowed Howell to explain how humans could be guilty of Adam's sin though they did not participate in it. While God does not hold humans accountable for the sins of another, humanity's unique relationship with Adam is part of God's design. This involvement was explicitly rejected by Finney and the New Haven School.

Humanity's involvement with Adam, as Howell understood it, yields personal culpability for everyone as a result. Yet this innate depravity does not render humanity powerless. Despite the inclination toward sin that plagues humans naturally, they are not powerless to avoid sin. God holds them accountable for their evil thoughts because humans have the power to control them. "If we could not command our thoughts, we could not be justly held accountable for them For it is very obvious to all, that where there is no *ability*, there is no *responsibility*." God justly involved humanity in Adam's sin, and yet humans sin willingly though they are able to avoid it.⁷⁰ All humans stand condemned therefore, according to Howell, whether they have heard the gospel or not. In a sermon preached both in Nashville and in Richmond, Howell said, "*In the God which nature reveals*, you behold every perfection. He is therefore worthy of your boundless *admiration*." This truth renders all without excuse, even "had Christ never visited our fallen world."⁷¹ Howell concluded that all humans are guilty because of their

Baptism, 192, but only to give the Methodist position on baptism. He did not use the quote to assert his own position on original sin as he did in the later sermon.

⁶⁹See John Wesley, "A Treatise on Baptism," in *A Collection of Interesting Tracts, Explaining Several Important Points of Scripture Doctrine* (New York: G. Lane & C. B. Tippet, 1847), 246. Howell drew his quote from this reprint, which did not italicize the words in question.

⁷⁰Howell, "Moral Character of Thought," *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 24 December 1840. Emphasis original.

⁷¹Howell, "The Leading Cause of Man's Condemnation is the Rejection of Existing Light," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 14:687, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

involvement with Adam, guilty because of their own sin, and guilty of rejecting the truth God has revealed. They are inherently inclined toward sin and will not accept divine testimony. Howell's position on original sin put him at odds with some of the most important anti-Calvinist thinkers of his time.

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Conversion

R. B. C. Howell understood the human predicament to be one in which people are unable to save themselves. The message of salvation presented by the church is presented to men, women, boys, and girls who are naturally inclined to turn away from God. Humans are responsible for this predicament, but are unable to remedy it. The critical work of salvation, then, is one in which the Holy Spirit works effectually to bring about salvation without obliterating the free agency of humans.

The key to understanding how Howell integrated these two elements in the process of conversion is found by examining his explanation of how God works upon the human faculties. In establishing the free agency of individuals, Howell agreed with Edwards that the will is free as long as it responds to the strongest motive, even though he chose to use different language than the Great Awakening theologian. In explaining his understanding of the human faculties, Howell borrowed directly from Edwards' *Religious Affections*. In "The Proof of Regeneration," a sermon Howell preached to his Nashville congregation, Howell used Edwards' argument in the first part of his treatise to define two distinct faculties within the soul. The *understanding* is the faculty by which the soul is "capable of perception, and speculation." The *inclination* is the faculty by which the soul "not merely discerns and judges, but is some way *inclined*—or it is that faculty by which it views things, not as an indifferent unaffected *spectator*, but either liking or disliking, approving or disapproving."⁷² These two faculties compose the

⁷²Howell, "The Proof of Regeneration," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:478, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville. The quote Howell used is found in Jonathan Edwards *Religious Affections*, ed. John E. Smith, *The Works of*

human will. The understanding perceives and reasons. The inclination expresses approval or disapproval.

The difficulty facing humanity, Howell argued, was not a lack of understanding of spiritual things, but a lack of inclination toward spiritual things. Alexander Campbell had argued that humans, when confronted with divine testimony, could change their mind regarding the truth. The only role the Holy Spirit played in this part of the process was in giving the initial testimony found in Scripture. Campbell held, then, that the understanding (as Howell defined the human faculties) was principally involved in the change. Howell declared that a mere change in the understanding was not sufficient. To demonstrate this point, he divided the work of the Spirit into two categories, moral influence and supernatural power. Moral influence involves the Spirit working indirectly upon the mind of the sinner through the inspiration of Scripture, the medium of preaching, conversations, reading, and prayers—any work in which the mind is presented with motives, facts, and arguments. In this way the Spirit of God operates upon all men to whom these efforts are addressed. Howell concluded emphatically, “*The Holy Ghost by moral power, alone, such as is contained in facts and arguments, even though they be inspired, does not renew, and sanctify, the souls of men. This is done by an influence superadded to moral power.*” The Holy Spirit employs supernatural power in order to bring change to the soul. Sinners need this power in order to overcome the disinclination of the heart. Change cannot be wrought without it. Howell explained,

This disinclination has its seat in the depravity of the heart; which is an absolute disrelish of spiritual things. Without the removal of this &c—no discoveries of religious truth, however clear, which moral power can impart, can render the service of God agreeable, or induce the individual to engage in it. On the contrary, the clearer these objects are discovered the greater will be the disrelish, so long as the inclination remains unchanged.⁷³

Jonathan Edwards, vol. 2, ed. Perry Miller (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959), 96. Howell was actually quoting from an abridged edition first produced by Ellerby and published by the American Tract Society beginning in 1833. See the preface to the Yale edition: Smith, “Editor’s Introduction,” 77.

⁷³Howell, “The Influence of the Spirit of God in the Regeneration of the Soul,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 3:50-59, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

According to Howell, then, Campbell's argument for the moral influence of the Spirit alone was insufficient to account for the perversion of human inclinations as a result of depravity. A supernatural work is necessary for salvation.

Howell argued, however, that this supernatural work of the Spirit does not violate the free agency of man. Though an antinomian may argue that the Spirit effects regeneration in a human "by immediately creating in him virtuous volitions," Howell objected to this characterization. All of the volitions of moral agents, he said, are the acts of those agents. The Spirit does not create any volition, but rather "merely communicates to him [the individual] the love, taste or relish for spiritual objects." A work whereby the Spirit creates an act of the will in man would be unnecessary, "because the communication of the relish is as truly followed by virtuous willing and doing as would be the creative act [of the Spirit]."⁷⁴ The Holy Spirit effectually calls specific humans to salvation. This work of the Spirit does not violate the free agency of humans because God does not create in anyone an act of the will. Rather, the Holy Spirit changes the inclination of the individual, thereby changing that individual's assessment of spiritual things. Instead of being unconcerned about spiritual truths as a depraved person would be, the individual embraces God, loves God, and responds to the call of the Spirit. Contrary to Campbell, Howell argued that a supernatural work of the Spirit was necessary. He insisted, however, that this supernatural work coincides with the free response of the individual.

In his efforts to establish an integrated view of the supernatural work of God in conversion and the free response of individuals, Howell looked for help from his Baptist heritage, particularly from English Baptists. In articulating the doctrine of depravity,

Howell makes similar arguments in a sermon preached a few years later, "The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Regeneration and Salvation of the Soul," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, vol. 12, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville. A complementary treatment in less technical language is found in *The Way of Salvation*, 165-74.

⁷⁴Howell, "Regeneration," *The Baptist*, 28 September 1844.

Howell repeatedly made use of the work of John Gill. A reader of *The Baptist* asked Howell for articles on key doctrines related to Baptists' dispute with Campbell. Howell complied by printing sermons he had preached on faith, justification, and regeneration, but on the issue of depravity, he merely reprinted a section from Gill's *Body of Divinity*.⁷⁵ In a sermon on the same subject, preached in Richmond in 1853, Howell again quoted Gill at length, this time from his commentary on Romans. In Howell's chapter on depravity in *The Way of Salvation*, he quoted Andrew Fuller, well known for his theological work opposing hyper-Calvinism and defending the cause of missions. On the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit, Howell found help from the renowned preacher Robert Hall, Jr. A sermon Howell preached in 1839 borrowed extensively from a circular letter written in 1815 by Hall, "On the Work of the Holy Spirit."⁷⁶ In his critique of Campbell before his Norfolk congregation, Howell pointed with irony to the fact that the extremes of Campbellism and antinomianism had met, in that these opposite positions opposed the same practices. Fuller and Hall used this argument repeatedly, pointing out that the extremes of Arminianism and hyper-Calvinism depended upon the same erroneous view of free agency. Perhaps most striking is Howell's use of Fuller's *Dialogues and Letters between Crispus and Gaius*. As Howell explained his view of free agency in the third installment of his letters on predestination, he obviously had before him the fifth dialogue of Fuller's work, where Fuller defined the key to free agency as "the power of following the inclination." Howell echoed Fuller's words almost verbatim as he explained the difference between his own view of free agency and that of Arminianism. As he explained free agency Howell said, "The one [his view] goes merely

⁷⁵John Gill, "Total Depravity," *The Baptist*, 31 August 1844.

⁷⁶Howell, "The Influence of the Spirit of God in the Regeneration of the Soul." See Robert Hall, Jr., "On the Work of the Holy Spirit," in *The Works of Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833), 1:233-46.

to render us accountable beings, the other arrogantly claims the turning point of salvation.”⁷⁷

Howell’s acquaintance with the writings of the English Baptists is further evident in his choice of words. In his letters to John M. Watson as he dealt with the controversy over missions, Howell said, “Facts are stubborn things.” Fuller, interacting with Dan Taylor on the divine decrees, laid out his evidence and concluded, “Exclamations may abound, but facts are stubborn things.”⁷⁸ In addition to quoting Hall for more than a page in his sermon, “The Influence of the Spirit of God,” Howell borrowed imagery from Hall in the same sermon as well, such as the phrase “a relish of the sweetness of divine truth.” Howell’s acquaintance with the works of Hall and Fuller was such that even their language crept into his own writing at times.

That Howell would draw upon the writings of John Gill, Andrew Fuller, and Robert Hall should not be surprising. The works of these three Baptists were reprinted in America in the nineteenth century and were popular among American Baptist ministers. More important than his use of their material, which merely shows that Howell had a library, is the fact that Howell’s arguments for the use of means in conversion and revival fell right in line with the theology of the English Particular Baptists who supported the work of the Baptist Missionary Society. Andrew Fuller’s *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation* was an effort to defeat the theology of hyper-Calvinism by demonstrating that faith is a duty required of all humans. Similar argumentation can be found throughout Hall’s writings as well. The preaching of both Fuller and Hall is replete with references to and emphasis upon the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore,

⁷⁷Howell, “To the Rev. John Rushing. Letter No. III—Predestination,” *The Baptist*, 1 September 1837. Fuller had Gaius say in the dialogue, “The one [his view of free agency] goes merely to render us accountable beings; the other arrogantly claims a part, yea, the very turning point of salvation,” *The Complete Works of Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher, 2:658.

⁷⁸Howell, “To Dr. John M. Watson. Letter VIII,” *The Baptist*, 16 May 1837. See Fuller, *Works*, 2:503.

both Fuller and Hall agreed with John Gill on human depravity, even though they held Gill partly responsible for the theology of the hyper-Calvinist movement among English Baptists.⁷⁹ As Howell attempted to establish a fully integrated theology for the Baptist mission movement in America, he drew upon the writings of English Baptist preachers, most importantly Fuller and Hall, who were influential in establishing and supporting the work of the Baptist Missionary Society that sent out William Carey. Howell found precedent for his views on the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit and the nature of human free agency in the theological work of the Baptists in England. Likewise, following these British preachers, Howell stressed the importance of the use of means for conversion.

The Use of Means in Conversion and Revival

As R. B. C. Howell preached on regeneration, he did not do so in order to point his congregation toward their inability to convert themselves. Nor did he preach on the doctrine of regeneration in order to render his congregations passive as Finney and Campbell accused Calvinists of doing. Both of the latter individuals blamed the perceived languishing condition of the Calvinist churches out of which they came on the way the pastors understood the doctrine of regeneration. Howell, as the British Baptist theologians had before him, urged that the necessity of a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit did not render humans passive. As he closed one of his sermons on regeneration,

⁷⁹For recent examinations of the theology of these English Baptist leaders, see Michael A. G. Haykin, ed. *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697-1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, vol. 77, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (New York: E. J. Brill, 1997); Michael A. G. Haykin, ed., 'At the Pure Fountain of Thy Word,': *Andrew Fuller as an Apologist*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 6 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2004); Peter J. Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) and the Revival of Eighteenth Century Particular Baptist Life*, Studies in Baptist History and Thought, vol. 8 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003). Though work has been done on the preaching of Robert Hall, Jr., for which he was famous, no examination of his theology has been printed. Hall has received brief treatment in J. H. Y. Briggs, *The English Baptists of the Nineteenth Century*, A History of the English Baptists, vol. 3, ed. Roger Hayden (Oxford: The Baptist Historical Society, 1994), 159-63. His works were printed in several editions in the nineteenth century.

he made this point to his congregation: “If [the individual] cannot be said to be responsible for his regeneration, because it is a divine act performed in him by means of which he is made the subject of new life . . . still he is responsible for his repentance, for the exercise of faith, and for conversion—and let him remember that God has promised to give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him.”⁸⁰ The inclinations are renewed by the Spirit, but the work of repentance, faith, and prayer which flow from that work are performed by humans.

If humans are responsible for their response, they are responsible to respond in faith and obedience to the moral influence of the Spirit. The Spirit speaks in nature, in Scripture, in the events in the life and mission of Jesus, in the work of the Spirit on the heart of individuals, in preaching, and in worship in the sanctuary. Preaching on Hebrews 3:7-8, Howell implored his congregation: “You have been awed &c, but you have hardened your heart. You have read his word &c, but you refused to hear and hardened. You have thought of Christ &c, but have hardened your heart &c. You have listened to the preacher &c, and hardened your heart &c. Once more he calls today.”⁸¹ Howell was convinced that God commands immediate response as well as the exercise of faith. Howell pointed to numerous verses both in the Old and New Testament where God commands all men to believe in his promises, where unbelief is considered a sin, and where faith is equated with obedience. “We conclude, therefore,” he said, “that faith *is* obedience, properly considered, because it is a duty commanded, and to believe is to obey his command.” The fact that faith is a duty does not negate the reality that it is also a gift of God. He explained, “If nothing is duty that God works in us to perform by his word and spirit [*sic*], then it is not the duty of believers to work out their own salvation

⁸⁰Howell, “Regeneration,” *The Baptist*, 28 September 1844.

⁸¹Howell, “The Duty of Compliance with the Invitations of the Spirit,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:827, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

with fear and trembling, because it is God that worketh in us both to will and to do.”⁸² Howell was convinced that the effectual work of the Spirit does not negate humans’ responsibility to respond to the Spirit’s invitations. Indeed, as Howell preached, he always called upon his hearers, both believers and unbelievers, to respond in faith.

Howell was convinced not only of the responsibility of the hearers, but also of the responsibility of the speakers as well. To John M. Watson, the antimission Baptist leader in Middle Tennessee, Howell explained that the Great Commission, where Jesus commanded that the gospel be preached to all nations, was given specifically to the church. That the apostles understood this to be so, he said, is evident from the book of Acts as well as the ministry of Paul, for the New Testament gives evidence of the aggressive missionary strategy of the early church. Moreover, the evidence for the preaching of the gospel to the lost suggested to Howell a conclusion: “Was not God equally able then, as now, to save his people without means, out of all nations? If he did not choose that religion should be spread without instrumentality, nor to save men without the knowledge of Jesus Christ, in those days, will he do so now? Has God, in relation to his manner of saving sinners, changed?” The fact that the Holy Spirit works effectually in conversion does not negate the responsibility of the sinner to respond or of the church to proclaim. Sinners ought to seek the truth, repent, and believe, and the church should send messengers to proclaim the gospel.⁸³

These means are equally important in seeking revival in the church. Apathy and coldness of heart, Howell explained, creep into the church at times. When this happens, “faith is weak, love waxes cold, and the attendance upon the appointed means of grace is signaled by dull formality. The spirit of the world seems to overpower the

⁸²Howell, “Faith,” *The Baptist*, 7 September 1844. Howell alluded in this quote to Phil 2:13.

⁸³Howell, “To Dr. John M. Watson. Letter VII,” *The Baptist*, 1 May 1837. The first of the Watson letters, a ten letter series, appeared in *The Baptist* in January 1837 and appeared weekly thereafter.

spirit of godliness.” At these times prayer is weak and neglected.⁸⁴ These times of coldness can be triggered by external circumstances, as Howell pointed out during the election of 1844. During the excitement of the presidential campaigns of the Whig candidate, Henry Clay, and Democratic candidate, the Tennessean James K. Polk, Howell feared that religion had become a secondary concern. He complained, “Not unfrequently the regular meetings of the house of God are forsaken, and our brethren, instead of assembling to pray, are found shouting at the political meeting. Is it, therefore, astonishing that spiritual dearth is upon us?”⁸⁵ Howell considered the remedy for this spiritual coldness, however, not to be the excitement and enthusiasm generated by extravagant displays and humanly devised measures. Rather, genuine revival consisted of a return to duty, spirituality of mind, and devotion of heart by the church members.

As he mused upon the beginning of this work, Howell reminded his readers that in every congregation were those who have not “bowed their knees to Baal,” who continued to serve the Lord with conviction. These individuals would be the divine instruments to bring the church to a better state. This faithful remnant would notice the deplorable condition of the church and begin to ask themselves and God why “must we go on at this poor, dying rate?” As the faithful few organized for prayer, God would enlarge their hearts and begin to give them joy, filling them with greater love for Christ and concern for “the ingathering of the wandering sheep.” As the revival would advance, the church meetings would become more solemn and devotional, and the preaching of the pastor would fall upon the hearers with greater urgency. The fruitful branches, Howell explained, would be pruned and become more fruitful, while the dry branches would be separated “in justice to them and in mercy to the saints.” During the course of this

⁸⁴Howell, “Revivals,” *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 6 August 1840.

⁸⁵Howell, “State of Religion,” *The Baptist*, 31 August 1844. Evangelicals’ involvement in the presidential campaign of 1844 is recounted by Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 71-88.

revival true believers would receive encouragement and would discover and discipline unbelievers who have polluted the congregation.⁸⁶

The course of revival described by Howell is one in which the Holy Spirit works through the usual prescribed means of worship, service, and polity. The church needs none of the “New Measures” prescribed by Finney. Meetings do not have to be organized and conducted for the calculated purpose of provoking response from the hearers. Howell concluded, “Here there is no morbid excitement; no extravagance—no affected display—no dependence on management or humanly devised *measures*. The whole is scriptural, sober-minded, and dignified from first to last.” The Holy Spirit works through the means prescribed in the gospel for the conversion of souls and the renewal of the church. The church is instructed to pray as it ought, to worship, to preach, and to proclaim. Realizing their desperate need, pious church members call upon the Lord for assistance, and the Holy Spirit begins to work change. Recognizing the presence of sinful or unregenerate members in their midst, the congregation takes scriptural steps to discipline them, resulting in repentance or exclusion. The revival R. B. C. Howell envisioned was not a revival of dramatic excitement, but a revival characterized by holy and joyful change.

Though he did not see merit in great displays of enthusiasm, Howell considered holding special series of meetings for the purpose of renewing the church to be consistent with both the sovereignty of God and the use of means for conversion. In the same letter in which he offered his perspective on the encounter with Campbell and his associates in Norfolk, Howell lamented the coldness of the church after these tumultuous events. He concluded, “I am convinced that a well conducted protracted meeting would, at this juncture, be attended with unspeakable blessing.” As he closed the letter, he implored ministers from around Virginia to volunteer their services for such

⁸⁶Howell, “Revivals.”

a series of meetings.⁸⁷ Several ministers responded to Howell's call and the preaching commenced a few weeks later. As Howell assessed the fruits of that labor, he considered many of the negative effects of the controversy obliterated. God had melted frozen hearts and broken down barriers in the way of the church's prosperity. He stated, "The hindrances in the way of success have been removed, the ground broken up, and prepared, and the seed sown. Now my dear brother *we must have another protracted meeting*, 'if the Lord will,' in a month or two, to reap the harvest. But little has been done as to the conversion of sinners. . . . The fields are, however, now, white all around us. To reap them requires another meeting."⁸⁸ Though Howell was convinced that an individual's conversion was the result of a special work of the Holy Spirit on the heart, he saw merit in holding a special series of meetings for preaching the gospel. Those meetings, he thought, could be productive both for the renewal of believers and for the conversion of sinners. The Holy Spirit worked through such means.

This is precisely the point at which Howell differed from the antimission Baptists. John M. Watson, during his one year as editor of the antimission newspaper, *The Correspondent*, explained why "the Old Baptists" do not have annual revivals like other denominations. They do not, he said, "because they do not employ *popular* means for exciting them." They refused to use such means, he argued, because they considered the measures unscriptural. He said, "We can go no further than the constant use of *ordained* means; and do not presume to give any peculiar efficacy to such means by any unscriptural devices of our own, knowing that the Lord alone can give them success." Here were two opposing convictions. Howell, on the one hand, was convinced that protracted revival meetings, when conducted properly under the influence of sound theology, could be the means of a great work of the Holy Spirit. Watson, on the other

⁸⁷Howell, "Letter to the Editor," *The Religious Herald*, 31 January 1834.

⁸⁸Howell, "Letter to the Editor," *The Religious Herald*, 28 February 1834.

hand, was convinced that churches had no warrant to use such means and that the participants did not have the right to consider the result the work of the Holy Spirit.⁸⁹

The critique of revivalism offered by Watson illuminates the major objection of this important antission Baptist leader—the theology of the revivalists. Watson complained that the revival preachers tell their lost hearers that “faith is the product of the carnal heart and if they will only originate it, exercise it, and be immersed they will thereby be regenerated!” They further tell their hearers “that if they will only *yield* to the influence of the Holy Spirit, or perform a round of duties they will be converted.” This, Watson said, is not the Old Baptist doctrine, and this difference in doctrine explains why the Old Baptists do not participate in revival measures. He explained, “But when Old Baptist doctrines are taught, such as the total depravity of the human heart, the utter inability of man to save himself, and his entire dependence on sovereign grace, through a Crucified Redeemer, we may expect according to the Scriptures (Mat. vii, 14.) only a *few* to embrace them.”⁹⁰ Watson explained that the antission Baptists refused to participate in revival measures because those measures are the result of and further propagate an Arminian theology.

Howell, however, participated in certain revival measures while attempting to maintain the same doctrines Watson believed were critical to maintaining a healthy view of conversion. Howell taught total depravity, even to the point of upholding the doctrines of original sin and original guilt. He also taught that humans are unable to save themselves and are dependent on the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit. Unlike Watson, Howell did not think that holding a series of protracted meetings for the purpose of calling on sinners to come to Christ and calling on believers to arouse from their slumber necessarily involved a compromise with Arminianism. Furthermore, Howell understood

⁸⁹John M. Watson, “Revivals,” *The Correspondent*, September 1839.

⁹⁰Ibid.

regeneration to involve the renewal of the sinner's inclinations, which thus empowered the individual to exercise faith and repentance. He did not shy away from emphasizing to sinners their duty. Watson, on the other hand, saw such measures as a compromise on two fronts. Revivalists were perverting the sovereign prerogative of God to effectuate salvation and the inability of humans to save themselves. Howell held that the Holy Spirit worked effectually through such means. Watson could not agree to this.

In Howell's view, misunderstanding the proper integration of God's sovereignty and human responsibility brought dire consequences on the life of the church. The disagreement between Howell, Finney and Campbell, and the antimission Baptists was not merely over methods, but over deeper issues of theology. Howell argued that the inconsistent doctrinal opinions of each were actually an impediment to revival in the church. Campbell looked to purify the church by restoring the ancient view of saving faith. Finney looked to bring masses to Christ through his anxious meetings. The antimission Baptists looked to bring blessing on the church by purifying it of Arminianism. Howell offered this assessment of the issues:

Take for example a church that is either highly *Antinomian*, or highly *Arminian*, and how can it be visited by a true revival? Extremes meet, and consequently both these classes diverse as they seem to be, arrive at surprisingly similar results. With the Antinomian all events are fixed, and since he is not saved by any virtue of his own, he is not endangered by the want of it. He is therefore as a professor of religion, indifferent to duty, and of questionable morals. The Arminian is on the other hand partner with God in his salvation. He thinks he can obtain religion when he shall see proper. The result is he neglects it altogether. Or there is a periodical spasmodic essay &c. A revival with antinomians never occurs. With arminians [*sic*], is a violent animal excitement, which soon passes away, and leaves no beneficial spiritual results.⁹¹

The differences over theology resulted in practical differences in the life of the church. On the one hand, the antimission Baptists, to whom Howell frequently referred when he used the term antinomian, formulated the doctrine of God's sovereignty in such a way as to negate human responsibility, thus rendering their congregations indifferent. From

⁹¹Howell, "Revivals of Religion," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 8:988-89, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

Howell's perspective this would explain why Watson would not use protracted meetings for the conversion of the lost. Revival, Howell said, cannot occur in this context. Arminians, on the other hand, thought that people can attain salvation whenever they desire it; thus they either neglect salvation entirely or they pass through periods of intense excitement which are not spiritually beneficial. A true, lasting work of renewal and conversion in the church, according to Howell, results when the congregation understands the necessity of a work of the Spirit in regeneration and renewal and responds in obedience to the means God has appointed for that work. In this way prayer, preaching the gospel, the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper, congregational worship, and discipline become the life-blood of the church.

Conclusion

R. B. C. Howell contended for a missionary Baptist theology in the context of conflict with antission Baptists and with the anti-Calvinistic populist movements that flourished during the Second Great Awakening. In his understanding of human depravity, original sin, and the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, he remained decidedly Calvinistic. Remaining faithful to these doctrines, he thought, was critical for maintaining a healthy view of the process of conversion and of the methods useful for promoting conversion. His understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit on the human faculties provided the foundation for his position on the role of human effort in conversion. Repentance and faith on the part of the sinner, and preaching and the implementation of the means of grace on the part of the church, all occur because the Holy Spirit works effectively on the human faculties, generating the desire to follow Christ in obedience. This formulation of divine sovereignty and human responsibility put him at odds, from his perspective, with both the antission Baptists and populist anti-Calvinist theologians. Nevertheless, it left him, in his view, with a theological foundation upon which the church could witness true conversion and revival. A church with this

foundation, he thought, would be a church that can fulfill God's command to spread the aroma of Christ to all nations.

CHAPTER 4

THE SUM OF THE GOSPEL: CHRIST CRUCIFIED AND THE COVENANT OF REDEMPTION

Central to the missiological mandate of the church, by any Christian estimate, is a proper understanding of Christ's work on the cross. As Howell labored to establish a solid theological basis for the church's mission, he wrote and preached about the cross. Again the issue of the integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility surfaced in his ministry. The issue continued to surface because Howell repeatedly perceived that a distortion of this theological integration would have implications for the gospel the church proclaimed and thus the mission the church carried out. He faced theological adversaries who denied substitutionary atonement and thus perverted what he viewed as a biblical conviction about the depth of human depravity and the sovereign initiative of God which was necessary in order to procure salvation for humanity. On the other hand, some opponents understood the blessings of the cross as intended by Christ to flow only to the elect. This conviction, limited atonement, left no room, according to Howell, for sinners to believe they have warrant to embrace Christ at all. Preachers, therefore, would have no right to urge sinners to come to Christ. Howell understood the blessings of the cross—justification, sanctification, and perseverance—as likewise the fruit of the objective work of Christ on the cross, applied to the individual by the Holy Spirit, and appropriated by the individual through the God-ordained use of means. Howell considered the Covenant of Redemption to be the rubric best suited for keeping in view the sovereign work of God in atonement, justification, sanctification, and perseverance. At the same time, however, Howell articulated these doctrines in such a

way as to give proper footing to human instrumentality. Thus by preaching and writing about the cross as the fulfilment of the Covenant of Redemption, appropriated by the individual through God-ordained means, Howell intended to help churches maintain a gospel which would fuel them to accomplish God's mission.

Preaching the Cross

R. B. C. Howell resigned his pastoral charge in Nashville in the spring of 1850 in order to commence labors in Richmond as the pastor of the Second Baptist Church. On 14 April, he delivered a farewell address to his Nashville Congregation. In that sermon, he described his move as follows: "I go, my brethren, to another field; but not now among strangers or to a city where our principles, and character are unknown, and contemned, but I go again to mingle amid the scenes of my childhood, with dear relatives, and the beloved friends of my early days. I return as a bird from its wanderings to the parent nest."¹ Though Howell grew up outside of Raliegh, North Carolina, in many ways he considered Virginia home. He looked forward to laboring again in Virginia, where he had many friends and relatives, and where the Baptist cause was already strong.

Two weeks after delivering this farewell discourse, Howell preached his introductory sermon to his congregation in Richmond. Taking up Paul's text in 1 Corinthians 2:2, Howell explained to the congregation that the responsibility belonged to him and to the church as much as it did to the primitive church to preach Christ crucified "with the same simplicity and directness." "Upon no other power or wisdom can the hope of blessing be safely predicated," he explained. He further remarked that great danger awaits the ministry which neglects to present the gospel in this way. He said further, "The ministry that does not so present the gospel, is destitute of either energy or

¹R. B. C. Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, From its organisation [*sic*] July 22d, 1820 to July 22d, 1862," vol. 1. First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee. Typescript 1:312.

vitality. It is cheerless as the arid desert, and must lead to ultimate disappointment and disaster. God forbid that I, or that you, should ever look to any other source for hope and salvation.”² At the beginning of his ministry in Richmond, Howell wanted to set forth clearly what he considered the basis of success for the church. He was convinced that a church must preach a simple and direct message of the way of salvation or disaster awaits. Even the most cursory survey of American Christianity during the Second Great Awakening will suggest that many Christians among the evangelical denominations in the United States, especially in the South, felt the same way as Howell about the importance of preaching about Christ’s work on the cross.³

Debate over the Cross

Despite this commonality, American Christians in the nineteenth century disagreed about exactly what Christ accomplished on the cross. By the 1820s, fault lines were appearing among the Congregationalists and Presbyterians of New England over the nature of the atonement. In the midst of the revival propagated by evangelists such as Lyman Beecher and Charles G. Finney, three different positions were being advocated: substitution, moral government, and moral influence. Prominent theologians such as

²Howell, “Christ Crucified, the Sum of the Gospel,” *The Baptist Preacher*, New Series (June 1850): 86.

³John B. Boles noted the “homogenizing of beliefs” in the preaching of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists during the Great Revival in Kentucky in the first decade of the nineteenth century. All parties during this period of awakening preached that humans depended upon the merits of Jesus Christ for salvation, which they could only obtain by faith. See Boles, *The Great Revival: Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1972): 134-37. Donald G. Matthews noted the importance of the conversion experience for religion in the Antebellum South. An experience of conviction of sin and regeneration through the power of the Holy Spirit were foundational elements in the testimony and church life of evangelical believers. See Matthews, *Religion in the Old South*, Chicago History of American Religion, ed. Martin E. Marty (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 10-14. Christine Leigh Heyrman also noted the centrality of the conversion experience to evangelicals of the Antebellum South. Though they differed over theological beliefs, she said, “all spoke the language of Canaan.” Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians, in other words, all emphasized the importance of repentance and rebirth. She stated that some in the South dissented from this religious conviction. “But, taken together,” she concluded, “they comprised a majority of southerners well into the nineteenth century.” See Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 4-5.

Charles Hodge of Princeton, Nathaniel William Taylor of Yale, and Horace Bushnell, pastor of North Congregational Church in Hartford Connecticut, reviewed and criticized one another's work with respect to the doctrine of the atonement, depravity, and regeneration.⁴ The same disagreement on the atonement that existed between Hodge, Taylor, and Bushnell also existed between three of the most important leaders of the early Restoration movement. Alexander Campbell held to substitutionary atonement, while Barton Stone, whose Christian movement formally united with Campbell's in 1832, held to the moral influence theory. Fellow Disciple Walter Scott, an early associate of Campbell, disagreed with both of them and advocated the moral government theory to explain Christ's work on the cross.⁵

In addition to more recent discussions, long standing differences over the doctrine of salvation continued to divide the denominations. Previous chapters have pointed out a variety of differences that existed between theologians following the Reformed tradition and those more closely aligned with Arminianism over the nature of free agency, the divine decrees, human depravity, and the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration. Calvinists and Arminians continued to disagree with each other and with others within their own tradition as they discussed these issues as well as the extent of the

⁴See David F. Wells, "The Debate over the Atonement in 19th Century America," 4 parts, *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144 (April-June, July-September, October-December 1987):123-43, 243-53, 363-76; and 145 (January-March 1988), 3-14. In addition to an account of the controversy between these three New England leaders, Wells's articles contain summaries of their respective views on the atonement. Hodge, advocating the substitution view, asserted that God's righteousness requires the punishment of sinners. As Adam was the federal head of humanity and humans became depraved and guilty because of his sin, so Christ was the federal head of humanity. God considered the guilt of sinners as Christ's guilt, imputed to him, while God imputed Christ's righteousness to the sinner. Thus Christ took the punishment for the sins of specific sinners. Taylor, advocating the moral government view, denied the federal headship of Adam and Christ and denied the doctrine of imputation. Christ's death was a demonstration of God's justice and moral government of the universe by demonstrating the consequences of sin. Bushnell, while he tried to uphold some objectivity in the atonement, taught that Christ's sacrifice was not a punishment for sins in any sense, but rather a display of God's love which was able to evoke love from sinners.

⁵For an analysis of the views of these three Restoration movement leaders, see John Mark Hicks, "What Did Christ Accomplish on the Cross? Atonement in Campbell, Stone, and Scott," *Lexington Theological Quarterly* 30 (Fall 1995): 145-70.

atonement, the nature of sanctification, and the possibility of apostacy by a genuine believer.

Theologians and churchmen did not view these differences as unimportant. Charles Finney had argued that the Holy Spirit influences but does not change the heart of the sinner. Charles Hodge objected to this understanding of the influence of the Spirit and explained, “We fear a still more serious objection is that Christ and his cross are practically made of none effect.” The sinner, he complained, is told to choose God and submit to the moral governor of the universe. Hodge concluded, “The soul is brought immediately in contact with God; the Mediator is left out of view. We maintain that this is another gospel. It is practically another system, and a legal system of religion.” He further clarified that while Finney did not actually reject the need for a mediator as he explained the work of the Spirit and the potential of the sinner to respond to God, his system neglected the role of the Mediator.⁶ Hodge felt Finney was undermining the importance of Christ’s work on the cross.

Finney, by contrast, thought that the traditional Calvinist position of substitutionary atonement—that the sins of the elect are imputed to Christ and that the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the elect—undermined the doctrine of salvation by grace. The Calvinist position, he said, implies that the elect are “saved by grace on principles of justice.” Christ by grace paid the debt owed by the sinner, “so that there is strictly no grace or mercy in our forgiveness.” He further remarked, “It follows that the elect may demand their discharge on the score of strict justice. They need not pray for pardon or forgiveness; it is all a mistake to do so.” Finney admitted that this last comment was an implication he perceived in the Calvinist position, not a doctrine they actually held. Nonetheless, Finney considered the doctrine of imputation found in

⁶Charles Hodge, “The New Divinity Tried,” in *Princeton Versus the New Divinity: Articles from the Princeton Review* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2001), 166-67. The original article is in *Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 4 (1832).

Calvinist soteriology insufficient to account for the biblical teaching on the forgiveness of sins. Following the Calvinist formulation, he said, the imputation of human sins to Christ accomplishes strict justice, not forgiveness. Salvation is therefore deserved, not mercifully granted.⁷ The differences between Hodge and Finney and between Calvinists and Arminians were perceived to be significant by many involved in these disputes.

R. B. C. Howell grasped the importance of the differences. In a sermon on the doctrine of the atonement he made this comment: "All, who lay claim to the title of christian, agree as to the general fact that an atonement exists; but the different denominations fail to coincide in opinion regarding scarcely any one particular which enters into the details. This melancholy fact is the more to be regarded on account of the importance of the doctrine connected as it is with all that is vital in our holy religion."⁸ While he perceived the importance of the differences that existed in the various interpretations of the work of Christ, however, Howell did not engage in the polemical exchanges which often occurred between Calvinists and Arminians. This was not, however, because he attempted to avoid public polemical interchanges. During his pastorate in Norfolk he engaged the Episcopal rector in an exchange regarding the doctrine of baptism. During his first years in Nashville he engaged the antimission party over the propriety of uniting for mission endeavors, a disagreement he was convinced involved soteriological issues. Later he engaged Methodist editor J. B. McFerrin in a debate over whether Baptists believed the doctrine of reprobation. His books, *The Terms of Communion* and *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, were polemical works designed to demonstrate the correctness of Baptist ecclesiology. Finally, in his last decade, he became embroiled in controversy with J. R. Graves, a controversy which partly involved

⁷Charles G. Finney, *The Memoirs of Charles G. Finney: The Complete Restored Text*, ed. Garth M. Rosell and Richard A. G. Dupuis (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1989), 60. Like Taylor and Scott, Finney also taught the moral government theory. For a detailed exposition of his position, see Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, ed. J. H. Fairchild (Oberlin, OH: E. J. Goodrich, 1899), 258-81.

⁸Howell, "The Atonement," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:348-49, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

disagreement over ecclesiology. Though Howell was not afraid to provoke discussion over key denominational distinctions, he resolved, as he said in his opening editorial in *The Baptist*, that he would “never wantonly assault any of their [other denominations’] creeds.”⁹ He apparently never saw a proper occasion for making differences over Christ’s work on the cross a point of debate.

Still, Howell understood the importance of a proper understanding of the doctrine of salvation for the missiological mandate of the church. As he articulated his understanding of the atonement, justification, sanctification, and perseverance, he was careful, as he was on other issues, to establish the importance of God’s sovereign initiative and yet protect the role of humans to use the proper means to bring about salvation. This Howell attempted to do by focusing his soteriological thought on the Covenant of Redemption.

Howell on God’s Work in the Covenant of Redemption

Howell did not attack other denominations’ understanding of the doctrine of salvation, but he did criticize preaching that he thought insufficiently stressed Christ’s work of redemption. In a sermon entitled “The Elements of Successful Preaching,” delivered on 1 October 1854, he pointedly denounced the failures of many preachers. A successful sermon, he commented, must have the gospel for its content. He explained, “As to *matter*, it must be *the gospel* which you preach. Much that we hear from the pulpit is not the gospel. And much of which this cannot be said [that is, that the sermon possesses solid gospel content], has very little relation to the gospel.” Some sermons, he thought, fail to preach the gospel sufficiently because the preachers fail to preach in a

⁹Howell, “Our Paper,” *The Baptist*, January 1835. Howell attempted to maintain this principle throughout his ministry. As he assessed Landmarkism, he complained, among other things, that those who receive its principles become inflated with pride and selfishness. Their appearance of illiberality toward other denominations, he thought, injured the Baptist cause. He concluded, “They cut off our approach to our erring brethren of other denominations and completely frustrate all our attempts to lead them in the scriptural paths of truth and duty.” Idem, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee,” vol. 2. Typescript 2:165.

way that the hearers can understand them. He said, "I care not how artistic, or learned your sermons, provided they present plainly, and forcibly, the simple truth." Other sermons, he continued, fail to present the gospel adequately because they do not explain the full scope of God's work of redemption:

All your preaching must 'circle about the cross,' and enter into the hearts of your hearers. This is, I think, less true of *us*, than it was of our *Fathers*. I have heard the fathers ridiculed by some of my contemporaries. Lightly it has been said of them, that they began every sermon in Genesis, and ended it in Revelations [*sic*], giving an account in its progress of the fall of man, the atonement of Christ, a christian experience, and the final perseverance of the saints. This precisely, is what constituted their excellence.¹⁰

Howell was convinced that Christ's work on the cross needed to be presented not as an isolated event that held significance for the hearers, but as the pinnacle of God's work of redemption begun in eternity past and that will be consummated when Jesus returns to claim his own. This, he said, many do not do.

Howell demonstrated what he considered the proper approach in his own sermons. In a sermon preached on 29 January 1839, Howell defended the assertion that true worship was the same in all ages. Biblical worship, he explained, is conducted by sacrifices which were designed to express the acknowledgement of God's dominion. The sacrifices in the Old Testament were offered in humility, required the shedding of blood, and pointed forward to the need for a mediator, Jesus Christ. New Testament worship is conducted on the same premises. The sacraments, not efficacious in themselves, point to the work of Christ.¹¹ Thus Howell related the development of God's work of redemption and demonstrated the continuity of God's plan. Later in his ministry, shortly after his return to Nashville, he preached a sermon entitled "The Expiation of Christ," in which he again demonstrated that Christ's sacrifice on the cross was prefigured in the Old

¹⁰Howell, "The Elements of Successful Preaching," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 13:830-31, Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Richmond, VA. By "our Fathers," Howell was referring to the Baptists of an earlier generation.

¹¹Howell, "True Religion the Same in All Ages," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:503-525, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

Testament sacrificial system. This arrangement, he explained, was part of the Covenant of Redemption made before time between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. If this covenant, he concluded, was made in eternity past, “will not God, in consideration of the same sovereign agreement, sustain you to the end?”¹² God will bring to fulfillment the Covenant of Redemption, made before time, to the perseverance of the elect. To Howell, the story of redemption was far more than the story of what happened on Golgotha. It is the story of God’s work on behalf of man from before time until the consummation of the ages.

The Covenant of Redemption received more explicit treatment in two of Howell’s books, *The Cross* and *The Covenants*. In these works Howell intended to demonstrate the centrality of the cross in God’s plan of redemption. At the beginning of *The Cross*, he said, “The cross is the bright center around which converge [*sic*] all that is glorious in the character of God; all that is animating in the hopes of men; and all that is impressive in the history of our fallen race. All preceeding dispensations were but preparations for its introduction. All succeeding events revert to the cross, as the grand foundation upon which they rest.”¹³ As in his sermons, Howell stated here that the cross was the pinnacle of God’s plan of redemption. Howell pointed to numerous passages, both in the Old Testament and the New (Zec 9:11, Col 1:20, Eph 3:9-11, and Heb10:29 and 13:20), which he thought indicate that Christ’s death occurred in accordance with this covenant which was part of God’s eternal plan. Howell marshalled further support in *The Covenants* (1 Pet 1:18-21, Titus 1:2, 2 Tim 1:9, and Eph 1:3-4).¹⁴ Howell asserted, “It is evident, therefore, that from that far-off eternity in which He dwelt, God never

¹²Howell, “The Expiation of Christ,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 12:225, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

¹³Howell, *The Cross* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1854; reprint Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1994), 1.

¹⁴Howell, *The Covenants* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1855; reprint Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1994), 25.

contemplated our universe, but in connection with a Mediator.”¹⁵ Enacting the covenant, God’s commitment to save lost sinners, even before the creation of humanity, was itself an act of grace by the creator of the universe.

In *The Covenants*, Howell explained in detail the parties involved in the Covenant of Redemption. Humans could not have been involved in this covenant since it occurred before creation. Aside from this, however, Howell argued that humans are unfit to participate in creating this covenant because they can never fulfill the terms of the agreement. Howell explained, “None but a divine person could do this, who joining Himself to our nature, could bear Almighty wrath, and ‘magnify the law’ by a perfect obedience.”¹⁶ Though humans are unfit to be participants in this covenant, Howell argued that God himself in his Trinitarian nature is the participant. The parties, Howell said, are the same who said in Genesis 1:26, “Let us make man in our image, and after our likeness.” All the persons of the Trinity, he said, are “the same in essence and equal in divine properties.” Sin was as offensive to one person of the Trinity as to the others, and the agreement of all regarding the terms of redemption was necessary. The promise of redemption was made by the Father but “was equally expressive of the goodness of both the other Persons in the Godhead.”¹⁷

The Father, Howell argued, could have left humans in their misery to perish for their sins. As the righteous governor of the universe, God would have been just to uphold his law and punish every guilty sinner for eternity. His goodness did not require him to rescue sinners because God’s goodness was amply displayed in creation. God’s glory, furthermore, is not dependent on any particular attribute, but rather in the harmony of every attribute. One cannot, therefore, argue that out of love God had to offer salvation.

¹⁵Howell, *The Cross*, 3.

¹⁶Howell, *The Covenants*, 26. Howell drew the phrase “magnify the law” from Isa 42:21, which he applied to the work of Christ living a life of perfect obedience and thus demonstrating the righteousness of the law and the glory of God.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 26-27.

Rather, Howell concluded, the Covenant of Redemption “shows that His glory is greater in the salvation, than it would have been in the destruction of men.” God the Father, therefore, offered the Son as a satisfaction for sins “of his own sovereign grace, uninfluenced by human merit.”¹⁸

God the Son, the second party in the Covenant of Redemption, was also sovereign and was moved by the same considerations. The Son however, took on the task of assuming human nature. This was necessary, Howell argued in many places, because a human nature and a divine nature were necessary to accomplish the work of salvation.¹⁹ The Son consented to be sent. Howell exclaimed, “Well did Messiah know that this work would require of Him to assume our nature; that it would cover Him with humiliation; that it would lead Him to the cross. Yet, in the high *counsels of eternity*, He hesitated not to enter into that covenant, and to say to the Father, ‘Here am I. Send Me.’”²⁰ As the federal head of humanity, the Son was the second Adam and died to bring righteousness, sanctification, and life to humanity.²¹

The Holy Spirit, Howell continued, was the third party of the Covenant of Redemption. Acting with the same freedom and sovereignty as the Father and the Son, the Spirit agreed to become “the efficient agent by which men might be regenerated, sanctified, and prepared to receive and enjoy the blessings of eternal life, and thus to consummate the end for which we were redeemed.”²² Thus, while the Father moved to

¹⁸Ibid., 28.

¹⁹Howell outlined this argument in *The Way of Salvation*, 3rd ed. (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1852), 76-86, as well as in numerous sermons.

²⁰Howell, *The Cross*, 5. The sentences Howell quotes are, drawn, of course, from Isaiah 6:10, used by the prophet himself in response to God’s call. Howell must have chosen this well known response for rhetorical force.

²¹Howell, *The Covenants*, 28-29.

²²Ibid., 30.

redeem humans from their sin and the Son agreed to be sent as redeemer, the Holy Spirit agreed to become the regenerating agent, bringing new life into the hearts of sinners.

Howell explained that God's dealings with humanity have occurred in history. The covenant, enacted in eternity, was the agreement that governed God's interaction with humanity in history. In order to demonstrate this, Howell traced in *The Covenants* the various stages through which God's plan progressed. First, God covenanted in the Garden of Eden with Adam that he could be saved by his works. Having violated that covenant, God initiated with Adam a covenant of grace to be accomplished by the Messiah, the blessings of which are procured by the believer through faith. God gave this covenant specific historical and ethnic reference when he chose Abraham to be the father of the nation through which the Messiah would come. God's plan in the Covenant of Redemption was presented and foreshadowed in the history of Israel through the nation promised to Abraham's descendants, the circumcision prescribed for them, the law given to them at Sinai, and the promise of perpetual kingship given to David. All of these events in history received their fulfillment in the coming of the Messiah, Jesus Christ. The church, Howell argued, is the heir of these promises, though the church will not be entirely visible until the second coming of Christ.²³ The Covenant of Redemption was enacted out of God's grace, made known explicitly in human history by God's sovereign initiative, and fulfilled by the work of Christ. Furthermore, the blessings of the covenant are bestowed upon specific individuals who constitute the church through the sovereign application of the Holy Spirit on the hearts of sinners. Therefore, each person of the Trinity is, by his own grace, involved in the work of the redemption, bringing it into being and seeing it to completion.

²³This is, in brief outline, the argument of chap. 2-9 of *The Covenants*. In "The Christology of the Pentateuch," Howell's revision of *The Covenants*, he brought the history of the work of redemption into even sharper Christological focus by adding two chapters specifically focused on how Christ fulfills the Covenant.

Toward the end of his ministry, Howell indicated concern over the presentation of the Covenant of Redemption that went beyond the failure of preachers to preach it properly. J. R. Graves and A. C. Dayton, both of whom were members of Howell's church, had presented a plan for the formation of a Sunday School Union that Howell perceived would put the proposed organization into conflict with another organization which was already established, the Southern Baptist Publication Society. Graves and Dayton further proposed a governing board for the Union which would be located in Nashville. Howell did not think this proposed board would be representative of the interests of Southern Baptists as a whole. Among other things, he complained that many of the members of the proposed board were associated with *The Tennessee Baptist*, which Graves edited, or with Graves's publishing company. Howell wrote a letter to *The Christian Index*, published in Georgia, explaining his objections. As he continued his explanation, he said, "Nor can I accept that proposed *local board* in this city . . . as the purveyor of theology for my children." Though most of the members of the proposed board were members of his church, and though he did not question their moral integrity or intellectual capability, Howell perceived a serious problem. He said,

Nor do I refer especially to the "Landmark" doctrine known to be "a hobby" among them; which, by the way, they do not understand, since they have never yet learned the teaching of the Bible, nor the opinions of our brethren in the South, regarding it. There are several other doctrines inculcated in that office [Graves's paper and publishing company], such as those relating to the Abrahamic covenant, to the law of prophetic interpretation, and to the millennium, which, although they do not invite, and bring upon us, the same useless odium [from other denominations, as did Landmark doctrine], are practically much more injurious.²⁴

Though Howell would be remembered later for his bitter personal opposition to J. R. Graves and to Landmarkism, as he considered the quality of the work that would be published by a Sunday School Union under Graves's influence, Howell was not concerned about the propagation of Landmarkism. He was concerned about perversions to the understanding of God's Covenant of Redemption.

²⁴Howell, "Letter from Dr. Howell," *The Christian Index*, 6 January 1858.

Howell never offered any direct critique of the eschatology or covenant theology of Graves or Dayton. He did, however, address misunderstandings which he thought prevailed among some evangelicals.²⁵ In *The Covenants*, which was published before he returned to Nashville and became embroiled in the Graves controversy, Howell tackled what he viewed to be misunderstandings of the Abrahamic covenant and of prophetic interpretation. In order to demonstrate that God's work of redemption was a unified plan from Genesis to Revelation, Howell argued that the covenants found in the Old Testament possessed "a peculiar philology." While the covenant to Abraham regarding possession of the land of Canaan certainly was intended to be understood literally, its "true legitimate import" could not terminate there. Howell used passages from Hebrews chapter eleven to assert that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were looking for the fulfillment of God's covenant in Jesus Christ. He said, "Their faith was directed, therefore, not exclusively to the earthly country, but also, and more especially to the 'heavenly country,' of which the earthly was but an emblem."²⁶ Looking for the literal restoration of the Jews to the land of Canaan as the fulfillment of the biblical promise to Abraham, to Howell, revealed a misunderstanding of the promise given to Abraham and a misunderstanding of the prophetic passages dealing with the land promise. After asking numerous questions which seemed to him inadequately answered by those looking for the

²⁵ Chapter 6 will discuss Howell's eschatology. Howell was a postmillennialist, while Graves held premillennialism. Graves became a dispensationalist, but not until after 1870. Howell did not, in *The Covenants*, identify any specific group in reference to the position on the literal restoration of the Jews to Israel. In the book he simply commented that "the opinion prevails very generally among Christians," *The Covenants*, 86. Ernest Sandeen has noted that many British evangelicals embraced premillennial views in the first several decades of the nineteenth century, and that these views spread to America during those same years. His article, "Millennialism," in *The Rise of Adventism: Religion and Society in Mid-Century America*, ed. Edwin S. Gaustad (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 104-18, explains the growth of this movement and contains a list of its core beliefs, among which is the restoration of the Jews to Israel. Howell was likely referring to this type of premillennialism. For Graves's eschatology, see Harold Stewart Smith, "A Critical Analysis of the Theology of J. R. Graves" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1966), 113, 297-307. Albert Wardin included a brief summary of Graves's eschatological views in *Tennessee Baptists: A Comprehensive History, 1779-1999* (Nashville: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1999), 263.

²⁶ Howell, *The Covenants*, 64.

national restoration of the Jews, Howell asserted, "To believe it is wholly out of the question, not only because it is unreasonable, but also because it directly contradicts many of the most important teachings of the New Testament."²⁷ Howell was convinced that the sovereign work of God in the Covenant of Redemption needed to be preached in its full scope and without dilution in order to do justice to the gospel and fully discharge the missiological mandate of the church. He thought that failing to preach the cross or undermining the Covenant of Redemption by teaching a national restoration of the Jews did damage to that missiological mandate. He was further convinced that Christ's work of atonement and the blessings which flow to the believer from it needed to be properly understood so that neither God's sovereignty nor human responsibility were distorted.

Understanding the Cross

By focusing on the Covenant of Redemption, Howell intended to lay before his audience the grand scope of God's work in redemption. God had initiated the work of redeeming humans before the foundation of the world. He had brought this work into history in his relationship with Adam, Abraham, and Israel, and had become incarnate in the Messiah, Jesus Christ. All of the blessings of the covenant are dependent upon the work performed by Christ and flow to believers from that fountain. Understanding the blessings which accrue to believers must begin with an examination of the nature and extent of the atonement. What did Christ accomplish on the cross? As Howell dealt with

²⁷Ibid., 87. Howell was convinced that the purpose of the Jewish nation was to serve as the means through which God would fulfill his promise to Abraham. God had promised to bless all the families of the earth through Abraham (Genesis 12:1-3). God intended Christ as the fulfillment of this promise and the Jewish nation as the nation that would preserve the line of the Messiah. After the coming of the Messiah, Howell argued, the reorganization of the nation of Israel would have served no purpose. Furthermore, he argued, the prophecies to which many pointed to indicate a restoration of Israel (Howell used Ezek 37:21-26 and Isaiah 60:12, 21 as examples) could not possibly be fulfilled literally. Ezekiel 37 speaks of the two nations becoming one and of David sitting on the throne, but the Northern ten tribes no longer exist and David is dead. Furthermore, the passage speaks of the nation as being righteous, but if so, Howell argued, "they will be what no nation has ever been." Furthermore, what law will they follow? The New Testament has superseded the sacrifices, offerings, and priesthood of the Old Testament. If the Jews followed the New Testament, then they would be Christians and should not remain separated as a body from other Christians. Christians should not interpret literally the Old Testament prophecies concerning the restoration of the Jews to the land, Howell concluded. Ibid., 86-88.

the nature and extent of the atonement he endeavored to show the effectual nature of God's work while also demonstrating the active role believers play in their salvation.

An examination of Howell's sermons and writings on the atonement will reveal that he believed that Christ's work on the cross was substitutionary in nature. A theologian who would remove the doctrine of substitution, he thought, would make human efforts the center of religion. For this reason Howell endeavored to clarify the Bible's teaching on the doctrine of substitution. He also emphasized the importance Christ's intention in dying on the cross. The free offer of the gospel to lost sinners depended, he thought, upon a doctrine of general atonement. At the same time, however, Howell held that humans' depravity necessitates the effectual work of the Spirit. In his teaching on the atonement, Howell attempted to integrate God's objective work in accomplishing salvation with the responsibility of all humans to respond to the gospel. Thus his view on the nature and extent of the atonement holds relevance for understanding his mission theology.

Howell on the Nature of the Atonement

Howell perceived misunderstandings to exist with respect to both aspects of the atonement. Certainly, disagreement over the nature of the atonement was not new. During the nineteenth century, both Horace Bushnell and Barton Stone rejected substitutionary atonement in favor of the moral influence theory. The theory that Christ's death served to influence the renovation of human character rather than to satisfy the wrath of God had been present among those who rejected the doctrine of the Trinity for over two centuries. Faustus Socinus (1539-1604) promoted unitarian theology in Europe during the sixteenth century. Unitarian views gained a foothold in England in the seventeenth century and in America in the eighteenth century.²⁸ Where conviction

²⁸For an account of the theology of American Unitarianism, see E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), especially 197-217.

regarding Christ's deity waned, convictions regarding the atonement often shifted from substitution toward the moral influence theory. Barton Stone, leader of the Christian movement that merged with Alexander Campbell, rejected the traditional formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity and clashed with Campbell himself over the atonement. Stone resided in Kentucky between 1796 and 1834 and visited Tennessee on preaching engagements and to organize churches, the first one organized in Sumner County, Tennessee in 1811. He actually lived in Middle Tennessee for a short time in 1811 or 1812 but returned to Kentucky. Stone had rejected substitutionary atonement, according to his own recollection, in 1804.²⁹ The nature of the atonement was therefore a subject of relevance to Howell and to the churches he served.

Howell lamented the rejection of substitutionary atonement. He commented, "Some regard the whole doctrine as obnoxious, and therefore, reject it from their creed altogether. They consider their own works entirely adequate." He assessed that their rejection of substitutionary atonement occurred for three reasons: first, they are "ignorant of human depravity;" second, they "commonly deny the divinity, either directly or indirectly, of Christ;" third, they have an inadequate view "of the holiness and extent of God's laws."³⁰ Nevertheless, Howell often preferred to address his congregation of believers on the subject of the atonement rather than critique the views of those not present. He stated on one occasion, "With those who disbelieve in the reality, and vicariousness, of the atonement of Christ, I have, at present, no controversy. They are not prepared to set out with us in the present discussion. To settle the first principles of their faith, if we may be permitted to have any agency in the important work, we shall be obliged to avail ourselves of some other occasion."³¹

²⁹Barton W. Stone, *The Biography of Eld. Barton Warren Stone, Written by Himself: With Additions and Reflections by Elder John Rogers* (Cincinnati: J. A. & U. P. James, 1847), 56, 67-68.

³⁰Howell, "The Atonement," 353.

³¹*Ibid.*, 347.

Howell understood the foundation for the doctrine of the atonement to rest upon three pillars. First was the doctrine of human depravity. As Howell lamented the lapse of the doctrine of substitution among some, he noted the inadequacy of their views on depravity. God, Howell said, must punish sin. Sin is repugnant to God's character and is a violation of his authority. Howell explained, "He [God] must look upon it with infinite loathing and indignation. Either, therefore, the cross, or the eternal destruction of sinners, was inevitable."³² The second pillar on which Howell's doctrine of the atonement rested was the principle of substitution. The sacrificial system of the Old Testament was a system of substitution. Howell explained, "When the trembling animal was slain, the worshipper thereby acknowledged that death was his own just desert, as the penalty of his transgressions; and when the life, and body, and blood, of the victim were laid on the altar, a supplication of pardon, the hope was thus expressed, of escape from the consequences of sin, by the sufferings of another." This system, of course, was not efficacious in itself, but rather was designed to point toward the work of Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, the system taught those who practiced it in faith that an adequate substitute was necessary in order to obtain forgiveness.³³ The third pillar was the doctrine of the incarnation. God could not serve as the substitute since God's nature required the punishment. Man could not serve as substitute since man is the guilty party. Angels could not serve as substitutes since they are another class of beings. In order to take the punishment of guilty sinners, the Messiah had to "unite in His own person perfect divinity and perfect humanity." As God, Jesus had the power to lay down his life and take it up again. As man, Jesus had the right to serve as the second Adam, the federal head of humanity.³⁴ Thus, the Messiah, being God and Man, could serve as humans' substitute, taking the punishment for their sins. Substitutionary atonement, therefore,

³²Howell, *The Cross*, 11-12.

³³Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 88,

³⁴Howell, *The Cross*, 12-14.

played a central role in God's work of redemption, according to Howell. He concluded, "Remove it, and the Gospel would be nothing more than a system of ethics."³⁵ The fulfillment of the Covenant of Redemption required the incarnation of the God-man, who would die as a substitute for sinners. This is the gospel Howell preached.

Howell on the Extent of the Atonement

The doctrine of substitutionary atonement was not extensively debated among Southern Baptists in Howell's day. Very few would have disagreed with Howell's articulation of the doctrine. On the question of who was represented by Christ in the atonement, however, much debate was occurring. David Benedict, as he related his impressions of the changes which had occurred among Baptists from 1810 to 1860, noted a change in Baptists' views on the atonement. "Forty years ago," Benedict said (which would have been about 1820), "large bodies of our people were in a state of ferment and agitation, in consequence of some modifications of their old Calvinistic creed." Benedict explained that Andrew Fuller, the English Baptist theologian and one of the founders of the Baptist Missionary Society, "maintained that the atonement of Christ was general in its nature, but particular in its application, in opposition to our old divines, who held that Christ died for the elect only."³⁶ More specifically, Fuller argued that the sufferings of Christ made his sacrifice infinitely worthy and sufficient to merit the salvation of every human. The merit of his atonement is only effectual, however, for those to whom the Spirit applies it. To be accurate, Fuller's view was a variety of the limited atonement doctrine in line with the views of John Owen and the Synod of Dort, though not consistent with the entire Calvinist tradition.³⁷ Nonetheless, Benedict explained that

³⁵Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 89

³⁶David Benedict, *Fifty Years among the Baptists* (New York: Sheldon & Company, 1860), 135.

³⁷For a nuanced perspective on Fuller's view of the atonement, see Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life*, rev. and exp. ed. (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006), 68-77; idem, *The Baptists: Key*

many Baptists considered Fuller's view of Christ's work to be a departure from the accepted standards of the past, standards they thought were exemplified in the work of John Gill. Thus, Benedict stated, "the terms 'Gillites' and 'Fullerites' were often applied to the parties in this discussion."³⁸

As will be shown later, Benedict's language regarding Fuller's views was imprecise and characteristic of the confusion that was sometimes present among American Baptists regarding Fuller's views. In spite of a little ambiguity in his assessment, Benedict was not the only Baptist to consider Fuller's views on the atonement a significant factor in the changes that were occurring. Primitive Baptist Historian C. B. Hassell, condemning "the new-fashioned or Fullerite party," quoted extensively from Benedict's *Fifty Years* as he likewise identified Fuller as the theologian behind the missionary movement.³⁹ Fellow Primitive Baptist Lawrence Greatrake concurred. Greatrake, a pamphleteer and Baptist minister in Pennsylvania during the 1820s, when both the Campbellite movement and the antimission movement were gaining momentum, reviled the followers of Fuller for the unstable innovations he was convinced they brought into Baptist churches. He exclaimed, "You must know by this time, that Fullerism *superinduces* myriads to make a PROFESSION as Baptists, all of whom, upon the most *natural* principles, *may* become (hundreds and thousands of them do become) Campbellite or any other sort of consummate heretical Baptists—the *transformation* is as *natural*, easy and rapid as that of a *flye-blow* into a maggot in Dog-

People Involved in Forming a Baptist Identity (Ross-shire, UK: Mentor, 2005), 1:253-59. See also Peter J. Morden, *Offering Christ to the World: Andrew Fuller (1754-1815) and the Revival of Eighteenth Century Particular Baptist Life*, *Studies in Baptist History and Thought*, vol. 8 (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster Press, 2003), 68-77. Fuller articulated his view of the atonement in a number of works included in volume 2 of his complete works. See Andrew Fuller, *The Complete Works of Rev. Andrew Fuller*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph Belcher (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988).

³⁸Benedict, *Fifty Years among the Baptists*, 135.

³⁹Cushing Biggs Hassell, *History of the Church of God, From the Creation to A. D. 1885; Including Especially the History of the Kehukee Primitive Baptist Association* (Middletown, NY: Gilbert Beebe's Sons, 1886), 751-58.

days.”⁴⁰ Benedict identified Fuller’s view on the atonement to be an innovation in Baptist life. Hassell and Greatrake considered the results they thought had followed the innovation to be destructive of old Baptist principles.

That Fuller was influential among American Baptists in the nineteenth century is difficult to deny. Northern Baptist leader Francis Wayland and Southern Baptist leader Jeremiah Jeter joined with Benedict in ascribing significant influence to Fuller.⁴¹

Georgia Baptist Jesse Mercer, a staunch supporter of the missionary enterprise, recognized Fuller’s influence in an article written in 1833. In his opening editorial as editor of *The Christian Index*, Mercer acquainted the readers with his views, noting that he considered Fuller’s scheme Calvinistic even though he did not agree with all of Fuller’s views.⁴² The need to position himself with respect to Fuller was due to the acceptance of Fuller’s views among missionary Baptists on the one hand and the opposition to Fuller from antission Baptists on the other. Fellow Georgia Baptist pioneer Adiel Sherwood, another supporter of the missionary enterprise, demonstrated Fuller’s influence as early as 1818, when in a letter to his sister he addressed the duty of unbelievers to exercise faith.⁴³ William Carey Crane, a pastor, editor, and educator, while he was co-editor of *The Baptist* with Howell, also attested to Fuller’s influence. A pastor in Alabama asked Crane to furnish a list of books suitable for a minister’s library. Crane provided a list which he thought would be suitable for any minister, whether

⁴⁰Lawrence Greatrake, *The Parallel and Pioneer, or, a Pocket Mirror for Protestant Christendom* (New Lisbon [OH?]: Printed at the Office of the Palladium, 1830), 98. One could rephrase Greatrake’s comparison to read as follows: “the transformation of a Fullerite Baptist into a Campbellite is as smooth as the transformation of a fly’s egg into a maggot in the hottest part of the summer.”

⁴¹Francis Wayland, *Notes on the Principles and Practices of Baptist Churches* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1857), 18; Jeremiah Bell Jeter, *Baptist Principles Reset* (Richmond, VA: The Religious Herald Co., 1902), 13. For more on Fuller’s influence, see Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 78-79.

⁴²Jesse Mercer, “The Christian Index and Baptist Miscellany,” *The Christian Index*, 14 September 1833. See also Anthony L Chute, *A Piety above the Common Standard: Jesse Mercer and the Defense of Evangelistic Calvinism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004), 60-61.

⁴³Jarrett Burch, *Adiel Sherwood: Baptist Antebellum Pioneer in Georgia* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2003), 51.

educated or not. Crane placed John Dick's *Lectures on Theology* at the head of books on theology. Second he listed the works of Andrew Fuller.⁴⁴ Antebellum Baptists, both missionary and antimissionary, perceived Fuller as having an important place in the theological discussions of the day.

In fact, however, as Benedict himself notes, the disagreement among American Baptists went back beyond the early decades of the nineteenth century.⁴⁵ Disagreement over the atonement occurred before Fuller began to propound his views. Discussions about the extent of the atonement occurred among the Separate Baptists of Virginia at least as early as 1775. In that year, at a joint meeting of the Northern District and Southern District associations, Separate Baptists debated the following query: "Is salvation, by Christ, made possible for every individual of the human race?" The subject was debated warmly between a Calvinistic party and a more Arminian party until the Arminian party agreed to embrace particular election, "still retaining our liberty with regard to construction," to the final perseverance of the saints, and to salvation by grace through no merit of the creature. After this concession, the Calvinistic party, which had the majority, agreed to "willingly retain [them] in fellowship, not raising the least bar."⁴⁶ These Separate Baptists agreed to maintain unity despite disagreement over the extent of the atonement.

Such disagreement over the atonement became more intense in the South, however, after the beginning of the mission movement and the growth of populist Arminianism in the first decades of the nineteenth century. In Kentucky numerous

⁴⁴William Carey Crane, "A Library for Ministers," *The Baptist*, 19 October 1844.

⁴⁵Benedict noted that American Baptists in the eighteenth century held to Calvinist doctrine with varying degrees of insistence. The Baptists in New England, he said, "were not in the habit of enforcing [Calvinistic doctrines] so strongly" as those in the middle and southern colonies. The Separate Baptists, he said, were even less stringent than the Baptists in New England, for they "dwelt mostly on the subjects of Christian experience and practical religion;" Benedict, *Fifty Years among the Baptists*, 137-38.

⁴⁶Robert Baylor Semple, *A History of the Rise and Progress of the Baptists in Virginia*, rev. and exp. by G. W. Beale (Richmond, VA: Pitt & Dickenson, 1894), 83-84.

associations divided over the mission movement and disagreement over the atonement played a prominent role in the dispute. The Licking Association, in the 1820 meeting, ceased correspondence with the Elkhorn Association because of doctrinal disagreements, ceased correspondence with the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions, and noted its approval of John Taylor's *Thoughts on Missions*. Furthermore, they voted to adopt the name "Particular Baptist" for the association to indicate that limited atonement and unconditional election, the two doctrines that were apparently at issue, were doctrinal standards. In 1830, the Association assigned blame for the controversy over the atonement and over missions to the theological "departure" of Andrew Fuller. The Red River Association suffered division because of disagreement over the extent of the atonement in 1825. At the 1833 meeting of the Little River Association, several churches complained about the general atonement doctrine circulating among the advocates of missions and a division ensued. The Green River Association suffered strife over the extent of the atonement, the missionary enterprise, and temperance reform in 1837. Though the advent of a revival delayed division, the churches finally separated in 1839.⁴⁷

The churches elsewhere in the South experienced a similar struggle. Around 1829, the Cumberland Association of Tennessee, an association which in the next decade would declare itself antimissionary, discovered that one of its ministers, Elijah Hanks, had been teaching that Christ "tasted death for every man." After interviewing him to discern the truth of this allegation, the association excluded his churches.⁴⁸ In Mississippi, antimission Baptist Joseph Erwin complained about the results that flowed from the founding of the Mississippi Baptist Convention in 1824. He said, "Well, from some part of the State in pours the general atonement doctrine, with its multifarious doctrines, that Christ tasted death for every man equally alike, that all mankind are in a

⁴⁷J. H. Spencer, *A History of the Kentucky Baptists from 1769 to 1885* (Cincinnati: J. R. Baumes, 1885), 2:111-12, 228-30, 241-43, 271-72.

⁴⁸Wardin, *Tennessee Baptists*, 113.

salvable state. The old Regulars opposed that doctrine strenuously.”⁴⁹ In South Georgia, the annual circular of the antissionary Suwannee River Association in 1843 declared that the primary theological problem in the missionary controversy was the extent of the atonement. The author, Owen Smith, found the doctrine of an atonement universal in nature and particular in application to be erroneous. He considered the advent of this understanding of the atonement to be the Devil’s scheme to use a “hair-splitting mysterious doctrine to destroy the peace and fellowship of the Church of God.”⁵⁰

During the same time the mission movement was provoking controversy over the atonement, the growth of populist Arminianism signaled that the disagreement over the atonement extended further than the division between the followers of Gill and the followers of Fuller. The division between the Regular and the Separate Baptists in Tennessee, which was discussed in chapter two, involved disagreement over the doctrines of election and of the atonement. The Regular group held to unconditional election and effectual calling and the Separate group held to conditional election and a general atonement. James Whitsitt, siding with the Regulars, made comments on this dispute which reveal that the difference between these two groups extended beyond the differences between Gill and Fuller on the atonement. Whitsitt explained the changes that were taking place as follows: “The first onset was preaching *universal atonement*, that Christ died for all, yet none but the *elect* would receive the benefit, and that by special application. Well, there was not much good or harm in this. . . . Presently we began to hear universal operation preached, and that specialty stood in man’s exertions.” While Whitsitt was not as troubled by an atonement scheme which stressed particularity in application, the preaching of general atonement concerned him. He declared, “I have often wondered how an Arminian accounts for this obnoxious doctrine coming from the

⁴⁹Benjamin Griffin, *History of the Primitive Baptists of Mississippi* (Jackson, MS: Barksdale and Jones, 1853), 66. Griffin used the term “old Regulars” to refer to the antission party.

⁵⁰John G. Crowley, *Primitive Baptists in the Wiregrass South: 1815 to Present* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1998), 78.

Devil's country, and spreading itself spontaneously over the Bible."⁵¹ This scheme, which its advocates represented as general in nature while limited in application, was not the only theory of the extent of the atonement. At least some of the Separate Baptists were preaching general atonement, and the movement was significant in size. Though the Separate Baptist Concord Association reunited with the Regular Baptist Concord Association in 1842, the Separate Baptist movement in Tennessee yielded four associations totalling seventy churches by 1851.⁵²

Other Arminian groups emerged throughout the South. In Georgia, Cyrus White, former state convention missionary and pastor of Bethlehem church in Jasper County, published a treatise arguing for an Arminian view of the atonement. In response, the Georgia Baptist Convention withdrew fellowship from him. Subsequently, his association, the United Association, withdrew from the state convention. By 1839, the United Association was joined by the Chatahooche United Association, which had churches in Georgia and Alabama; both associations followed White's general atonement teaching.⁵³ The first Free Will Baptist church in Alabama was organized as Mount Moriah church in 1834. The Mount Moriah Association was formed in 1851.⁵⁴ In Tennessee, a group calling itself Free Will Baptists organized itself into the Double Springs Association in the early 1840s. By 1851 the Free Will Baptists had four associations in the state with twenty three churches.⁵⁵ Though the Free Will Baptists emerged in Tennessee, Alabama, and Georgia beginning in the 1830s, in other states,

⁵¹James Whitsitt, "Elder J. Whitsitt of Nashville, Ten. to Elder James Burch, of Miss.," *The Baptist Chronicle and Literary Register*, December 1831.

⁵²Wardin, *Tennessee Baptists*, 155.

⁵³Burch, *Adiel Sherwood*, 90-91. For an analysis of White's treatise and the response written by Jesse Mercer, see Chute, *A Piety above Common Standard*, 83-91.

⁵⁴J. D. O'Donnell, "The Alabama State Association," in *History of Free Will Baptist Associations*, ed. Robert E. Picirilli (Nashville: Randall House Publications, 1976), 1-2.

⁵⁵Wardin, *Tennessee Baptists*, 155.

such as North Carolina and Virginia, Arminian groups calling themselves General Baptists had existed much earlier.⁵⁶

Determining which Baptists held to Fuller's scheme of limited atonement and which Baptists held to an Arminian scheme of general atonement can be difficult. The language used in associational records and state histories was not always precise. Joseph Erwin of Mississippi referred to an influx of general atonement teaching in conjunction with the beginning of the state convention. Given the popularity of Andrew Fuller's views among missionary Baptists, many of those advocating the "general atonement" teaching were likely followers of Andrew Fuller's scheme, not an Arminian view of the atonement. Furthermore, biblical language was often used to state a group's position on the atonement. Elijah Hanks of Tennessee had taught that Christ "tasted death for every man." The Regular and Separate Baptists of Kentucky, as they drafted the terms of union of the two groups in 1801, determined that "the preaching that Christ tasted death for every man shall be no bar to communion." The document does not explain what position on the atonement the ministers in question preached.⁵⁷ James Whitsitt, who held to limited atonement, attests to the fact that the use of the language itself does not indicate Arminian views. He said, "That Christ by the grace of God tasted death for every man is a truth; but when read in the connection which there follows, the reader will perceive that its extent stands qualified."⁵⁸ The three positions on the extent of the atonement—limited in nature and application, general in nature and limited in application, and general in nature and application—could use the same language and often did not use precise language to indicate the position of opponents.

⁵⁶For a general history of the movement, see Michael R. Pelt, *A History of Original Free Will Baptists* (Mount Olive, NC: Mount Olive College Press, 1996).

⁵⁷William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1959), 359.

⁵⁸Whitsitt, "Elder J. Whitsitt of Nashville, Ten. to Elder James Burch, of Miss."

To further complicate matters, others claimed the support of Fuller though they did not hold to his “sufficient for all, efficient for the elect” position. One such example is E. P. Bond. Bond was associated with the First Baptist Church, Lawrenceburg, Indiana beginning around 1840, later served the church as associate pastor, and finally served as pastor from 1857 to around the end of the Civil War. In a lengthy work on the atonement, Bond argued for conditional election and general atonement. At the end of his work, as he reviewed his arguments, he indicated that he rejected what is called Arminianism because Scripture reveals that humans cannot keep the law. He continued,

Neither do I think much more of the doctrine of a professed general atonement, with particular unconditional application; because it contradicts what God says in his word, and makes the atonement in effect . . . an unmeaning and useless thing—at least, as the means of conversion and reconciliation; and throws a dark shade of suspicion upon the invitations and promises of God, and makes the faith of the gospel of no effect; and adopts a principle of salvation that would limit the grace of God, and make him inconsistent with himself.⁵⁹

The scheme of atonement he so vociferously denied was that which was commonly credited to Andrew Fuller. Yet, in the closing paragraph, as Bond indicated the authors to whom he was indebted, he said, “We are sustained in the premises, we think, by A. Fuller, T. W. Jenkyns, and most other correct writers on this part of the subject.” Exactly what the premises were in which Bond concluded he was indebted to Fuller is unclear, but he was not indebted to Fuller for his views on the extent of the atonement. A lack of clarity regarding where Fuller stood on the doctrine of the atonement certainly could not have helped illuminate the discussion for antebellum Baptists.⁶⁰

R. B. C. Howell’s works on the doctrine of the atonement were written in this environment of debate, disagreement, ambiguity, and misunderstanding with respect to

⁵⁹E. P. Bond, *The Atonement, the Key Doctrine* (New Albany, IN: Gregg & Sons, 1852), 296-97. For information on E. P. Bond, see R. L. Parker, ed., *The First Baptist Church of Lawrenceburg, Indiana, 1807-1957: Commemorating 150 Years of Service* (n. p.: by the author).

⁶⁰E. P. Bond, *The Atonement the Key Doctrine*, 299-300. Bond seems to have argued for a moral government view of the atonement in chapters 4 and 5 of his book. He may have considered Fuller his authority for this argument, though even this would be a misunderstanding of Fuller. For Fuller’s position with regard to the moral government scheme, see Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 74-76.

the extent of the atonement. His published writings do not yield a complete picture of where he stood in the discussion, though a few points are clear. First, in a few places Howell indicated that Christ's death was in some sense intended to benefit all of humanity. As he wrote concerning the doctrine of reprobation, he disagreed with a position stated by Presbyterian theologian John Dick. Howell quoted Dick as saying, "He [the Father] would send his Son into the world, to seek and to save that which was lost, but he did not intend him to be the Saviour of the reprobate."⁶¹ Howell put forward a litany of Scripture passages which he thought contradicted Dick's assertion: 1 Timothy 2:3-4, Revelation 22:16-17, 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16, 2 Timothy 2:10, and 1 Peter 3:9. Howell could not accept Dick's argument that Christ's death was not intended to benefit the reprobate. In his first essay on predestination, Howell made the same point, quoting 1 Peter 3:9, and concluded, "Peter and Calvin are here at points, and I shall leave it to the readers to settle the question as to which of the two is right."⁶² Howell made a similar argument in *The Way of Salvation*. He asked how Christ could die for all and yet the benefits of his death not be effective for all. Howell concluded, "All were represented, but all do not avow his acts of redemption."⁶³ While Christ intended his death to benefit all, those benefits are appropriated only by those who believe. At the end of his introductory sermon at Second Baptist Richmond, Howell addressed unbelievers and declared, "Beloved friends, for you Jesus Christ bled, and groaned, and died. O will you not look to him, repent, believe, and be saved?"⁶⁴ Howell said that Christ was intended to be the savior of the reprobate, that he represented all of humanity, and that he died for

⁶¹Howell, "Reprobation," *The Baptist*, 8 March 1845; John Dick, *Lectures on Theology* (New York: Robert Carter and Brothers, 1855), 1:369.

⁶²Howell, "Letter to Mr. Lyon," *The Baptist*, 15 July 1837.

⁶³Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 199.

⁶⁴Howell, "Christ Crucified the Sum of the Gospel," 94.

all those in his audience who were lost. These passages indicate that Howell considered Christ's death as intended to benefit all of humanity.

Second, in other passages, Howell indicated that he considered Christ's sacrifice on the cross effective in accomplishing God's design. In an 1845 sermon, Howell declared regarding Christ's sacrifice: "Nothing more is needed. It is perfect; it is effectual; it is sufficient." Later in the sermon, as he explained to his hearers what Christ's death accomplished, he asserted that because of the atonement, human guilt is removed, "God the Father is reconciled, justice is appeased, and the way of salvation opened to men." None of this, however, is complete without the work of the Holy Spirit. He continued, "Pardoned indeed, we might be, without his regenerating work. This however, would avail us little, since, as our depraved nature would remain unchanged, we should still be unqualified for happiness, and incapable of the glory of heaven." In the conclusion, Howell offered this evaluation: "The subject instructs us that the sacrifice of Christ for sins, is entirely sufficient to accomplish all the purposes for which it was designed. Can the all-wise and omnipotent God fail in his purposes of love to us?"⁶⁵ Howell was insistent that God's purposes cannot fail. Christ's death, he had argued, was intended to benefit all of humanity. His death brought the removal of human guilt, the reconciliation of God, and the possibility of salvation for all of humanity. None of this, however, was effectual. Based on Howell's statements, he seems to have held that salvation was not procured for specific individuals through Christ's death on the cross. The possibility for salvation was created. Though humans had been redeemed through Christ, the benefits of that redemption could not be enjoyed by those who possessed a depraved nature. The renewal worked by the Holy Spirit on the heart, according to Howell, brings the benefits of salvation to specific individuals. These statements from his published sermons lead to the conclusion that Howell considered Christ's death to be

⁶⁵Howell, "The Value of Christ's Sacrifice," *The Baptist Preacher* 4 (August 1845): 150, 157.

intended to benefit every human and yet effective only for those effectually called by the Holy Spirit. In his published sermons and books, however, he gives no indication of how these two elements could fit together.

Howell discussed the extent of the atonement in more detail in an unpublished sermon preached in Nashville in 1840. Here he explicitly denied both limited and unlimited atonement and presented a coherent picture of the extent of the atonement. If the atonement were unlimited, he argued, it must be unlimited in its nature, provisions, and application. This would mean that God intended, provided for, and accomplished the salvation of all men. After all, he said, God accomplishes perfectly his design. Limited atonement, Howell thought, also erred because it confined the benefits of the death of Christ to “a certain definite number, which cannot be increased or diminished.” “It follows,” he continued, “that some men were made to be damned, and that it is not the duty of some men to repent and believe in Christ, or if they do they cannot be saved, because no provision is made for their salvation.” Howell opposed limited atonement because by limiting the death of Christ to a definite number, it seems to eliminate the proper ground for human repentance and faith. In other words, the doctrine of human responsibility negates the possibility of limited atonement. Howell then quoted similar passages to those he used in response to Dick to indicate God’s desire that none perish and that all be saved. Limited atonement, he said, contradicts this testimony found in both the Old and New Testaments.⁶⁶

After arguing that both unlimited and limited atonement are in error, Howell quoted 1 Timothy 4:10: “Therefore, we both labor, and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is the saviour of all men, especially of those who believe.” Commenting on this verse, Howell stated, “These two facts are prominent, that the atonement is *general* in its nature, and *special* in its application.” He considered the

⁶⁶Howell, “The Atonement,” 357-62.

atonement general, he said, in both a temporal and a spiritual sense. Temporally, the atonement benefits all of humanity by purchasing a respite, allowing them to continue their natural life though it should have been forfeited because of their sins. Furthermore, he argued, civilization, learning, and justice are found in the world as a result of the atonement.⁶⁷ Howell stated that the atonement is general in a spiritual sense because the Great Commission is based upon it. Christ's death benefits all of humanity by enabling the gospel to be preached all over the earth. The atonement is special in application, Howell concluded, because it is applied effectually to specific persons by the Holy Spirit. Thus, according to Howell's understanding of 1 Timothy 4:10, the atonement benefits all humans, especially those who believe.⁶⁸

Having noticed that Howell viewed the atonement as general in nature and particular or limited in application, one might naturally assume that he embraced Andrew Fuller's doctrine of the atonement. Howell was, after all, very familiar with Fuller's writings, and he agreed with the British Baptist theologian on the nature of human free agency, human depravity, and the duty of believing in Jesus Christ. Though Howell obviously benefited from Fuller's writings, however, he did not agree entirely with Fuller on the atonement. They certainly agreed that the atonement is particular in application. They also agreed that Christ's satisfaction was sufficient to accomplish the salvation of the entire human race.⁶⁹ The difference between the two arose regarding Christ's intention in offering an atonement.

⁶⁷Howell said nothing more in this sermon about the benefits of the atonement to the world at large, but he included a discussion of this benefit of the work of Christ in chap. 6 of *The Cross*. He explained here that the changes made upon believers because of the atonement have brought physical, moral, intellectual, and political blessings upon the earth because of the influence of Christians upon human societies. See *The Cross*, 51-61.

⁶⁸Ibid., 363-65.

⁶⁹In *The Way of Salvation*, 91, Howell explained that the divinity of Jesus Christ made his work of satisfaction "infinite in virtue, and efficacy, wherever applied." Fuller, replying to Dan Taylor, stated regarding Calvinists (his position), "They suppose the sufferings of Christ, in themselves considered, are of *infinite* value, sufficient to have saved all the world, and a thousand worlds, if it had pleased God to

Fuller maintained that Christ intended his atonement to benefit only those to whom the Spirit would apply it. In *The Gospel Worthy of All Acceptation*, he stated, “And as the application of redemption is solely directed by sovereign wisdom, so, like every other event, it is the result of *previous design*. That which is actually done was *intended* to be done. Hence the salvation of those that are saved is described as the *end* which the Saviour had in view.”⁷⁰ Fuller’s position on the atonement was, in fact, a limited atonement position. As Baptist historian Thomas J. Nettles pointed out, Fuller at various times quoted John Owen and referred to the Synod of Dort for support of his position, even though other Calvinists understood limited atonement differently.⁷¹ Though the sufferings of Christ were sufficient to cover the sins of the world, the benefits of his death were intended to be applied only to the elect. Fuller made clear in *The Gospel Worthy*, however, that he viewed the sufficiency of the death of Christ important for the proclamation of the gospel. If the atonement were a literal payment of the exact sins of particular individuals, as some Calvinists argued, Fuller explained, “it might, for aught I know, be inconsistent with indefinite invitations.” The doctrine of the sufficiency of Christ’s death for all, despite the limited scope of God’s design, was necessary for general, public invitations to the lost.⁷²

As Howell’s writings make clear, he did not consider Christ’s design in offering the atonement to be limited to only the elect. Howell went beyond Fuller’s assertion that Christ’s death was sufficient for all, affirming that Christ’s death was

have constituted them the price of their redemption, and to have made them effectual to that end.” See Fuller, *Works*, 2:489.

⁷⁰Fuller, *Works*, 374. Further evidence of Fuller’s conviction regarding Christ’s intention in the atonement is found in *Ibid.*, 489-90. Fuller argued, “If it [the atonement] extended to all mankind, all mankind would certainly be saved. Unless, therefore, we will maintain the final salvation of all mankind, we must either suppose a limitation to the absolute determination of Christ to save, or deny any such determination to exist.” For comment on this passage see Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory*, 70-71.

⁷¹Fuller, *Works*, 122. Fuller quoted Calvinist theologians Owen and Witsius in defense of the argument that the death of Christ was sufficient for all. See the footnote in Fuller, *Works*, 2:489.

⁷²Fuller, *Works*, 2:373.

intended to bring benefit to all—to open the way of salvation for all. Fuller made no such assertion. Also, unlike Fuller, Howell considered Christ’s intention to save all to be necessary for a proper grounding for indiscriminate invitations. Fuller held that the sufficiency of Christ’s death for all, regardless of his intention, was a sufficient ground for general gospel invitations. Therefore, though Howell demonstrated his agreement with Fuller on numerous occasions, he did not agree with him on the extent of the atonement.

For an indication of where Howell might have found support for his view, another English Baptist preacher of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century deserves attention. As was noted in chapter three, Howell found support for some of his positions in the writings of Robert Hall, Jr. During Howell’s editorial controversy with Methodist editor J. B. McFerrin, McFerrin repeatedly asserted that Baptists were Calvinists and therefore believed in unconditional reprobation because Calvinists believe in unconditional reprobation. Howell responded that a middle ground existed between Calvinism and Arminianism, for Baptists reject both. Since McFerrin had quoted Robert Hall during their editorial debates, Howell offered as evidence a quote from the 1833 New York edition of Hall’s works: “Let us hear him [Hall] again—works, vol. 3, page 35—On being asked whether he was an Arminian or a Calvinist, he (Hall) said: ‘Neither, sir, but I believe I recede further from Arminianism than Calvinism. If a man profess himself a decided Arminian, I infer from it that he is not a good logician.’ This is precisely our own view of the case.”⁷³ Regarding the question of whether or not Baptists were Calvinists, Howell found support from Hall to suggest that they were not. Something had motivated Hall to assert that he was not a Calvinist, and something motivated Howell to embrace Hall’s assertion in support of his own position.

⁷³Howell, “Calvinism or Arminianism,” *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 16 June 1842. The quote from Hall is found, as Howell indicated, in Robert Hall, Jr., *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.*, ed. Olinthus Gregory (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833), 3:35.

Howell's motivation for embracing Hall's statement on Calvinism might be isolated by examining a letter Hall wrote to Rev. W. Bennett. Bennett had given to Hall an essay he had written. In reply, Hall praised the work, saying,

I do think you have steered a happy medium, between the rigidity of Calvinism and the laxness of Arminianism, and have succeeded in the solution of the grand difficulty—the consistency between general offers and invitations, and the specialty of divine grace. . . . I am particularly delighted with your explicit statement and vindication of the established connexion between the use of instituted means and the attainment of divine blessings, and the consequent hypothetical possibility of the salvation of all men where the gospel comes.⁷⁴

This section of the letter makes clear that Hall thought the hypothetical possibility of the salvation of all men to be the only proper grounding of a general gospel invitation to lost sinners. Hall reiterated this conviction later in the letter and asserted further that Calvinists' unwillingness to embrace this truth was giving Methodists and others justifiable reason for rejecting the doctrines of unconditional election and effectual calling. He said:

I lent your book to Mr. B.—who is much pleased with it, and only wishes you had expressed yourself more fully in favour of the general extent of Christ's death. I think you have asserted it by implication, though I wish you had asserted it unequivocally, because I am fully persuaded it is a doctrine of Scripture, and that it forms the only consistent basis of unlimited invitations. I think the most enlightened Calvinists are too reserved on this head; and that their refusal to declare, with the concurrent testimony of Scripture, that Christ died for all men, tends to confirm the prejudices of the Methodists, and others, against election and special grace.⁷⁵

In his preaching and public writing, Hall was reticent to discuss some theological issues. Fellow English Baptist John Foster assessed Hall's preaching by saying, "In preaching, he very rarely made any express reference to that doctrine [i.e. Calvinism]."⁷⁶ Hall's private letter to Bennett, therefore, provides a rare glimpse into

⁷⁴Hall, *Works*, 2:466.

⁷⁵*Ibid.*, 467.

⁷⁶John Foster, "Observations on Mr. Hall's Character as a Preacher," in Hall, *Works*, 3:110. Foster concluded nonetheless that Hall was, in fact, a Calvinist. He assessed that Hall derived his penchant for giving general invitations from the example of the Apostles. Hall refused to discuss the details of Calvinism from the pulpit, he said, because "he judged that neither the doctrine itself, nor the process of reasoning to prove the belief of it, consistent with the most unrestricted language of exhortation, could be

some of Hall's zealously guarded theological convictions. Hall apparently stated his convictions again in private to Rev. Robert Balmer, who provided extracts of several conversations with Hall for Olinthus Gregory's memoir of Hall. During one conversation, Balmer expressed doubts concerning the extent of the atonement. Hall replied, "I believe firmly in 'general atonement;' I often preach it, and I consider the fact that 'Christ died for all men' as the only basis that can support the universal offer of the gospel." Balmer replied that a belief in election and a belief in limited atonement must be inseparable. Hall explained that this was not the case. He said,

I consider the sacrifice of Christ as a remedy, not only adapted, but intended for all, and as placing all in a salvable state; as removing all barriers to their salvation, except such as arise from their own perversity and depravity. But God foresaw or knew that none would accept the remedy, merely of themselves, and therefore by what may be regarded as a separate arrangement, he resolved to glorify his mercy, by effectually applying salvation to a certain number of our race, through the agency of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁷

This excerpt reveals more completely how Hall understood the connection between divine election, the atonement, and the free offer of the gospel. While God decreed that the sacrifice of Christ should make salvation possible for all of humanity, God also foresaw that none would accept the remedy. Therefore, by "a separate arrangement," in a separate decree, God determined to apply the benefits of Christ's death to specific individuals through the Holy Spirit.⁷⁸ Using this construction Hall maintained unconditional election, general atonement, and effectual calling.

made a profitable part of popular instruction." Ibid., 111. While Foster was probably correct about Hall's unwillingness to discuss the relationship between the divine decrees and human responsibility from the pulpit, Hall's private correspondence shows that Foster was not precise about Hall's opinions regarding Calvinism.

⁷⁷Hall, *Works*, 3:76-77.

⁷⁸This last excerpt helps to identify Hall as an Amyraldian. Moise Amyraut (1596-1664) was a Reformed teacher at the French Protestant Academy at Saumur. Amyraut taught a position which became known as "hypothetical universalism," the term used by Hall in his letter to Bennett. Specifically, Amyraut taught that the covenant of grace is really two covenants. In the first, God decreed to save all men through the death of Christ. Since human inability made responding to this offer impossible, God decreed to elect some to salvation unconditionally. For a brief explanation of Amyraldianism, see Andrew T. B. McGowan, "Amyraldianism," in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, ed. Trevor A. Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 12-13. For a detailed treatment of Amyraut's life and thought, see Brian G. Armstrong, *Calvinism and the Amyraut Heresy: Protestant Scholasticism and Humanism in Seventeenth-*

An examination of R. B. C. Howell's writings reveals that he held many of the same doctrines. Howell stated in "The Value of Christ's Sacrifice" that though Christ's death made a way of salvation possible for all humans, their depravity prevented them from entering into it. Howell also stated in the same passage that the Holy Spirit applies the merits of Christ's death effectually to specific individuals. The only component missing in Howell's formulation that was present in Hall's explanation to Balmer is a statement on the divine decrees. Howell never explained that God made two decrees and never expressed his theology as "hypothetical universalism" the way Hall did. Nonetheless, the similarities between Hall and Howell are striking. Howell used Hall's works on a number of occasions, approved of Hall's assessment regarding Calvinism, and held similar views regarding the sovereignty of God, the efficacy of the atonement, and the work of the Holy Spirit. Beyond this, Howell's view regarding the proper ground for offering general invitations was identical to Hall's. Both thought a general atonement was necessary. Given these facts, Robert Hall, Jr., likely influenced Howell's view on the extent of the atonement rather than Andrew Fuller.

Given the pervasive discussion of the doctrine of the atonement among Baptists in Howell's day and the popularity of Robert Hall, Jr., Hall's influence may have extended far beyond Howell.⁷⁹ Whether it did or not, Hall most likely provided Howell with a paradigm for understanding how unconditional election and effectual calling coincide with a doctrine of general atonement, and how this scheme can provide a foundation for the general offer of the gospel. Without the truth that Christ died for all people, Howell decided, God could not hold humans accountable for not exercising faith

Century France (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).

⁷⁹Excerpts of Hall's reviews, letters, and sermons were frequently included in antebellum Southern Baptist newspapers. *The Baptist Library*, a 3-volume set which included "standard Baptist works," contained three of Hall's treatises in vol. 2 and Olinthus Gregory's memoir of Hall in vol. 3. See Charles G. Sommers, William R. Williams, and Levi L. Hill, eds, *The Baptist Library: A Republication of Standard Baptist Works*, 3 vols. (Prattsville, NY: Robert H. Hill, 1843).

in Christ. God would be calling them to lay hold of that which he never made possible for them to embrace. General atonement, then, provided for human accountability.

At the same time, Howell was convinced that the doctrines of substitution and effectual calling properly highlighted the objectivity of God's work in salvation—that God has done something on behalf of the sinner. As Howell taught his readers and his congregation on the Covenant of Redemption, he explained that anything less reduces Christianity to a system of ethics. Those who deny Christ's substitution, he thought, had denied the depravity of humans and relied upon salvation by human work. They had jettisoned any understanding of God's work in redeeming sinners. Howell considered the doctrine of effectual calling equally important. The reality and depth of human depravity rendered man unable to come to Christ without the renewing work of the Holy Spirit in the heart. Howell was convinced that the doctrines of substitutionary atonement, the general extent of Christ's death, and effectual calling, taken together, provided the proper integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility regarding Christ's work of redemption on the cross.

The Blessings of the Cross

Howell highlighted God's objective work in accomplishing salvation by stressing God's design in the Covenant of Redemption and how Christ's work on the cross fulfilled and accomplished that covenant. As Howell taught on the blessings which flow to believers from Christ's work on the cross, he continued to stress the objectivity of God's work on the one hand and the activity of the believer on the other. Howell's views on repentance, faith, justification, sanctification, and perseverance, therefore, demonstrate his concern to maintain an integrated mission theology.

Howell on Justification and Faith

Just as Christ's work on the cross was a point of controversy among nineteenth century American theologians, so the blessings which flow from Christ's work were a

point of controversy. Charles Finney, Nathaniel William Taylor, and Walter Scott denied that Christ took upon himself the punishment due to sinners. Rather, Christ's death was intended as a demonstration of God's justice in punishing sin. Part of their objection, as Finney clearly expressed, was that Christ's righteousness could not be imputed to the believer. Finney thought that would render salvation an obligation, not a work of grace. His view on the atonement, therefore, had implications for the doctrine of justification. Specifically, he said, justification is not a declaration of righteousness based on the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. Justification, rather is God's pardon of the sinner upon the conditions of faith and repentance. Finney explained that the Old School Calvinist view of depravity rendered the doctrine of imputation necessary. He said, "They hold . . . that the constitution in every faculty and part is sinful. Of course, a return to personal, present holiness, in the sense of entire conformity to the law, cannot with them be a condition of justification. They must have a justification while yet at least in some degree of sin. This must be brought about by imputed righteousness." Because the Old School asserted that humans are constitutionally sinful, they could not consider faith and repentance conditions of God's pardon. They had devised a scheme which would "divert the eye of the law and the lawgiver from the sinner to his substitute." Finney concluded regarding this view that "a greater absurdity cannot be conceived."⁸⁰ Finney was confident that repentance and faith are possible for humans and that imputed righteousness is unnecessary.

Howell disagreed with this New School doctrine represented so plainly by Finney. Aside from perceiving a faulty view of depravity, Howell also detected in Finney's position a failure to uphold the obligation of men to obey the law. Howell implored his readers, "Do not, I pray you, fall into error here. Too many have committed the melancholy mistake which supposes that the Gospel is designed to supercede the law.

⁸⁰Finney, *Lectures on Systematic Theology*, 402. Finney's outlined his understanding of justification on pages 382-401.

They have imagined . . . that with the Gospel as a new and milder code, the terms of which are repentance, faith, and obedience, the sinner has now only to offer a sincere compliance, and his reward will be salvation!” Making faith and repentance the conditions of God’s pardon implied, according to Howell, a rejection of the claims of the law upon the sinner. Howell responded by explaining that the law was not repealed by the gospel. In fact, Christ himself asserted the continued role of the law: “I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill,” (Matt 5:17).⁸¹ According to Howell, God based justification on terms other than repentance and faith. The basis of justification must involve satisfying the law. Howell asserted, “So far from being repealed by the Gospel, [the law] is repeated and imperatively enforced. Its infinite claims must be satisfied. A perfect righteousness is alone adequate to this end.”⁸² That perfect righteousness, Howell taught, is found in Christ.

Howell understood justification to rest not on the foundation of faith and repentance, but upon the twin pillars of imputation: the imputation of human guilt to Christ and of Christ’s righteousness to the believer. After repudiating Finney’s understanding of justification, Howell quoted a number of biblical texts mentioning justification (Acts 13:38, 39; Rom 4:25, 5:9). He concluded, “In these, and numerous similar passages, we are taught that the undeviating obedience, the amazing sufferings, and the agonizing death of the adorable Redeemer, constitute the righteousness on account of which we are justified.” The life of obedience and the sufferings of Christ, what Calvinists often call the active and passive righteousness of Christ, constitute the basis for human forgiveness. This righteousness is applied to humans, he argued, because Christ acted as their representative and suffered in their stead.⁸³ In this passage Howell did not use the legal term “imputation,” frequently used by Calvinist theologians,

⁸¹Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 194.

⁸²Ibid., 198.

⁸³Ibid.

but rather a simpler, if less precise, term, “substitution.” How was the application of the merit of Christ’s sufferings and obedience possible? He explained, “The doctrine of substitution . . . casts a flood of light upon this otherwise obscure subject.”⁸⁴ Howell explained that Christ’s righteousness became the basis for human justification. The imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer was an important part of the basis for justification, according to Howell.

Howell considered the imputation of human guilt to Christ to be the other important component of the basis for human justification, though strangely he did not include a discussion of this component in *The Way of Salvation*. Given the fact that Howell asserts the imputation of human guilt to Christ elsewhere in his works and that he does not mention this at all, positively or negatively in *The Way of Salvation*, one ought to conclude that Howell simply neglected to mention this aspect of imputation in the section on justification. Nevertheless, both aspects are mentioned briefly in *The Cross*, though again the technical term “imputation” is missing. Howell explained, “It is sufficient at present to remind you that He was “*before the law*” your representative. In *Himself*, He was infinitely pure. . . . He ‘fulfilled the law.’ He ‘magnified it, and made it honorable.’”⁸⁵ Here Howell referred to Christ’s role as substitute in fulfilling the law, and thus alluded to the imputation of his righteousness to believers. He also asserted Christ’s role as substitute in bearing human guilt. He explained that Christ “*assumed, voluntarily and freely, the sins of all His people, of every period and of every country. He so took them into connection with His own holy nature, that He was no longer regarded by the law as innocent, but as a sinner. You are a sinner. He took your place.*” Howell plainly stated a few sentences later: “[Christ] hung upon the cross, therefore, not as an innocent, but as a guilty being. Justice approved His sufferings and death.”⁸⁶

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Howell, *The Cross*, 16. The texts Howell to which alluded are Mat 5:17 and Isa 42:21.

⁸⁶Howell, *The Cross*, 16.

Christ fulfilled the law, satisfying God's righteous demand for holiness and bore upon himself the sins of his people.

This same doctrine is present in a sermon he preached to his Nashville congregation, but unlike in *The Way of Salvation* and *The Cross*, here he used standard Calvinist terminology, including the technical term "imputation." He said, "The principle upon which we are justified by the righteousness of Christ, is familiarly called *imputation*." He summed up the doctrine succinctly, saying, "He, in his life fulfilled the law, which, therefore, had no claims upon him. And in his death, he suffered its penalty. Having thus 'died for our sins, he rose for our justification.' In him the Father is reconciled." Furthermore he stated, "The obedience and death of the Son of God are acknowledged by all to have been, not for himself, but for us." Thus Howell included both the imputation of human guilt to Christ and the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer. Howell further clarified his understanding of justification that it consists not of making a person righteous, but of pronouncing a person righteous, "not a change of disposition in the person so judged, and acquitted, but a change of his state." The individual does not receive a transfusion of Christ's righteousness. Rather, Christ's merit is assigned to the individual "according to the stipulations of the covenant of grace."⁸⁷ In terms reminiscent of book three of Calvin's *Institutes*, Howell explained justification as a declaration of righteousness based upon the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer and the imputation of the believer's guilt to Christ. As had Calvin, Howell explained the transaction not as a change of disposition, but as a change of state.⁸⁸

Howell followed this classic Calvinist articulation of the doctrine of justification by explaining how humans appropriate this work for themselves. Howell

⁸⁷Howell, "Justification," *The Baptist*, 1 March 1845.

⁸⁸Just as Howell argued that individuals do not receive a change in disposition, Calvin explained that justification does not involve a renewal of the individual so that their good works may merit righteousness. Both agreed that God declares sinners righteous. See John Calvin, *Institutio Christianae religionis* [1559] 3.14.11, in *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, The Library of Christian Classics (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:778.

said, “The instrumentality by which we become possessed, personally, of the unspeakable blessing of Justification, is as already intimated by faith—*faith* in Jesus Christ.” This faith, he explained, is not mere assent to the testimony of God, as Alexander Campbell taught. It is, in fact, “the humble and joyful reliance of the soul upon his righteousness and atonement, as the only ground of acceptance with the Father.” Thus Howell held that faith was the instrument by which God justified the sinner. Howell clarified that faith is not meritorious in any sense. It is not the cause of God’s grace coming to the individual. The cause rather is the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer. Faith is the instrument. Howell summarized, “The sole office of faith, therefore, so far as justification is concerned, is to put us in possession of a righteousness by which we are accounted righteous.”⁸⁹

This important point led Howell into another consideration, namely, when justification occurs. Were humans declared righteous before God at the time of Christ’s death or are they justified when they exercise faith and repent? Howell commented, “We were not, on the ground of the obedience and death of Christ in our stead, immediately [that is, at the time of Christ’s death] justified. It was necessary that some act of our mind should precede the application of his merits.”⁹⁰ Howell considered this comment relevant because of a debate that had been waging between evangelical Calvinists and hyper-Calvinists for approximately two hundred years. The debate concerned the relationship between law and grace in the life of the believer. Puritan opponents considered Tobias Crisp (1600-1643) and many who followed him to be antinomian, denying the proper place of the law in the life of the believer. Among other doctrines, these antinomians were accused of teaching that the elect were united with Christ and justified before the foundation of the world. Eighteenth century English Baptist John Gill

⁸⁹Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 195.

⁹⁰Howell, “Justification.”

taught this doctrine of eternal union, though he avoided denigrating the role of the law and good works in the life of the believer. Despite this, some Baptists following Gill did adopt the doctrine of “eternal justification” without providing a nuanced view of good works in the life of the believer.⁹¹ Some antimission Baptists in America taught a version of the doctrine of eternal justification. Following the two-seed theology of Daniel Parker, they taught that some humans descended from the seed of the Devil are condemned from eternity; others, descended from the seed of Adam, are justified from eternity. Tennessee antimission leader John Watson denied this teaching and sought to counter it in his book, *The Old Baptist Test*.⁹² As late as 1879, the Powell Valley Association of Primitive Baptists in East Tennessee passed a resolution condemning this version of eternal justification.⁹³ The teaching had found a home in Tennessee.

Howell countered this position by explaining that if God’s purpose to justify his people from eternity means that they are justified from eternity, the same must be true of conversion and glorification. This misunderstanding of God’s purposes, Howell asserted, rendered conversion and glorification meaningless. He stated, “All religion is by such a theology, converted into abstractions, and becomes a mere dream of the imagination.” Howell concluded, “The plan for the justification of his people was unquestionably fixed as the purpose of God, before the foundation of the world; this plan was executed in the life, the death, the resurrection, the ascension and intercession of Christ . . . but the blessing is conferred, and enjoyed only when the soul rests in the Redeemer.”⁹⁴ Though God had a plan to redeem his people through the Covenant of

⁹¹For an account of the Antinomian Controversy and the views of John Gill with respect to that controversy, see Curt Daniel, “John Gill and Calvinistic Antinomianism,” in *The Life and Thought of John Gill (1697-1771): A Tercentennial Appreciation*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, ed. Heiko A. Oberman (New York: E. J. Brill, 1997), 171-90.

⁹²John M. Watson, *The Old Baptist Test* (Nashville: Republican Banner Press, 1855), 29-30.

⁹³Lawrence Edwards, “The Baptists of Tennessee with Particular Attention to the Primitive Baptists of East Tennessee” (M.A. thesis, University of Tennessee, 1940), 57.

⁹⁴Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 200-01.

Redemption before the foundation of the world, he actualized that plan in time in the life and sufferings of Jesus Christ. God furthermore confers the benefits of Christ's death upon the individual, not before the foundation of the world, but only when the individual trusts in Christ by faith. Howell considered faith, then, to be the instrument through which God reckons the sinner justified.

Howell understood faith to operate along with repentance. Faith, he stated, is "a firm belief of the testimony of God concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord," founded upon an adequate knowledge of the subject as revealed in Scripture. Faith, then, is not "choice, temper, behavior, or any disposition of the mind." Faith is the conviction that Jesus Christ is the only suitable savior, a conviction that is backed up by a response.⁹⁵ That response, Howell taught, was repentance. He defined repentance as sorrow for past sins which leads to reformation for the future. Obviously, then, repentance must involve a knowledge of the presence of sin, its effects, and its remedy. This knowledge of sin must lead to sorrow (because sin is displeasing to God) to confession of sin to God, and to prayer for deliverance from sin. Howell saw both repentance and faith as means or instruments by which an individual is brought to God and justified by grace: "Thus brought to Christ by repentance, our faith lays hold on him, and we are safe—Cleansing, pardon, peace, by the blood of Christ, and everlasting life, follow."⁹⁶ While Howell explained that justification is God's work of grace made possible through the imputed righteousness of Christ, he asserted that repentance and faith are the instruments through which the sinner experiences this blessing. By maintaining the doctrine of justification through the imputed righteousness of Christ, Howell attempted to maintain the graciousness of salvation. He was convinced that humans were not capable of accomplishing salvation by any work of their own—even if

⁹⁵Howell, "Faith," *The Baptist*, 7 September 1844. For another sermon on faith, see Howell, "Faith," *The Evangelical Preacher* 1 (February 1848): 44-51. Howell also treated repentance and faith in *The Way of Salvation*, 115-48.

⁹⁶Howell, "Repentance," *The Baptist*, 14 September 1844.

that work be faith and repentance. The populist Arminians, according to Howell, had given too much to human responsibility. Only the sovereign initiative of God could bring about atonement and forgiveness. On the other hand, by asserting the instrumentality of faith in the work of justification, Howell attempted once again to avoid the errors of antinomianism and maintain a solid ground for human responsibility. The same issues Howell raised with respect to the divine decrees, human depravity, regeneration, and revival were also issues with respect to the cross. In order for the church to preach the gospel to the world, it must preach the message of the cross—God’s objective work of substitution and imputation, appropriated by the individual by faith.

Howell on Sanctification

Howell understood the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to the believer, procured by the individual through faith and repentance, to result in justification. God’s work in the individual does not stop here, however. He explained, “The pardon of sins does not, however, fit us for heaven.—This can be done only by the process of sanctification.” At the point of justification, when sins are forgiven, the process of sanctification begins. At this point, Howell explained, the believer experiences, “the removal of the sinful, or depraved disposition; the cancelling of the punishment of sin; and the cleansing of the conscience from a sense of guilt for sin.” These purifying works, he said, are “a very important part of the work of sanctification.” Still, they are closely associated with what occurs in the believer in justification. He said, “Yet they are so blended with a judicial pardon that they cannot be separated without irreparable injury.”⁹⁷ The process of sanctification, Howell taught, begins at the time of justification. He stated this succinctly to his readers in *The Way of Salvation*. Once regenerated and justified, he said, “your sanctification then commenced, and with the divine blessing, will

⁹⁷Howell, “The Remission of Sins,” *The Baptist*, 21 September 1844.

continue until you are made *perfect in glory*.”⁹⁸ Howell taught that justification is a declaration of righteousness, while sanctification is a process that begins at conversion.

The process of sanctification, Howell explained, involves the restoration of the believer to the image of God. The image to which God restores believers includes holiness, for Scripture declares that God is holy. Howell clarified, however, that believers do not grow to approximate God’s holiness “as to degree,” but only “to the nature” of God’s holiness. While God is infinitely holy, believers will “continue to approximate God’s holiness forever, and still be infinitely distant from it as *to degree*.” Nonetheless, believers possess holiness of the same nature as God’s, “a purity which dwells in the soul, and develops itself in all our dispositions, and actions.”⁹⁹ Howell explained that holiness manifests itself in love toward God and man, triumph over sinful dispositions, and “justice, integrity, candor, and honor” in the believer’s “social and domestic relations.” Finally, this restoration to the image of God is, unlike regeneration and justification, progressive in character. Thus, Howell explained, sanctification is “gradually and constantly progressing,” increasing and expanding in the believer.¹⁰⁰

While Howell stressed the progressive nature of sanctification, he also explained that sanctification is not merely the result of human effort at holiness. Sanctification, he said, is “eminently the work of the Holy Spirit, with the gracious concurrence of both the Father and the Son.” The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit work simultaneously to bring about the sanctification of the believer. This, however, does not mean that the believer is inactive. The Holy Spirit uses *means* to accomplish this work of sanctification: “The *instrumentality* employed is the inspired word of truth.”¹⁰¹ Through Scripture God calls believers to holiness, to a consideration of the righteousness and

⁹⁸Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 297.

⁹⁹Howell, “Christian Holiness,” *The Baptist*, 19 April 1845.

¹⁰⁰Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 300-02.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 297-98.

atonement of Jesus Christ, and to the glory that awaits them.¹⁰² In Scripture, Howell explained in another sermon, God provides the believer with the moral law, prominently found in the decalogue, which is the Christian's rule of life.¹⁰³ In an essay on the need for greater holiness, Howell summarized his position by saying that the work of the Holy Spirit in renewing the heart and the testimony of Scripture regarding God's standard of holiness are advantages given to believers which enable them to attain to holiness. These instruments, provided by the Holy Spirit, render believers responsible for cultivating holiness. Howell explained,

You are responsible for all that is attainable, and as soon as it might be reached; and if you have not secured this advantage which has been so benevolently held out to you, you have not, thereby, cancelled your obligation, but on the contrary have added to all your other sins the crime of neglecting to improve those means which God has appointed, and by which you are required to "grow in grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In order to take advantage of the means God has provided, the believer must utilize "exercise, vigilance, discipline, and all of these formed into a settled habit."¹⁰⁴

Howell stressed to his readers in *The Way of Salvation* that despite the need for holiness and despite the means provided by the Holy Spirit for it, perfect holiness is not attainable in this life. The Apostle Paul, he reminded them, claimed that he was not perfect (Phil 3:12). Believers should not claim to have transcended him: "He who imagines himself to have reached perfection must have greatly mistaken both his own heart, and the purity of the Redeemer. Still there are a great many persons who have indulged this dream!"¹⁰⁵

¹⁰²Howell, "Christian Holiness."

¹⁰³Howell, "The Law," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 3:83, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

¹⁰⁴Howell, "Moral Character of Thought," *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 24 December 1840.

¹⁰⁵Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 304.

Indeed there were. John Wesley taught “Christian perfection,” also called by others “entire sanctification,” and this doctrine became an important doctrine of Methodism. Wesley taught that believers can and should experience a subsequent blessing of the Holy Spirit which would enable them to live without *known* sin. This, he taught, was “Christian perfection,” not living totally without sin. As John Wigger pointed out, this quest for entire sanctification became a prominent part of the preaching of the first generation of American Methodist circuit riders. Over time, however, as Methodists became a “more settled, less countercultural, more middle class,” their preachers preached less on sanctification.¹⁰⁶ Beginning in the 1830s, however, the doctrine of entire sanctification experienced a resurgence. Methodists Walter and Phoebe Palmer began to stress the doctrine and urge believers to seek an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in sanctification. Charles G. Finney and the faculty of Oberlin College also taught a version of the doctrine. Revivalists called on their hearers to experience this blessing and reported the dramatic results to religious newspapers. The doctrine of perfection became a prominent element in Second Great Awakening preaching, not only among Methodists, but among many evangelicals of various denominations.¹⁰⁷

Howell was concerned about the doctrine of entire sanctification because he thought that the experience of grace, which supposedly brought this perfection, ultimately undermined the Christian’s quest for holiness rather than helped to accomplish it. Howell asked, “Shall believers be encouraged to conclude that as soon as they have met with some remarkable manifestations of God’s love, and have lived a while, without any known inclination to displease him, that they are perfect? Be not, I entreat you, thus deceived.” The doctrine of perfection, he said, teaches believers to consider as perfection

¹⁰⁶John H. Wigger, *Taking Heaven by Storm: Methodism and the Rise of Popular Christianity in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 20, 184.

¹⁰⁷For an account of the resurgence of the doctrine of perfection in the Second Great Awakening, see Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1957), 103-47.

that which really is not. As a consequence, it thus lowers the standards of moral obligation “not only to the capacity, but even to the present habits of men evidently not the most humble or Christ-like in their dispositions.” Thus, believers who have experienced the blessing of God’s presence are deceived into thinking that their present state and habits are considered perfect. In this way, the doctrine of perfection becomes “a mere element of antinomianism.” It undermines the process of sanctification in the life of believers and prevents them from detecting sinful thoughts and inclinations that can be dangerous. Tragic consequences can ensue for the believer. Howell explained, “Not being prepared to analyze their own feelings in regard either to their origin, their nature, or their permanence, it is not a matter of surprise that they fall into serious mistakes, and ascribe to grace entirely, results which are partly at least, due to nature, and especially to physical, and social excitement.”¹⁰⁸ Howell taught that sanctification, therefore, was a process in which the Holy Spirit enables the believer, through the admonition and instruction of Scripture, to increase in love toward God and man, triumph over sinful dispositions, and achieve greater purity in social and family relationships. This process requires discipline and will continue throughout life. Howell thought that the doctrine of perfection, taught by many during his time, undermined the process of discipline and vigilance which God intended as a means toward greater holiness. The doctrine of perfection, in Howell’s estimation, erred by undermining human responsibility. By misunderstanding the work of the Holy Spirit in sanctification and misunderstanding the nature of indwelling sin within the human heart, believers who embraced the doctrine of entire sanctification often failed to see the need for continued vigilance and discipline. Churches in which the sanctification of believers is short-circuited are churches which are less equipped to fulfill God’s purposes for them.

¹⁰⁸Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 304-05.

Howell on the Perseverance of the Saints

As with the doctrine of sanctification, so with the doctrine of perseverance: Howell stressed both the divine work of preserving the believer for glory and the human work of continuing in the faith. Howell conceived of the perseverance of the saints as a sovereign work of God that provides for the use of means for the exercise of human responsibility. This work of perseverance, he said, like the work of sanctification, is a work of the entire Trinity and is also a product of human instrumentality. God the Father, Howell argued, has redeemed, regenerated, and sanctified his people, “and the glory of all his attributes demands that the end proposed shall be accomplished.” The Father’s love and faithfulness persists and his wisdom guides the believer through every obstacle of life. God the Father will accomplish his purpose for his own glory. God the Son is also involved in the perseverance of the saints by offering atonement for the sins of believers, providing for their adoption, and serving as their advocate “to plead [their] cause before the Father in heaven.” Howell asked, “Will he fail of success?” He concluded that Christ secures for the believer their “final and complete salvation.” Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is involved in the work of perseverance. Following 2 Corinthians 1:22-23, Howell described the work of the Holy Spirit as anointing, sealing, and providing earnest of the promises to come. Through the work of the Spirit, God anoints believers as kings and priests of God, seals them as God’s special treasure, and gives them a downpayment of the future blessings that will be theirs. Beyond this, Howell argued, the Holy Spirit works regeneration and sanctification, which also serve an important role in perseverance. The sovereign work of the Holy Trinity, therefore effectually brings salvation to those who believe.¹⁰⁹

Believers, however, are not idle. Because of the renewal of the will and affections by the Holy Spirit, “all the powers of the mind, are . . . turned from sin to

¹⁰⁹Howell, *The Way of Salvation*, 245-47.

holiness.” This new spiritual nature willingly pursues the things of God; believers therefore follow the inclinations of the new nature and will not ultimately abandon themselves to a life of sin. Howell was confident that this certainty did not mask a violation of the freedom of the will that, after all, has been renewed by the Holy Spirit and thus freely pursues a course of holiness in accordance with its new nature.¹¹⁰ Believers, therefore, empowered by a renewed nature, also become active agents in perseverance.

Howell understood that the experiences of church members can sometimes give a false impression about the perseverance of the saints. The fact that some abandon their profession of faith and pursue a life of sin testifies that some church members are unbelievers. Though Howell thought that believers should be able to articulate an experience of saving grace in order to join churches, he recognized that sometimes their profession of faith seems convincing even though it is false. The period of testing that tries every believer reveals many times the inadequacy of their profession. At other times, Howell explained, individuals pursue a lifestyle of sin but are grieved and return to the faith. These individuals, though backsliding, are genuine believers. In both cases the warnings given in Scripture against falling away serve a useful function. False believers are warned against the danger of their situation, and backslidden believers are reminded of the love and grace of God in bringing them to repentance.¹¹¹

As he detailed his view of the perseverance of the saints, Howell was careful to counter the doctrine of the possibility of apostasy, a doctrine which had been present in Arminianism from the time of Arminius. Positively, Howell asserted that Scripture teaches the perseverance of the believer as evidenced in the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as well as the work of the renewed believer. Howell also countered

¹¹⁰Ibid., 244, 248.

¹¹¹Ibid., 240-43.

the arguments of Arminians. First, he said, Arminians are wrong to argue that the apostasy of angels and of Adam and Eve suggest the possibility of the apostasy of Christians. Angels are of a different order, and Adam and Eve were under a different covenant, a covenant of works. Second, Howell argued, the passages warning against the danger of apostasy do not indicate that true believers can or will fall away; rather, they were addressed to churches, which are inevitably composed of some who are unbelievers. Furthermore, the passages are useful as a warning to unbelievers and a reminder of God's grace to believers.¹¹² Howell was convinced that the doctrine of the possibility of apostasy misunderstands the Covenant of Redemption.

Howell held, therefore, that God guarantees the blessings of the covenant of redemption for those who believe. Justification, sanctification, and perseverance, in his view, are blessings which flow from the objective work of Christ on the cross, applied to the heart by the Holy Spirit. God secures those blessings through his own sovereign purpose, through the effectual work of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and through the efforts of the renewed nature in the life of the believer. God is active in justification, sanctification, and perseverance; so is the believer.

Conclusion

In his preaching, R. B. C. Howell sought to keep the cross central. He thought this was important because he conceived of the cross as the pinnacle of God's plan in the Covenant of Redemption. God had established his purpose from the foundation of the world to redeem fallen humanity and to justify and regenerate specific sinners. He enacted this covenant in history through the nation of Israel to be fulfilled in one Israelite, Jesus of Nazareth. That man, the God-Man, atoned for the sins of the world and provided a way of salvation for all of humanity. Through the merit of this work, the Holy Spirit applies the blessings of salvation to specific sinners. The Spirit regenerates and renews

¹¹²Ibid., 236-40.

their natures. By this means the Spirit sanctifies and preserves believers to the end. Because of the renewed nature and the testimony of Scripture, believers are empowered to pursue their own sanctification and perseverance. All of this, Howell concluded, was God's plan from eternity. While God accomplished his purpose in the Covenant of Redemption, however, he did so through human instrumentality. Because Christ died as the substitute for every human, as Howell understood it, every human is obligated to believe in Christ and Christians can in good conscience call upon them to exercise faith and repentance. Faith and repentance, furthermore, are the appropriate and necessary human responses used by the Holy Spirit to bring sinners to salvation. The Holy Spirit uses spiritual disciplines such as the reading of Scripture, prayer, fellowship, and the sacraments to sanctify individuals. Howell perceived each deviation from this outline—the restoration of Jews to Israel, the moral government and moral influence theories of the atonement, the universal or limited extent of the atonement, entire sanctification, and the doctrine of apostasy—as a violation of the integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility which God accomplished in the Covenant of Redemption. The Covenant of Redemption, to Howell, was the core of the gospel. Howell defended the Covenant of Redemption in sermons, in his books, and in letters because he considered the proclamation of the gospel the most important task in executing the church's missiological mandate. If the blessings of the cross were misunderstood, either by undermining the role of the use of means or by denying the objective blessings procured by God through his sovereign initiative at the cross, the gospel would be diluted and the church's message would be less effective.

CHAPTER 5

THE APPOINTED INSTRUMENTALITY: THE CHURCH IN GOD'S PURPOSE OF GRACE

Throughout Howell's ministry, as previous chapters have argued, Howell labored to articulate a theology which properly integrated divine sovereignty and human responsibility so that the church could accomplish the mission God had given it. An examination of Howell's writings on the doctrine of the church reveals that Howell viewed the church as an integral instrument in the accomplishment of God's purposes in history. Therefore, Howell was convinced that Baptists needed a sound ecclesiology in order to build an empire of missions and benevolence in their own denomination. God would use the church as the means by which he would bring the nations to Jesus Christ. For this reason Howell defended against antimission leaders the identity of the church as a missionary body. God had ordained that the church was responsible to fulfill the Great Commission and to organize in order to accomplish this great mandate. Howell viewed purity and doctrinal consistency, however, as necessary traits for the church to accomplish God's missionary mandate. For this reason he engaged in polemical interchanges with Pedobaptist leaders over the doctrine of infant baptism. Howell's stress on the importance of consistency and doctrinal purity, however, brought him into conflict with the leaders of the Landmark movement on one hand and the advocates of open communion on the other. Through his writings in defense of close communion and against Landmarkism, Howell attempted to show that while Baptists' consistency with regard to church purity sets them apart from other denominations, their claim to be the true church does not invalidate the missionary efforts of the other groups. This chapter

will explain how Howell conceived of the church as God's instrument to accomplish his mission.

The Church as a Missionary Body

When R. B. C. Howell began his pastorate of First Baptist Nashville in January 1835, the church was meeting for worship "on a high rent" in "the spacious apartment" on the first floor of the Masonic Hall. The original church building remained with the majority of the original congregation, which had followed Philip S. Fall in embracing the Restoration Movement. In the 11 April 1835 business meeting the church resolved to build a new house of worship.¹ On 22 January of the following year, Howell addressed a meeting which the church had called for the purpose of further considering the plans to build a building. In that meeting Howell reiterated the need for the new building, offered thoughts regarding the location and style of architecture, and suggested that steps be taken to ensure that the new building not be lost in the same way the previous building had. In order to secure the new building as the permanent possession of the Baptist church, Howell proposed changing the church's constitution so that "if any should secede from the faith of the church, and there be but one firm, the property shall be his." "If all depart," he continued, "the property shall still be held in trust for others," who may later embrace the principles indicated in the declaration and thus occupy the building.² The church heeded his suggestion and adopted a new constitution and declaration of faith on 9 July of that same year, 1836. Article ten of the constitution states, "If, at any time, a majority of the Church should depart from the principles embodied in the annexed

¹R. B. C. Howell, "Baptist Church in Nashville," *The Baptist*, May 1835. See also "Minutes and Records of First Baptist Church Nashville, Tennessee, 1820-1939," First Baptist Church, Nashville; idem, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, From its organisation July 22d, 1820 to July 22d, 1862," vol . 1, First Baptist Church, Nashville. Typescript 1:94-102.

²Howell, "Address at the Meeting to Take Measures for Building a House of Worship for the Baptist Church," in Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 14:957-64, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

Declaration of Faith, the property of the Church shall belong to the minority, however small, who adhere to those principles.”³

Though preparations for the new building were being made early in Howell’s ministry, the facility was not completed for some time. On 31 October 1841, six and a half years after passing the resolution to build a house of worship, the church dedicated the new sanctuary. Inscribed in letters of gold on the church edifice were the words “One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism.” Howell preached from this text at the dedication service that morning.⁴

In his sermon, which he entitled “The Unity of Religion,” Howell expressed both thanksgiving for what God had accomplished through nearly seven years of labor at the church and optimism for what lay in the future. Though “our footsteps have been incessantly haunted by the spectres of despondency and dismay,” he stated, God had sustained them.⁵ As he addressed the congregation, he explained that this important juncture in the church’s history called for reflection on the church’s purpose. He said, “This appropriate occasion, imperiously calls upon us, to prove that the cause we espouse, is worthy of all the efforts which are made to sustain it.” To demonstrate that the church’s cause was worthy, Howell drew from Ephesians 4:5. Working to sustain First Baptist Nashville, he argued, was worthwhile because all of the church’s doctrines are in harmony “with each other, and with the nature and purposes of its divine author.”⁶ The church accurately taught the Trinitarian nature of God, the necessity of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ for salvation, and the requirement that believers receive baptism by immersion in order to obtain membership in the body. Howell defended all three of these

³*The Constitution, Declaration of Faith, and Covenant, of the Nashville Baptist Church* (Nashville: W. Hasell Hunt & Co., 1836), 5.

⁴Howell, “Dedication and Ordination,” *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 11 November 1841. The text is Ephesians 4:5.

⁵Howell, “The Unity of Religion,” *The Virginia Baptist Preacher* 1 (February 1842): 21.

⁶*Ibid.*, 22.

doctrines in detail and concluded, “I will add that the principles thus set forth as the doctrines of the Great Jehovah, to whom we this day dedicate this Temple, are necessarily held by the true Church of Jesus Christ; and that the practice of them, with the accompanying blessing of the Holy Ghost, is requisite to give full effect to the Revelation of God.” Though Howell explained that his design was to “censure no denomination,” he called upon his church to act with confidence in fulfilling God’s purposes because it alone, as a Baptist church, could proceed as the true church and with the full blessing of God. Furthermore, he argued, the church should act with confidence because, through the sovereign work of God, Baptist churches will ultimately prevail and bring great blessing to the earth. Howell said, “The church thus endowed and adorned, is Christ’s representative on earth, and enjoys the promise, that ‘against her the gates of hell shall not prevail.’ She will ultimately triumph, and subdue the world to the government of the Messiah.”⁷ Fueled by this confidence in the triumph of Christianity and of Baptist principles, Howell urged his congregation to move ahead with faithfulness and zeal in accomplishing God’s purposes.

Howell made one of those purposes clear at the beginning of the last main chapter of his book, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, with a bold statement reminiscent of the confidence he exuded in his dedicatory sermon in Nashville in 1842: “This whole world is to be converted to God. As yet most nations are in darkness, and the shadow of death. But they shall all ultimately be delivered from their thralldom. Joy, and peace, and salvation, shall at length, reign universally.”⁸ How will the church accomplish this? Howell asserted that the gospel of Christ, which is “the power of God unto salvation” (Romans 1:16), would accomplish God’s purpose. Always concerned about the proper

⁷Ibid., 36. His citation is from Matt 16:18.

⁸Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 3rd ed. (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1852), 293. As this quote and the 1842 dedicatory sermon hint, Howell held to postmillennialism. He thought that God would use the church to usher in a period of peace and that the return of Christ would follow. Chapter 6 will explain fully Howell’s view on the millennium.

use of means, Howell continued, "The church, we have before seen, is the appointed instrumentality by which these purposes of grace are to be accomplished." The church is God's instrument for converting the world. He further asked, "What is she doing? Springing forward to duty?" He answered, "Alas, no! She has ingloriously turned away from her mission!"⁹ By 1851, when Howell wrote this book, the antimission movement had mostly separated from the larger Baptist body and ceased attempting to hinder the activity of mission agencies and conventions. At that point Howell directed his attention to the hindrances caused by the division of the church over the doctrine of baptism. For the early part of Howell's ministry, however, he viewed antimission Baptists as one of the major agitators turning churches away from their mission. Their main quarrel with the missionary Baptists concerned the identity of the church as a missionary body.

Antimission Ecclesiology

The formation of the Tennessee Baptist Convention in 1833 provoked controversy in the state over mission endeavors. Influential pioneer preacher Garner McConnico, in a meeting held in May 1833 at the Big Harpeth meeting house in Williamson County, proposed to the participating churches the organization of a state convention for missionary purposes. The delegates present approved his proposal and referred it to the next meeting of the Cumberland Association. By the time the meeting occurred in September, McConnico had died. Perhaps partly as a result of this loss of influence, the association rejected the proposal. In the face of this rejection, another gathering assembled at Mill Creek Church in Davidson County in October and approved the formation of a convention. Even before the organization of the convention, therefore, the antimission forces were vocal.¹⁰

⁹Ibid., 296.

¹⁰Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 1. Typescript 1:107-111; also Albert W. Wardin, Jr., *Tennessee Baptists: A Comprehensive History* (Brentwood, TN: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Convention, 1999), 123-24.

Howell's editorial work in *The Baptist*, however, brought the issue to the forefront of discussion. In the first three issues of the paper in 1835, Howell brought attention to the issue and argued for support of the convention. He was present at a meeting on 27 March 1835 in which both promission and antimission leaders attempted to find a basis for agreement. The resolution which these leaders approved stated that each church should support ministers who endeavored to preach the gospel in destitute places. The resolution, however, left the support to individual churches and said nothing regarding the propriety of a convention or society.¹¹ Howell supported the resolution at the meeting. His support led some antimission leaders to suppose that Howell was on their side. He countered this claim in a May editorial, stating that the resolution was commendable in that it called for churches to support itinerate preaching, but that the resolution fell short because it failed to stipulate that the success of the effort would depend upon united action.¹² This same issue contained a lengthy letter from antimission advocate Jesse Cox of Williamson County. The June issue contained a letter under the signature of B. Phillips supporting the convention and the August issue contained another letter from Cox, a letter from promission layman William Martin, and a letter from antimission leader Washington Lowe of Montgomery County.

Though the antimission spokesmen offered numerous criticisms of the mission movement, each offered ecclesiological objections to the convention formed by the Tennessee advocates of missions. Jesse Cox explained regarding the convention, "There are many things that the Convention proposes to do, that in themselves are good, but the manner it proposes to do them, we think to be unscriptural, and therefore, feel opposed." Specifically, Cox asserted that the New Testament gives no warrant for missions and benevolent societies to usurp the prerogative of the church. Using these societies to

¹¹Howell printed the resolution from this meeting in an untitled report of the meeting in *The Baptist*, April 1835.

¹²Howell, "The Bethesda Meeting," *The Baptist*, May 1835.

conduct the work which belongs to the church “tends to an amalgamation of the church and world.”¹³ While Cox favored supporting preachers who spread the good news in areas deprived of gospel preaching, he considered this the prerogative of the local church alone. While Cox offered no scriptural evidence to support his claim, he asserted that societies organized for the purpose of missions lack a scriptural basis and usurp the role that properly belongs to the churches.

Washington Lowe, writing two months later, took a different approach than Cox in attempting to refute promission arguments. Lowe argued against “money missions” and defended his position by arguing that “there is no authority in the scriptures for saying God *ever did* or *ever will* use money for that purpose.” He boldly declared, “And I challenge the world to point out the authority in the Bible where a *single dollar* ever has advanced, or shall advance the Redeemer’s kingdom by spreading the gospel.” Lowe said that God has never used money to advance his kingdom. He asserted even more boldly, “I know of no place in scripture where money has ever been a blessing, but many where it proved a curse.” To support this he offered as evidence the examples of Joseph’s brothers selling him as a slave and Judas betraying Jesus for thirty pieces of silver. Lowe next turned to what he viewed to be the main pillar of the promission argument—the Great Commission. Convention advocates asserted that Jesus gave the Great Commission to the church. Lowe countered that Jesus gave the commission specifically to “the eleven” (since Judas had “gone to his own place,” alluding to Acts 1:25). Lowe thought the choice was plain: either believe Jesus Christ or the convention advocates. He further painted the controversy in the starkest terms, thus impugning the motives of his opponents. He warned his audience, “Reader, pause and consider!—for many lying spirits have gone forth into the world, it is to be feared, under

¹³ Jesse Cox, “Letter to the Editor,” *The Baptist*, May 1835.

the garb of *Baptist preachers*!”¹⁴ Lowe’s vigorous letter was not the last antimission correspondence to appear in the pages of Howell’s newspaper.

In January 1836, Howell printed a letter from William Patrick, a pastor in Haywood County in West Tennessee. As was his practice, Howell included his own critique of the letter in which he offered this assessment of its contents: “Notwithstanding its thousand and one absurdities, it is the *best anti-effort* essay we recollect to have seen.”¹⁵ Patrick produced numerous objections to the “benevolent operations of the day,” criticizing the conduct of the convention’s advocates and the threat their operations posed to Baptist ecclesiology. Regarding the latter threat, he first criticized the convention for taking the Baptist name without having received authority from the churches of the denomination to conduct their activities. Patrick said, “I am willing to admit that it is a ‘Convention of Baptists’ acting without church authority, for which they are amenable to the church.” No association or meeting, he argued, could call itself “Baptist” without authority from a church, even if it was composed of Baptists. Second, he argued that the convention exercised an unbiblical level of oversight regarding the field of labor assigned to each preacher sent by the convention. Using the case of Paul and Barnabas, Patrick concluded that God calls, sends, and determines the field of ministry, not a convention or even a church. The right to determine the field belongs only to God. In other words, the advocates of the convention were assigning to themselves a prerogative that did not belong to them. Lastly, regarding ecclesiology, Patrick asserted that God gave the Great Commission to the apostles, not the church, and that they fulfilled this mandate without

¹⁴Washington Lowe, “Elder Lowe’s Reply to Elder Phillips,” *The Baptist*, August 1835. Though Howell printed the letter, he offered a firm assessment of its contents. He called the letter a “precious morsel,” and criticized Lowe for having “too free a command of a peculiar class of words.” Waxing proverbial, Howell stated, “From the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh.” Regarding the quality of the argument, Howell assessed, “[Regarding t]hose who can be convinced by such arguments. . . we do not envy their discriminating abilities.” Regarding the tone of the letter Howell asked, “Is this the true spirit of anti-effortism? A cause which requires to be upheld by such means ought to fall.” Howell thought the tone of the argument and the quality of its argumentation spoke volumes regarding the antimission position. See Howell’s assessment in “Elder Lowe’s Reply to Elder Phillips.”

¹⁵Howell, “Elder Patrick’s Essay,” *The Baptist*, January 1836.

taking up collections from churches. Patrick supported this argument by examining the commission Jesus gave to the apostles in Luke 10:2-11, the commission Jesus gave them prior to his ascension, and the instances in which the church collected money in the book of Acts. In each case, Patrick concluded, the church did not support the apostles' mission by taking up money. Finally, in order to bolster this last argument, Patrick asserted that God does not further his kingdom through the collection of money, but rather through the proliferation of persecution.¹⁶

Later that year, John M. Watson published a thirty-three page pamphlet which made a unique contribution to the discussion. His essay included many of the concerns antimission spokesmen had aired before, but he provided a more focused critique than the essays which had appeared earlier.¹⁷ Rather than complaining about the conduct of the convention advocates or raising several seemingly unconnected ecclesiological objections, Watson focused his critique upon the basis of authority of the new institutions. This was Watson's first point of discussion, and Howell understood it to be the most important: "Indeed, everything depends upon the correctness of the first."¹⁸ Watson's thesis was that the New Testament provided "neither precept or [*sic*] example" for the establishment of benevolent institutions designed to do the work of the church. The missionary advocates, Watson argued, relied upon the authority of the Great Commission, stating that God had called the church to go into the world and spread the good news. As Lowe and Patrick before him, Watson argued that God gave this commission to the apostles, not the church. Watson explained the significance of this

¹⁶William Patrick, "Elder Patrick's Essay," *The Baptist*, January 1836.

¹⁷Watson's pamphlet, *An Apology for the Brethren who are Opposed to Baptist Conventions: Also, an Exposition of Certain Duties of the Church toward its Ministers, as Enjoined by the Word of God*, is extremely rare and difficult to find. Watson had it reprinted in installments, however, in the Primitive Baptist newspaper, *The Signs of the Times*, beginning with the 3 November 1837 issue. For biographical information on Watson, see John M. Watson, *The Old Baptist Test; or, Bible Signs of the Lord's People*, 2nd ed. (Nashville: Bell, Jones, & Co., 1867). This work contains a eulogy on Watson given by W. K. Bowling of the University of Nashville and an autobiographical account written by Watson himself.

¹⁸Howell, "Dr. Watson and the Convention," *The Baptist*, June 1836.

point: “Now, if the commission had been given to the apostles as a church, then the church should have appointed them their respective fields of labor afterwards, as the Convention-folks do now; but this was not done by the church then, neither should it be now. The church is only called upon to fellowship and acknowledge what the Lord, as the Great Head of the church does in the above respects.”¹⁹ Like Patrick, Watson used the example of Paul and Barnabas. The church did not appoint them to a special work but merely acknowledged that the Lord had called them.

Furthermore, Watson explained, the New Testament church never took upon itself the prerogative of assigning preachers a particular field or assigning them specific sums of money for support. Watson complained that “if the Convention has a right to hire, engage, and send out missionaries to particular places, that it has the right also *to ordain them, to silence them, and to prescribe doctrine and practice for them.*” These prerogatives, Watson asserted, belong to God alone. A missionary that embarks under such circumstances undertakes his mission with “only a *fleshly* desire to preach the gospel.” On the other hand, Watson said, “Whenever we may see preachers starting out under a spiritual exercise of the soul, concerning the heathen, and going in the way the Saviour commanded, without gold or silver, or with their own purse only, in the wisdom and power of the Lord, and in his providence, connected with their work, we will hear of a *spiritual work* abroad.”²⁰ A true missionary undertakes his call in response to the summons of God and does so without financial considerations in mind. The advocates of the convention, Watson concluded, had not established with firm authority where in the New Testament the church exercised the prerogative to send missionaries, determine their course of action, and provide them with regular financial support. Watson had established to his satisfaction the unscriptural nature of missionary institutions. He

¹⁹John M. Watson, “An Apology,” *The Signs of the Times*, 3 November 1837.

²⁰*Ibid.*

furthered his critique by pointing out the numerous evils which would result from allowing an unscriptural institution to connect itself with the church.²¹

The antimission spokesmen who voiced their opinions through the pages of *The Baptist* primarily objected to the ecclesiology of the mission movement. Jesse Cox had asserted that mission societies were unscriptural, though he offered no support for this argument. Washington Lowe criticized the fact that the institutions provided financial support, and he founded this criticism on weak biblical examples and *ad hominem* argumentation. He further argued that God did not give the Great Commission to the church, but to the twelve Apostles. William Patrick argued that the missionary Baptists organized the Tennessee Baptist Convention without the authority of any churches, wrongly took upon themselves the prerogative of sending and assigning missionaries, and falsely assumed that the Great Commission belonged to the church rather than the Apostles. John M. Watson focused these arguments around one central issue, the authority of churches to establish institutions to carry out the Great Commission. The Great Commission, he said, belonged to the Apostles, and God alone possessed the authority to send, assign, and provide financially for missionaries.

Howell's Missionary Ecclesiology

Though Howell had responded to the letters of Cox, Lowe, and Patrick as he commented upon their letters in *The Baptist*, he gave Watson a more lengthy response. He did so probably because while Cox, Lowe, and Patrick were vocal antimission leaders, none of them led churches within the Concord Association. Watson, however, did. Furthermore, Watson was present in the fall associational meeting of 1836 when the antimission group within the association attained a majority and voted to dissolve the association. Howell argued that the dissolution of the association occurred in a manner

²¹See John M. Watson, "An Apology," *The Signs of the Times*, 17 November 1837, 1 December 1837.

which was unconstitutional and called upon the promission churches to ignore the action of the fall meeting and assemble, according to schedule, at the Bradley's Creek meeting house the following September.²² The promission churches eventually took this course of action, but in the meantime Howell wrote an extended essay on the historical, biblical, and theological basis for missions as a series of ten letters to Watson.²³ Howell's thesis was as follows, "*I assert that from the days of the Apostles to the present time, the true legitimate churches have ever been missionary bodies.*"²⁴

The question with which Howell dealt was the same with which Watson had dealt in his pamphlet. Did God intend to spread the gospel through the instrumentality of missionaries sent by churches? Howell defended the position taken by the missionary Baptists first by asserting that Baptist churches have always acted on the assumption that God had commanded churches to send missionaries. Howell intended this argument to counter the claim that the missionary Baptists had departed from the established practice of Baptists in the past. He began by pointing to numerous instances in which British Baptists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries conducted missionary work and collected money for missionary enterprises.²⁵ Howell further referred to the activity of the Philadelphia Association, the General Association of Virginia, and the Charleston Association in the mid-eighteenth century to demonstrate the existence of missionary

²²Howell, "Concord Association," *The Baptist*, October 1836. Howell printed the minutes from this meeting, written by Watson, who was the clerk, in John M. Watson, "Division of the Concord Association," *The Baptist*, December 1836.

²³The first to appear was Howell, "To Dr. J. M. Watson, Letter I," *The Baptist*, 9 January 1837. Number 10 appeared in *The Baptist*, 15 June 1837. Howell included the letters in "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 1. Typescript 1:133-96. James Esmond Hilton discussed and evaluated the letters at length in, "Robert Boyte Crawford Howell's Contribution to Baptist Ecclesiology: Nineteenth-Century Baptist Ecclesiology in Controversy" (Ph.D. diss., Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2005), 104-38. See also Linwood Tyler Horne, "The Life and Work of R. B. C. Howell" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1958), 125-37.

²⁴Howell, To Dr. J. M. Watson. Letter I."

²⁵Ibid.

activity among American Baptists at an early date.²⁶ Fittingly, Howell challenged Watson with the historical evidence, saying, “I leave it to your own candor to say, if you, and not we, have not departed from Baptist principles and usages.”²⁷

Having argued that Baptist churches had always assumed to themselves the responsibility to send out missionaries to spread the gospel, Howell secondly asked whether that practice conforms to the pattern established in Scripture. Over the course of several letters Howell argued that this practice is scriptural. He began where several of his antimission opponents began—with the Great Commission. Jesus gave to the church the work of preaching the gospel to every creature, Howell argued. The key to answering this question, he thought, was located in determining when God constituted the visible church. Though “the Lord always had a Church upon earth,” the church as a visible body of professing believers began during the ministry of Jesus. Two sacraments, Howell argued, were necessary in order to constitute the church—baptism and the Lord’s Supper. John the Baptist began the practice of believer’s baptism, and Jesus himself began the Lord’s Supper on the night before his crucifixion. At this point the eleven apostles composed the first visible church. When Jesus commissioned the Apostles, therefore, he commissioned the church.²⁸

Howell supported this conclusion by drawing a few implications from the antimission position. To argue that the Great Commission was given only to the apostles would require one to believe either that the command to preach the gospel was no longer in force or that the apostles had successors who were charged with this task independently of the church. The latter, he said, “is *popery* in all its extent!”²⁹

²⁶Howell, “To Dr. J. M. Watson. Letter II,” *The Baptist*, 16 January 1837.

²⁷Howell, “To Dr. J. M. Watson. Letter I.”

²⁸Howell, “Letter III. To Dr. John M. Watson,” *The Baptist*, 1 February 1837.

²⁹*Ibid.*

Furthermore, as he argued in his next letter, the Great commission specified to those who listened that they were to teach the disciples to observe all things Jesus commanded. Undoubtedly the command to go to all nations and preach the gospel should be included among all the things Jesus commanded. Howell asserted therefore that the church was present at the Great Commission and Christ gave the church of the future its orders in the Great Commission. Even though God has given the church a special class of servants whose full responsibility involves preaching the gospel, they do not possess an authority to preach which is independent of the church.³⁰ God gave the Great Commission to the church. The church, therefore, has always been a missionary body.

Howell extended his defense of the missionary enterprise by arguing that the New Testament provides warrant for churches to unite for cooperative endeavors. He found evidence to support the convention party in the book of Acts and the letters of Paul. The church of Jerusalem, he argued, sent out Barnabas as a missionary. The church at Antioch later sent out Paul and Barnabas. The church itself appointed them to a specific field and, when they returned, they reported to the church regarding their progress.³¹ Furthermore, Howell thought 2 Corinthians 8:16-20 demonstrated that numerous churches cooperated together in collecting money for the poor of Jerusalem, and they selected specific brothers to carry the collection with Paul. This appointment must indicate, Howell concluded, “a coming together of some kind.” This kind of cooperative endeavor, he thought, was noted again when Paul pointed out to the Corinthians that he had “robbed” other churches, but had chosen not to be a financial burden on them. Could this cooperative effort to support Paul in Corinth have happened without intention or design? Howell asked, “Who will believe it? No man, certainly who has intelligence enough to know that two and two make four.”³² Not only did God

³⁰Howell, “To Dr. John M. Watson. Letter IV,” *The Baptist*, 16 March 1837.

³¹Howell, “To Dr. John M. Watson. Letter V,” *The Baptist*, 1 April 1837.

³²Howell, “To Dr. John M. Watson. Letter VI,” *The Baptist*, 15 April 1837.

intend the church to be a missionary body, but based on the example of the churches of the New Testament, churches today should cooperate with one another in organized efforts to further the mission.³³ In the face, therefore, of serious ecclesiological objections and in the wake of division in his own association, Howell offered historical, biblical, and theological arguments in support of the work of the convention. God intended to bring salvation to the nations through the cooperation and efforts of churches. The church is God's missionary instrument.

As Hilton explained in his dissertation on Howell's ecclesiology, Howell's letters did not silence the opposition. Antimission protesters continued to vocalize their concerns for several years.³⁴ Howell's series proved popular, however. The editor of *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, published in Kentucky, reprinted it, and later in 1837 Howell printed it as a pamphlet. Numerous supporters of the convention testified to the rapid progress that occurred after the letters appeared. Through his writings Howell helped the missionary cause in Tennessee find its footing. His argument that God intended churches to be the vehicles through which the gospel would spread abroad found receptive ears in Tennessee. Howell was convinced, however, that the antimission Baptists were not the only group hindering the progress of the benevolent empire.

The Baptist Denomination in God's Purpose

Howell perceived the doctrine of infant baptism to be a serious impediment in God's design to convert the world through the instrumentality of the church. The

³³Letters 7 through 9, appearing in *The Baptist* on 1 May, 16 May, and 1 June 1837, discussed other issues besides ecclesiological objections which served as a barrier to the antimission Baptists' cooperation in mission endeavors. Letter seven discussed how properly to understand the sovereignty of God in bringing conversion. Chapter 3 of this dissertation dealt with this letter. Letters 8 and 9 dealt with the antimission Baptists' concern over the financial activity of the convention. In letter 10, Howell concluded the series with a survey of the lost condition of the peoples on every continent. Howell asked, "Can we look upon all this, while the command is sounding in our ears—'Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature,' and with the spirit of religion in our hearts, close our eyes and ears, and lie down and sleep on? Can I—can you—can any christian? God forbid." See Howell, "To Dr. John M. Watson. Letter X," *The Baptist* 15 June 1837.

³⁴Hilton, "Robert Boyte Crawford Howell's Contribution to Baptist Ecclesiology," 137-38.

doctrine of infant baptism, he explained, places Baptists and Pedobaptists in conflict with each other, thus producing endless controversies and prejudices which occupy the time and energy of believers and steal their unity.³⁵ Furthermore, the divisions created by the doctrine set ministers in competition with one another and draw manpower that churches should be able to divert to the foreign field. Finally, the doctrine of infant baptism gives “the name of christians to the abandoned and profligate merchants, and sailors, and soldiers, and others, in foreign lands. These men, wicked as they are, covered with every crime, *claim to be christians!*” Howell pointed out that Muslims and adherents of other religions see these men and associate their beliefs and conduct with the beliefs and ethics of Christianity. Many of these “ambassadors” are, in fact, members of Pedobaptist churches, but received baptism into the church as infants and have had no conversion experience. The prejudice created by the impression these people make on the inhabitants of foreign lands impedes the progress of the gospel. Howell asked regarding these hindrances, “With such an incubus hanging upon the church, diverting her energies, corrupting her principles, and destroying her life, how can the world ever be converted to God?”³⁶ The doctrine of infant baptism divided Christians and created an environment in which some who call themselves Christians could misrepresent Christianity to the world. This was a serious detriment to the church’s mission.

Furthermore, the doctrine of infant baptism was an impediment to the church’s mission because it corrupted the purity of the church’s doctrine and practice. As a Baptist, Howell was convinced that the practice of baptizing believers by immersion guarded the purity of the church. The practice of some other denominations was to consider as church members all those who have received baptism. This, Howell argued,

³⁵Howell’s most thorough defense of believer’s baptism came in an eight part series printed in *The Baptist* beginning in September 1835 and running through April 1836. The entire series covered approximately 115 columns of newsprint, three columns per page. His book, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, expanded on the theme of the sixth installment in this series, “Baptism—No. VI,” *The Baptist*, February 1836.

³⁶Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 296-99.

contradicted the spiritual nature of the church. As he explained on numerous occasions, many Pedobaptists defended their doctrine of infant baptism by arguing for the continuity of the rite with the Old Testament rite of circumcision.³⁷ In Howell's words, Pedobaptists argued as follows, "The Jewish society before Christ, and the Christian society after Christ, are one, and the same church, under different dispensations."³⁸ In response Howell asserted that this error stemmed from "a perversion of the covenants."³⁹ The children of Abraham were not the heirs of the covenant of grace, but heirs of another covenant made with Abraham. The circumcised became partakers of the promise God made to Abraham to make him the father of a great nation. This nation, which worshipped God according to the Mosaic law, foreshadowed the church, but was composed of believers and nonbelievers—all who were born of Jewish parents. The new covenant, however, is entirely spiritual in nature. The children of the covenant are spiritually children of Abraham by means of faith in Christ. Therefore baptism is not a replacement for circumcision. The children of believers have no right to receive baptism as an initiation into the covenant because the covenant is for believers only. Baptizing infants into membership in the church "brings into the body, not the spiritual and pure only, but also all classes of men; and it thus impresses upon it such a character as effectually destroys its claims to be regarded as the true visible church of Christ. It is thenceforth necessarily carnal and unholy."⁴⁰ One of Howell's reasons for viewing infant baptism as an evil was because he thought it corrupted the purity of the church.

³⁷Howell offered a refutation of this argument in "Subjects of Baptism—No. II," *The Baptist*, October 1835; "Baptism—The Argument from Analogy," *The Baptist*, 17 May 1845; and *The Covenants* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1855; reprint Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1994), 49-50, 82-86, 92-94.

³⁸Howell, *The Covenants*, 83.

³⁹Howell, "Subjects of Baptism—No. II."

⁴⁰Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 135.

Howell also viewed infant baptism as an evil because he thought it corrupts the church's understanding of the doctrine of salvation. The confessions of the major Protestant denominations—*The Augsburg Confession*, *The Westminster Confession*, and *The Thirty-Nine Articles* of the Anglican Church, as well as *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church*—state clearly the doctrine of justification by faith. Other Congregationalists and Independents agree with these statements, and yet, Howell argued, the doctrine of infant baptism stands “in irreconcilable contradiction” with justification by faith.⁴¹ Howell then surveyed the statements in these same confessions on baptism and summarized:

Lutherans declare that baptism is necessary to salvation, and that by it infants are received into the favor of God, and saved. Presbyterians, with all their kindred sects, maintain that baptism is to the child a sign and seal of the covenant of grace, of his engrafting into Christ, of regeneration, and of the remission of sins, and that all these are by baptism not only offered to the child, but really exhibited and conferred upon him. And Episcopalians and Methodists affirm that by baptism the new birth, the forgiveness of sins, and adoption, are all to the child, visibly signed and sealed. The child therefore in baptism, is pardoned of sin, is regenerated, is adopted, is received into the church, received into the favor of God, and saved. All this certainly involves justification, or the declaring the person innocent of crime. These confessions teach, therefore, the justification of the sinner by baptism.⁴²

Howell pointed out that Pedobaptists object that they do not attribute to infant baptism justifying power, and yet a survey of standard commentators in these confessions affirms the doctrines contained in the confession as Howell described. Howell concluded by saying that he lamented the compromise brought to the doctrine of justification by the doctrine of infant baptism, “but they [i.e. the compromises to justification] are so natural to their position, that from them there seems to be, without changing their ecclesiastical

⁴¹Ibid., 100. In discussing “the Protestant denominations,” Howell did not intend to include Baptists among that group. In a note in *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 117, he clarified this point and referred the reader to his extended defense of the continuity of the Baptist denomination with earlier schismatic groups such as the Anabaptists, Waldensians, and Donatists. See Howell, *Terms of Communion at the Lord's Table*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1846), 245-64.

⁴²Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 109-10.

relations, no way of escape.”⁴³ Howell thought that infant baptism inevitably compromised the doctrine of justification.

Another reason Howell was convinced that infant baptism corrupts the church’s doctrine was that it perverts the doctrine of regeneration. The history of the development of the doctrine of regeneration was different than the development of the doctrine of justification. While the major Protestant denominations had clearly articulated justification by faith in their confessions, in Howell’s opinion only *The Westminster Confession* (10.1) clearly stated the doctrine of regeneration. Large portions of these denominations, however, “have gradually acquired, as they became better instructed in the word of God, more distinct and full conceptions of the work of the Spirit in regeneration;” this was especially true in the case of Methodists and Congregationalists. Despite this improvement, Howell explained, the statements on baptism in their confessions still associated baptism with regeneration according to “the old popish dogma,” and commentators such as Matthew Henry and Charles Hodge echoed these standards. As a result, Howell concluded, peoples’ minds turn “from the reality to the mere forms of religion.”⁴⁴ Infant baptism, therefore, corrupts the church’s doctrine as well as its purity.

Howell also explained that the doctrine of infant baptism disrupts the mission of the church by interfering with the proper religious instruction of children. Reviewing numerous biblical passages which mandate the religious instruction of children, Howell acknowledged that all denominations agree that this is an important responsibility. Despite this agreement, he continued, Pedobaptists insist on the importance of infant baptism for the spiritual lives of children. When these children come to the age in which they begin to receive the usual methods of instruction, they receive instruction from the

⁴³Ibid., 114.

⁴⁴Ibid., 122-28.

same catechisms and confessions that teach the connection between baptism, justification, and regeneration. “If they believe them,” Howell explained, “they are unquestionably deceived as to the great principles of true religion.”⁴⁵ Howell was so zealous to guard children against this confusion that he refused to place Charles Hodge’s book *The Way of Life*, published by the American Sunday School Union, in his church’s library. The book, he assessed, contained useful chapters on the Word of God, sin, justification, faith, and holy living. Nonetheless, the chapter discussing baptism and the Lord’s Supper “totally destroyed” the usefulness of the book.⁴⁶ Howell sought to protect children from this error and to instruct them on their need for salvation through Christ. For this reason he supported the Sunday school movement. Regarding Sunday schools, Howell said, “They all assume one grand Baptist feature. They bring [children] to Christ before they receive them into the church.”⁴⁷ Howell thought the doctrine of infant baptism disrupts the religious development of children and thus hinders the mission of the church.

Infant baptism further hinders the church’s mission, in Howell’s opinion, because it contributes to the union of church and state. Without the doctrine of infant baptism, he argued, a national church would not be possible. A church gathered from those who have professed conversion would never have as members all of the wealthy and influential in society, not to mention every man, woman, and child in the nation. The doctrine arose, he argued, with the political ambitions of Constantine, who knew little of Christian doctrine or practice, but who knew that nations up to his time had typically adopted the prevailing superstitions as the religion of the state. Pedobaptists have bolstered this practice, Howell explained, by drawing upon the example of the nation of

⁴⁵Ibid., 221.

⁴⁶Howell, “The Way of Life,” *The Baptist*, 19 October 1844. See Charles Hodge, *The Way of Life* (Philadelphia: American Sunday-School Union, 1841).

⁴⁷Howell, “Sunday School,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:192, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

Israel in the Old Testament. Howell thought this doctrine ignored the spirituality of the church in the same way as the argument for baptism from continuity with the rite of circumcision. The results of the union of church and state, he continued, have been that “Wealth and honors poured into the church; and with them came impiety, spiritual ignorance, ceremonies and superstitions of all kinds.” Not only did the establishment of a national church foster immorality and false doctrine, it lead directly to the increased prevalence of infant baptism, on which it depended. Finally, he argued, the union of church and state instantly resulted in the cessation of true religion. He said, “Christianity, as revealed by Messiah, necessarily involves individual inquiry, belief, and profession. An established religion is exactly the opposite, since it demands unexamining conformity.”⁴⁸

Persecution and restrictions to religious freedom come as a consequence of this enforced uniformity, Howell asserted, because infant baptism brings many unconverted people into the church. Then, unconverted leaders pursue their ambition without concern for spirituality and are not afraid to punish those who contradict their principles. Howell brought evidence of the persecution of “Baptists” before the Reformation, of the persecution of German, Swiss, and English Anabaptists during the Reformation, and of the persecution of English dissenters subsequent to the Reformation. By virtue of its importance for the union of church and state, therefore, infant baptism contributes toward persecution and the restriction of religious freedom.⁴⁹

At a Fourth of July celebration in 1852, Howell delivered an address in which he argued positively for the rightness of Baptist principles instead of negatively regarding

⁴⁸Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 225-33. For the arguments of this chapter, Howell relied heavily upon a book on the history of baptism written by American Baptist Isaac Hinton and a treatise on the union of church and state written by Baptist W. Noel of England. See Isaac Taylor Hinton, *A History of Baptism: Both from Inspired and Uninspired Writings* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1840), and Baptist W. Noel, *Essay on the Union of Church and State* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1849).

⁴⁹Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 234-61.

the evil of Pedobaptist principles. Baptists, he said, hold that government has no right to enforce religion. By admitting to membership only those who can relate an experience of conversion, Baptists guard the reality “that government has no right to prescribe religion, and that men are responsible for religion to God only.” Furthermore, he argued, Baptists’ doctrine of congregational church government protects civil government from interference by religious hierarchies. Baptist principles, therefore, prevent government from establishing religion and prevent religion from interfering with civil government.⁵⁰

According to Howell, then, the doctrine of believer’s baptism (1) protects the purity and spirituality of the church, (2) protects the key soteriological doctrines of justification and sanctification from compromise, and (3) guards the church from interference by the state and the state from interference by the church. In this way the Baptist doctrine protects religious freedom and prevents the persecution of dissenters. Pedobaptist doctrine does none of these things and greatly harms the church.

In fact, Howell argued, Pedobaptist doctrine does more than merely harm the church. It actually destroys the church. He offered this conclusion regarding the results of Pedobaptist doctrine on the church, “What do we now see? The *spirituality* of the church is gone! The *visibility* of the church is gone! The church *itself* is gone! It is despoiled of those peculiar qualities which are essential to the church of Christ.”⁵¹ Regarding these essential qualities Howell gave five “principal particulars,” or five marks, “which must enter into, and form, the composition of the true church.” First the true church must have Jesus Christ as its foundation. Christ is the author of revelation, which is the church’s authority, the only lawgiver for the church, and the only source of

⁵⁰Howell, “The Relations between Baptist Principles and Political Liberty,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:722-23, The Robert Boyte Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville. A Baptist could critique Howell’s presentation in *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, particularly the chapter on religious freedom, for ignoring this last point, that congregational church government prevents religious hierarchies from influencing government and enforcing conformity. On pp. 255 and 256 of that work he noted only the role of infant baptism in undermining religious freedom.

⁵¹Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 138.

salvation. Second, believers alone are included in a true church. Third, a true church must hold to the true doctrine of Christ. Though he did not descend into the particulars of determining how much error could prevail in a true church, he made clear that a true church would be pure in every area of doctrine and practice. Fourth, he said, a true church possesses a legitimate ministry, men who are converted, called of God, and acknowledged by other ministers and by the church. Finally, a true church possesses “a Gospel government.” By this he meant especially congregational church government. He concluded, “These characteristics are essential. If any of them are wanting, to an ecclesiastical body, it cannot be a true Church.”⁵² The result of these principles, as he said in another sermon, was that, “the Baptist church presents the true scriptural, and apostolic model of the visible church of Christ, and this can be affirmed of no other church now existing.”⁵³ Accordingly, Howell did not consider Pedobaptist congregations true visible churches, because they lacked the essential marks.

Despite the injury done to the true church and the extinguishing of true churches due to Pedobaptist principles, Howell remained confident. God’s purpose for his church would prevail. Howell asserted, “But this impediment will be taken away, this baleful influence which has poisoned christianity, will be removed, and ‘the kingdoms of this world become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ.’”⁵⁴ Howell was confident that Baptist principles and Baptist churches would prevail. Fueled by Baptist doctrine, the church would serve as God’s instrument to convert the world.

⁵²Howell, “The Church,” *The Baptist*, 25 October 1845.

⁵³Howell, “The Church of Christ, Preached at the Dedication of Reed’s Church, Caroline County, Virginia,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 12:993, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

⁵⁴Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, 300.

Exclusivity and Mission amid Denominational Plurality

Howell and Inter-Denominational Relations

If Pedobaptist denominations are not true visible churches, how should Baptist churches relate to them with respect to fellowship and missions? What level of cooperation should Baptists' sustain with Pedobaptist churches, ministers, and congregants? Howell was sensitive to this issue throughout his ministry. He waded into the waters of controversy during his first pastorate. During the first few years of his ministry in Norfolk, Howell's success as the pastor of a growing church brought the Baptists of the city into increasing visibility. In 1830 he preached a series of sermons on the doctrine of baptism, of which the local press printed excerpts. One of these sermons, entitled "Plain Things for Plain Men: the Expediency of Infant Baptism Considered," appeared in pamphlet form later that year.⁵⁵ The next year Henry W. Ducachet, the rector of the Episcopalian Church, wrote a pastoral letter in response to Howell's sermon; in it he defended the Episcopalian practice of *sponsorship*, the baptism of infants under the sponsorship of parents who were church members. The letter fell into Howell's hands and on 1 December 1831 he issued a forty page response. Howell explained that though he felt the necessity of defending what he viewed to be the truth, he wanted to do so with courtesy. He said regarding Ducachet, "As a gentleman, and a Christian, there is no man for whom I entertain a higher esteem; I regret, therefore, the necessity which brings me into collision with his sentiments. These however I intend to discuss in that spirit of kindness, and affection, which I hope will ever characterise my associations with the various denominations among whom I may be called to reside."⁵⁶

⁵⁵Horne, "The Life and Work of R. B. C. Howell," 58-59.

⁵⁶Howell, *A Review of 'The Office of Sponsors in Baptism, Explained and Vindicated, in a Letter to the Congregation of Christ Church, By Henry W. Ducachet, A. M. Rector of that Church.'* By R. B. C. Howell, in a *Letter to the Church in Cumberland Street, Norfolk, VA. of which He is the Pastor* (Norfolk: Shields & Ashburn, 1831), 3. For an analysis of the controversy between Howell and Ducachet, see Horne, "The Life and Work of R. B. C. Howell," 57-67.

Howell's effort to stay faithful to this resolution is evident throughout his editorial career. In his opening editorial in the debut issue of *The Baptist*, Howell explained to his readers that he would "feel every respect for the cherished systems of the various denominations of christians among whom we are called to reside," while at the same time defending Baptist principles.⁵⁷ Similarly, after Howell reissued *The Baptist* in 1844, he said that his paper would take an uncompromising stand on the doctrines he thought Scripture taught. His paper would, however, "towards those who differ from us cultivate brotherly kindness, and maintain towards all christian denominations a courteous and respectful bearing." He further admonished his readers in the next issue "that all articles intended for The Baptist be marked with christian courtesy and love, towards every individual and denomination." Regarding those with whom his readers differed he advised, "We can never win them but by love and kindness."⁵⁸

Because he stood by the truth of this last statement, Howell sometimes expressed regret when his own conduct toward other Christian brothers did not exemplify love and kindness. In his last editorial for 1838, he summarized the contributions the paper had made over the past four years. Regarding his own conduct he asserted, "The spirit of our articles has not, probably, in all cases, been as Christlike as could have been desired." Indeed Howell's editorials and responses to letters during the antimission controversy, not to mention during his editorial war with J. B. McFerrin, occasionally contained the kind of sharpness he had said he wanted to avoid. Though he hoped his readers would understand that the heat of controversy and the fierceness of the opposition sometimes provoked harshness from him, he nonetheless hoped to "find a ready forgiveness of God and our brethren."⁵⁹

⁵⁷Howell, "Our Paper," January 1835.

⁵⁸Howell, "Salutatory," *The Baptist*, 29 June 1844; idem, "Be Kind, *The Baptist*, 31 August 1844.

⁵⁹Howell, "Close of the Year," *The Baptist*, December 1838.

Howell attempted to conduct his efforts as an author in the same manner of courtesy he attempted to maintain as an editor. His first book, *The Terms of Communion at the Lord's Table*, covered an issue of controversy both among fellow Baptists and between Baptists and Pedobaptists. Baptists disagreed among themselves over whether baptism should be a prerequisite to communion. Some Pedobaptists criticized those who took the strict communion position (that communion should only be served to those who had been baptized by immersion) for being schismatic and uncharitable toward their Pedobaptist brethren. By taking on a topic of this nature, Howell intentionally, again, waded into controversy. He stated in the introduction, however, that he intended to conduct his discussion "in the true spirit of our holy religion." As he had in numerous editorials, he assured his readers of the good will he held toward Christians of other denominations. He added that he wanted to avoid the extreme of papering over significant differences on the one hand and assuming that Baptists alone are Christians on the other. He explained, "We do not imagine that every excellence is confined to our own ranks, nor are we reluctant to acknowledge the children of God wherever they may be found. On the other hand, we deprecate, with equal earnestness, that spirit of *liberalism* which hesitates not to sacrifice the commandments of God to the courtesies of religious intercourse." He asked in conclusion only that the reader would patiently hear his arguments.⁶⁰

Howell wrote his other major controversial work, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, with the same desire to be forceful but respectful. He said, "It has been my purpose to present the truth fully, fairly, and candidly, but at the same time, with all proper respect for the opinions of others."⁶¹ This book, however, written while Howell was in Richmond, produced a vigorous response from Pedobaptists throughout the South. The

⁶⁰Howell, *The Terms of Communion at the Lord's Table*, 19-20.

⁶¹Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism*, xii.

editor of Virginia's Baptist paper, *The Religious Herald*, explained shortly after the publication of Howell's book that both Baptists and Pedobaptists were discussing the subject of baptism extensively. The pastors of both the First and Second Presbyterian churches preached on the subject, as did Howell. After preaching the sermon, Howell sent his notes upon request to the local daily paper, *The Richmond Republican*, which published it two days later, 10 February 1852.⁶² Leroy M. Lee, the editor of the city's Methodist paper, the *Richmond Christian Advocate*, began shortly thereafter to publish a review of Howell's book in weekly installments.⁶³ Fellow Methodist Thomas O. Summers, editor of the *Southern Christian Advocate* in Charleston, began a similar series and subsequently converted his review into a book on baptism.⁶⁴ According to Howell, Presbyterian papers "in Virginia, in Georgia, and elsewhere" had addressed *The Evils of Infant Baptism* in a similar manner.⁶⁵

As Howell examined some of these reviews, he found the respondents lacking in the courtesy he intended to show toward other denominations. In his first letter to Leroy Lee, Howell said, "Scarcely does our language supply a form of denunciation, however unmeasured; and epithet of reproach, however vulgar; or an expression of contempt, however low, that you have not applied to me personally, and repeated again and again, throughout the whole of these *forty eight* columns!" Lee had called Howell "this Balaam whose vocation it is to curse Israel," "this modern Saul," and "this Anabaptist animated by the spirit of his predecessors at Munster." In response to these

⁶²William Sands, "Baptism," *The Religious Herald*, 19 February 1852.

⁶³Howell wrote a response to Lee's review which appeared in *The Religious Herald* in seven installments beginning 25 March 1852 and running through 13 May 1852.

⁶⁴See Thomas O. Summers, *Baptism: A Treatise on the Nature, Perpetuity, Subjects, Administrator, Mode, and Use of the Initiating Ordinance of the Christian Church: with an Appendix, Containing Strictures on Dr. Howell's "Evils of Infant Baptism"* (Richmond, VA: Published by John Early for the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, 1852). Howell responded to Summers through two letters published in *The Religious Herald*. See Howell, "Thomas O. Summers," *The Religious Herald*, 4 November 1852 and 11 November 1852.

⁶⁵Howell, "Thomas O. Summers," *The Religious Herald*, 4 November 1852.

epithets, Howell replied, "Meantime, let me assure you that in this respect I shall not *imitate your example*." Howell claimed that his thirty years in the ministry had made him immune to such verbal assaults. Furthermore, he explained, his experience had shown him that debaters who use such tactics do injury both to themselves and their cause.⁶⁶ Reviewing Summers' response, Howell found the same tactic and some of the same epithets. He attempted to explain this similarity to Summers, saying, "This, however, may be, I suppose, attributed to the disposition great minds have to run in the same channel." Again Howell explained that such tactics only damaged the author's reputation and would not give Howell himself any pain. As he conducted his own response, he again attempted to reply forcefully but with courtesy.⁶⁷ This was his tactic during his first pastorate in Norfolk, during his editorial career in Tennessee, and during his career as an author. Howell endeavored to treat other denominations respectfully, even if he was not always successful at doing so.

Despite the courtesy Howell made a hallmark of his ministry, his theological convictions regarding the doctrine of the church limited the degree to which he would extend the right hand of fellowship to the ministers and laity of other denominations. Because Howell viewed baptism to be a prerequisite to communion at the Lord's Table, he held to the close communion position and refused to invite Pedobaptists to communion. Not everyone agreed, however, that baptism is a prerequisite to communion. Both English and American Baptists who embraced open communion found a champion in the Englishman Robert Hall, Jr, whose brilliant style Howell thought had aided the proliferation of his book, *On Terms of Communion*. Hall viewed

⁶⁶Howell, "Reply to the Editor's Review of the 'Evils of Infant Baptism,' *The Religious Herald*, 25 March 1852.

⁶⁷Howell, "Thomas O. Summers," *The Religious Herald*, 4 November 1852. A statement in Howell's second letter to Summers serves as an example of this forcefulness. Howell said, "My object in this present letter is to show you the singular barrenness of argument by which your 'Strictures' are characterized." Despite this plainness, Howell avoided *ad hominem* arguments and name calling. See Howell, "Thomas O. Summers," *The Religious Herald*, 11 November 1852.

communion as an ordinance given to the universal church. Thus, he considered only a profession of faith necessary in order to receive communion. Furthermore, he argued, open communion is mandated by the New Testament requirement to exercise love toward the brethren and toleration on errors not fundamental to salvation. Perhaps most importantly, Hall argued that no connection between baptism and communion exists according to the New Testament evidence.⁶⁸

Howell wrote his defense of close communion, he said, because of the intensity of inter-denominational discussion in America and because of the popularity and persuasiveness of Robert Hall.⁶⁹ At the outset of his discussion Howell distinguished between Christian communion and sacramental communion. Christian communion, he said, exists between all who love the Redeemer and involves prayer, conversation, and cooperation for the benefit of one another and the salvation of sinners. Sacramental communion, however, involves the corporate participation of believers in the Lord's Supper.⁷⁰ The key point at issue, as Howell understood it, was whether Jesus Christ had established the terms of communion for the church. If Christ has established the terms of communion, he argued, the church could not either enact or substitute any additional

⁶⁸See Robert Hall, Jr., *On Terms of Communion* (Philadelphia: Anthony Finley, 1816); idem, *The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall, A. M.* (New York: J. & J. Harper, 1833), 1:283-362. Hall also wrote a reply to Joseph Kinghorn's response to his book, *A Reply to the Rev. Joseph Kinghorn, Being a Further Vindication of the Practice of Free Communion*, found in 1:391-504. Howell commented on "the charm of [Hall's] authority" in *The Terms of Communion at the Lord's Table*, 14.

⁶⁹Howell, *The Terms of Communion at the Lord's Table*, 13-20. Throughout the work, Howell acknowledged his dependence upon several British Baptist works on communion. In defense of close communion Howell utilized Abraham Booth, *A Vindication of the Baptists from the Charge of Bigotry in Refusing Communion at the Lord's Table to Paedobaptists* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1849). The ABPS and its predecessor, the Baptist General Tract Society, reprinted the work numerous times. It was originally published in England in 1778 under the title *An apology for the Baptists. In which they are vindicated from the imputation of laying an unwarrantable stress on the ordinance of baptism*. Howell also used Joseph Ivimey, *Baptism the Scriptural and Indispensable Qualification for Communion at the Lord's Table* (London: J. Offor, 1824); Joseph Kinghorn, *Baptism, A Term of Communion at the Lord's Supper* (Norwich, UK: Bacon, Kinnebrook, & Co., 1816); idem, *A Defence of 'Baptism a Term of Communion': in Answer to the Rev. Robert Hall's Reply* (Norwich, UK: Wilkin and Youngman, 1820).

⁷⁰Howell, *The Terms of Communion at the Lord's Table*, 23-24.

laws. Christ in fact did prescribe the terms of communion in the Great Commission. In this text, Howell argued, Christ commanded a series of duties in a specified order—first preach the gospel, then baptize, and finally make disciples. He asserted, “The order of the duties is as imperative as the duties themselves.”⁷¹ Furthermore, in the book of Acts, the Jerusalem church only communed with those who had received baptism. Moreover, the churches in Paul’s ministry always baptized new converts, thus indicating that they did not commune with those who were unbaptized.⁷²

Having argued that Christ had set the terms of communion, Howell proceeded to address the arguments made by Robert Hall. After offering a refutation of Hall’s biblical arguments, Howell asserted that the call to brotherly love and toleration toward erring brethren did not extend toward areas of clear divine law. Howell advised his readers, “The points of difference between you, if subversive of no existing divine law, may be safely left to your own discretion.”⁷³ The terms of communion, however, did not fall into this category. Thus, Howell concluded, Baptists are not being schismatic when they withhold communion from Pedobaptists. Christ had commanded that baptism precede communion, and true baptism can only be the baptism of a believer by immersion. Though Howell attempted to maintain a respectful relationship with Pedobaptists, he was convinced that an unbiblical doctrine of baptism prevented them from being able to participate in the Lord’s Supper with Baptists.

Howell also thought that the Pedobaptist doctrine of baptism, among other unbiblical practices, invalidated their claim to be a true church. As his sermon entitled “The Church,” indicated, he did not view Pedobaptist churches as true visible churches since they lacked the scriptural practice of believer’s baptism and the scriptural model of church government. Regarding the ministry, he did not want to imply that Baptist

⁷¹Ibid., 40.

⁷²Ibid., 41-50.

⁷³Ibid., 89.

ministers were superior in character or giftedness to Pedobaptist ministers. In a conciliatory tone, he stated, “We concede to our brethren equality with us, in personal religion, in love for the cause of Christ, in readiness to labor for the salvation of men, in deep sincerity, and in other christian qualities.”⁷⁴ Nonetheless, he declared that the authority and rights of Baptist ministers are superior to those of Pedobaptist ministers by virtue of their entrance into membership through scriptural baptism, their appointment to office by a legitimate source—the church and a presbytery of ministers—and the role they serve in the body (for unlike Presbyterian, Episcopal, and Methodist ministers they do not assume the power of legislators and ecclesiastical courts). As Howell presented these arguments in an ordination sermon in Clarksville, Tennessee, he realized that these statements brought him close to a denial of the legitimacy of the ordination of Pedobaptist ministers. Howell attempted to deflect the argument by clarifying, “I do not say that they are invalid. That is no business of mine; but I well know that they have no countenance in the word of God.” Likewise, he would not say that Pedobaptist ministers were not members of a visible church: “That is their own affair.”⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Howell did not attempt to argue for the legitimacy of Pedobaptist ordinations either.

Howell sought to maintain a cordial relationship with Pedobaptists, including what he called “Christian communion,” which involved praying together, conducting edifying conversation, and cooperating with one another for the progress of the gospel. At the same time, however, Howell thought Pedobaptists were unable to partake of

⁷⁴Howell, “Ministerial Ordination,” *The Baptist Preacher* New Series (August 1847): 140.

⁷⁵Ibid. Howell made a similar statement to the 1855 annual meeting of the Dover Association, of which his Richmond congregation was a member. In a sermon on the need for a united ministry, he asked, “Are all those who profess to be his ministers, *one* ministry? Taking them all of every denomination, are they united in any gospel sense? United! Could men well be more widely separated? How unlike! How discordant! How inimical! Are they notwithstanding, all the ministry of Christ? Can this be possible? If not, and Christ has a ministry, and but one ministry, who and where are they?” Again he stopped short of saying Pedobaptist ministers were not legitimate and authorized ministers of the gospel. Based on the leading questions he asked here, he evidently recognized that his logic implied the illegitimacy of Pedobaptist ordinations. See Howell, “Ministerial Union,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 15:128-29, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

sacramental communion with Baptists, did not possess true visible churches, and were at best irregularly ordained. Despite Howell's conviction that Pedobaptist churches were not true churches, however, he stopped short of saying Pedobaptist ministers were illegitimate or had no right to preach the gospel. This conviction, he thought, would seriously disrupt the church's mission to convert the world to pure gospel principles.

Landmarkism and Missions

Other Baptists within Howell's sphere of influence had no problem arguing that the ordination and gospel ministry of Pedobaptist ministers was illegitimate, a conviction that led to consequences which Howell considered a threat to the mission of the church. James R. Graves, Amos Cooper Dayton, and James M. Pendleton, known as the "Great Triumvirate" of the Landmark movement, endured opposition from Howell as they propounded principles which he thought brought confusion to Baptist churches. Graves, originally from Vermont, moved to Nashville in 1845 and joined the First Baptist Church. Shortly thereafter, on 2 November 1845, he became the pastor of Second Baptist Church. Howell presided over the installation service when Graves assumed the pastorate.⁷⁶ In 1846, Graves became the assistant editor of *The Baptist* under Howell, and in 1849 he resigned his pastoral duties and edited the paper full time. Shortly after beginning his work with the *The Baptist* the title of the paper became *The Tennessee Baptist* and Graves took on the majority of the editorial duties. Howell officially resigned as editor of the paper in 1848 and the Tennessee Baptist Education Society put Graves completely in charge. From the beginning of Graves' time as editor, he included articles of a controversial nature and drew the fire of Methodist and Presbyterian editors. According to his own account, Graves soon "commenced agitating the question of alien immersions, and the propriety of Baptists recognizing, by any act, ecclesiastical or

⁷⁶Howell preserved his brief notes from that occasion. See Howell, "Installation of J. R. Graves, A. M., as Pastor of the Second Church, Nashville," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 3:186-190, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

ministerial, Pedobaptist societies or preachers as *churches* or ministers of Christ.”⁷⁷ The combative tone which many associated with Graves’ editorial career was evident even at this early period.⁷⁸

Graves was concerned about the dangers he perceived to be inherent in openness toward the legitimacy of other denominations and attempted to rally his constituents at a gathering in Cotton Grove, Tennessee on 24 June 1851. At that meeting Graves asked five questions which came to define the Landmark movement:

1st. Can Baptists, consistently with their principles or the Scriptures, recognize those societies not organized according to the pattern of the Jerusalem Church, but possessing a different *government*, different *officers*, a different class of *members*, different *ordinances*, *doctrines* and *practices*, as churches of Christ?

2d. Ought they to be called gospel churches or churches in a religious sense?

3d. Can we consistently recognize the ministers of such irregular and unscriptural bodies as gospel ministers in their official capacity?

4th. Is it not virtually recognizing them as official ministers to invite them into our pulpits, or *by any other act that would or could be construed* into such a recognition?

5th. Can we consistently address as *brethren* those professing Christianity, who not only have not the doctrine of Christ and walk not according to his commandments, but are arrayed in direct and bitter opposition to them?⁷⁹

Graves answered each question negatively except the fourth. In July of that year, the Big Hatchie Association in Tennessee entertained these same questions and adopted a resolution which affirmed Graves’ position.⁸⁰ As the questions and answers indicate, Graves not only asserted the illegitimacy of Pedobaptist ordinations, something Howell was unwilling to assert plainly. He considered any invitation of a Pedobaptist to preach in a Baptist pulpit to be an act of approval of their church’s irregular government.

Though Graves had promoted these views in the Southwest through the pages of *The Tennessee Baptist*, the Landmark views came to the attention of a wider audience

⁷⁷J. R. Graves, *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?*, 2nd ed. (Memphis: Baptist Book House, 1880), xi.

⁷⁸James E. Tull, *High Church Baptists in the South: The Origin, Nature, and Influence of Landmarkism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2000), 2-3.

⁷⁹Graves, *Old Landmarkism: What Is It?*, xi-xii.

⁸⁰See also Tull, *High Church Baptists in the South*, 3-4.

through the publication in 1854 of James M. Pendleton's tract, *An Old Landmark*, later reissued as *An Old Landmark Re-set*. Pendleton, an associate of Graves, based the pamphlet upon Graves' fourth question in the Cotton Grove Resolutions: "Ought Baptists to invite Pedobaptists to preach in their pulpits?" In answering the question, Pendleton drew upon an argument made by Edward Dorr Griffin, a Congregationalist scholar who served as President of Williams College in Massachusetts (1821-1836). Writing to a Baptist on the subject of communion, Griffin stated that he agreed with the advocates of close communion that baptism is the ordinance which initiates an individual into the visible church, that without the ordinance of baptism no visible church can exist, and that a church ought not to commune with one who is not baptized.⁸¹ Griffin, of course, disagreed regarding what should constitute Christian baptism. Surprisingly, Pendleton agreed with Griffin's assertions despite his definition of baptism. In fact, Pendleton said later in the pamphlet that Griffin "furnished the premises from which my conclusion is drawn."⁸² Based on the premise supplied by Griffin, Pendleton concluded that baptism is essential to the existence of the visible church and that Pedobaptists do not have the ordinance of baptism since they do not have the proper subjects or mode of baptism. Therefore, he argued, Pedobaptists "have no churches among them."⁸³

Next Pendleton addressed the issue of authority. He argued that churches alone can rightly confer upon individuals the authority to preach the gospel, and since Pedobaptist ministers are not members of churches, they have no legitimate authority to preach the gospel. Pendleton asked, "Are we at liberty to bid those men 'God speed' and aid them in deceiving the world, by acknowledging their societies as churches, and

⁸¹James M. Pendleton, *An Old Landmark Re-set* (Nashville: Southwestern Publishing House, 1857), 4-5. See also Edward Dorr Griffin, *Griffin's Letter to Deacon Hurlbut, on the Subject of Open Communion* (Williamstown, MA: R. Bannister, 1829). Several Baptist works dealing with the communion issue also included a reprint of Griffin's letter.

⁸²Pendleton, *An Old Landmark Re-set*, 53.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 9.

themselves as veritable gospel ministers, who invert the order established by the Head of the church?”⁸⁴ Pendleton reasoned from this that if Pedobaptist preachers do not belong to the church and are not legitimate ministers of the gospel, Baptist ministers should not recognize them as such by calling on them to preach. Though everyone ought to pray, he concluded, calling on Pedobaptist preachers to pray from the pulpit would also involve an implicit recognition of their legitimacy. Thus, Baptists should avoid this practice also.⁸⁵ Finally, Pendleton argued, baptism is a prerequisite both to communion and to preaching the gospel. Therefore, he thought, Baptists who argued for close communion are inconsistent if they invite Pedobaptist ministers to preach.⁸⁶

Pendleton’s tract was consistent with the position taken by Graves in the Cotton Grove resolutions. Both Pendleton and Graves considered the doctrine of believer’s baptism a crucial component for a true church. Based upon this reasoning, both concluded that Pedobaptist ordinations were illegitimate, since legitimate ordinations can only come from a true church. Pendleton drew a further conclusion beyond what Graves articulated in his resolution when he argued that the preaching of the gospel is a task which only a true visible church can assign. Based on this, he concluded that Pedobaptists had no right to preach the gospel. Lastly, both concluded that inviting Pedobaptists to preach in a Baptist pulpit implied an approval of the legitimacy of their churches. Thus, the Landmarkers concluded, between Baptists should avoid pulpit affiliation with Pedobaptists.

Howell, who was serving in Richmond at the time of the pamphlet’s publication, did not immediately respond to Pendleton or Graves. Howell apparently shared in the opinion he later ascribed to the “well read and thinking men” of the

⁸⁴Ibid., 11.

⁸⁵Ibid., 13.

⁸⁶Ibid., 17.

Convention, that the churches would realize within a few years that these Landmarkers “had really been pursuing a phantom which existed only in their own clouded imaginations.” These “conservative brethren” were disappointed, for Landmarkism did not go away. Only later, he added, did John L. Dagg “overthrow and annihilate” the Landmark position in his *Manual of Church Order*, but this came too late to prevent damage to the churches of the Southwest.⁸⁷

Despite Howell’s despondency over the inability of the “conservative brethren” to mount an offensive against Graves and Pendleton, several responses appeared in the months following the publication of Pendleton’s tract. W. W. Everts, the pastor of Walnut Street Baptist Church in Louisville, Kentucky, issued a substantive critique of *An Old Landmark Re-set* in January 1855. Pendleton’s argument, he argued, suffered from two major fallacies. First, Pendleton confounded the essence of the church with its form. The primary and scriptural distinction of a church, Everts argued, was that it is an assembly of believers. Proper government and discipline are necessary in order for a church to be pure, but not in order for it to be a true church. Following Pendleton’s logic, which Everts argued Pendleton had fallaciously borrowed from Griffin, a church could as easily lose its claim to legitimacy through lack of faith, zeal, or pure discipline. The second fallacy Everts detected was that Pendleton assumed that preaching is exclusively an official act. The words used for preaching in the New Testament—*κηρυσσω*, *ευαγγελιζω*, *μαθητευω*, and *διδασκω*, and their noun forms—refer to any kind of proclamation of the gospel and not only to an official exercise of preaching. Based on New Testament usage, therefore, all Christians have the duty to proclaim the gospel.⁸⁸ Everts concluded, “It is a strange assumption that this new high church dogma

⁸⁷Howell, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee,” vol. 2. Typescript 2:139. See John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology: A Treatise on Church Order* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1859; reprint Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990).

⁸⁸W. W. Everts, “The Old Landmark Discovered,” *The Christian Repository* 37 (January 1855): 22-28.

should be claimed as an old landmark of our denominational estate. We regard it rather as a new stake, which can be set down and maintained only in sectarian arrogance.”⁸⁹

Other responses to Pendleton’s tract came within a few months. J. L. Burrows, editor of the *American Baptist Memorial*, published in Richmond, Virginia, briefly reviewed Pendleton’s tract the next month, February 1855, and stated, “There is no necessary scriptural connection between baptism and preaching.” Pendleton noticed the brief statement and sent a series of questions to Burrows through the columns of the *Tennessee Baptist*. Wanting to avoid polemical exchanges in his journal, Burrows briefly addressed the questions, concluding like Everts that the term “church” should be applied to any body of believers, whether it is “irregular and defective” or not. Furthermore, drawing upon Philippians 1:15-18 and Mark 9:4 and 9, he argued that all believers have the responsibility to proclaim the gospel.⁹⁰ J. E. Farnham, a professor at Georgetown College in Kentucky, wrote a series of essays published in *The Tennessee Baptist* during the summer of 1855 under the pseudonym “Layman” in which he critiqued Pendleton’s tract. Like Everts, Farnham drew attention to the New Testament usage of words for preaching and argued that preaching is not the sole responsibility of ordained clergy.⁹¹

John L. Dagg’s review of Pendleton’s tract, which Howell thought had annihilated Pendleton’s argument, appeared in his *Manual of Church Order*, published in 1858. Regarding Pendleton’s question, whether Baptists ought to recognize Pedobaptist preachers as ministers of the gospel, Dagg noted that the question is relevant for all Christians. If Pedobaptist preachers are not sent by Christ to preach the gospel, then no one, whether Baptist or otherwise, should recognize them. Next, Dagg critiqued

⁸⁹Ibid., 34.

⁹⁰J. L. Burrows, “An Old Landmark Re-set,” *American Baptist Memorial* 14 (February 1855): 61; idem, “An Old Landmark Re-set,” *American Baptist Memorial* 14 (March 1855): 76-77.

⁹¹See “Layman” [J. E. Farnham], *The Tennessee Baptist*, 21 July 1855; idem, “The Old Landmark Question,” *The Tennessee Baptist*, 18 August 1855. Pendleton identified “Layman” as Farnham in an appendix to *An Old Landmark Re-set*, p. 45.

Pendleton's premises, which Pendleton professed to have drawn from Griffin's letter. Dagg complained that Pendleton did not use Scripture to supply the premises or even quote Scripture in the tract. Furthermore, Dagg explained, when Griffin argued that baptism initiates the Christian into the church, he referred not to the local church but to what Dagg termed "the visible church catholic."⁹² He had defined the visible church catholic earlier in the book as referring to an external organization beyond a local church composed of all professing believers.⁹³ In that section of his work, Dagg had argued that while the New Testament uses the word "church" at times to refer to all believers on earth, this church has no external organization. Therefore, some who are members of this church are unbaptized. If this doctrine of the universal church is true, Dagg reasoned, it cannot be reconciled with Griffin's statement that without baptism one cannot be a church member. Pendleton's use of the word "church," borrowing from Griffin's terminology, was imprecise. Dagg explained, "In some way, its signification extends beyond the bounds of a single local church; and yet it is not the true universal church, 'composed of all the saved.' But the 'church' which appears in the premises and reasonings of the Landmark is, at best, only a Baptist modification of the visible church catholic."⁹⁴

After tackling Pendleton's premises, Dagg addressed the main argument of the pamphlet: whether Baptists ought to recognize Pedobaptist preachers as ministers of the gospel. While other writers had brought forth Scripture references to demonstrate that all believers are obligated to proclaim the gospel, Dagg argued that ministers are officers of the universal church. The Holy Spirit calls them to their task; thus they do not depend upon the authority of a local church to preach the gospel. Accordingly, Pedobaptist ministers should preach, even if they are in error with regard to church polity.

⁹²Dagg, *Manual of Theology: A Treatise on Church Order*, 288-89.

⁹³Ibid., 130.

⁹⁴Ibid., 290.

Furthermore, Dagg continued, inviting a Pedobaptist minister into a Baptist pulpit does not necessarily implicate the Baptist minister or the congregation in Pedobaptist error. Ministers who define their own position and maintain it faithfully will be in little danger of having their position misconstrued. Dagg, therefore, criticized the premises of Pendleton's argument more deeply than some who had gone before him and argued for the validity of Pedobaptist ministers based upon their call by the Holy Spirit, not based on the ordination of a local church.

Howell's systematic response to the Landmark position did not come for some time after the publication of *An Old Landmark Re-set* and the responses of Everts, Dagg, and others. Howell included a lengthy refutation of Pendleton's tract as chapter twenty-two of his "Memorial of the First Baptist Nashville," written during the Civil War but never published. By 1858, however, and before the publication of Dagg's *Manual of Church Order*, Howell had developed an opinion regarding the pamphlet's arguments. In a letter written to John A. Broadus, then of Charlottesville, Virginia, Howell asked Broadus to read over the pamphlet and send him his thoughts on the arguments. He stated that he did not want Broadus' evaluation in order to publish it, but only to use its arguments to improve his own, for, he said, if he entered into the discussion, his arguments "must be made thorough, perfect, unanswerable." In the letter Howell offered briefly his own thoughts on Pendleton's arguments:

Are not the premises in the argument loosely stated, partly true, and partly not true? Does not the writer use the words preaching, the ministry, &c, as convertible terms, and thus embarrass himself and convey false ideas, as if preaching was a word to convey a conception of all the official duties of the ministry? To what extent, if at all, are Pedobaptist churches, gospel churches, and why? To what extent, and why, are Pedobaptist ministers, gospel ministers? When you preach for them, or invite them to preach for you, or mingle with them in preaching, to what extent, if at all, do you recognize their baptism, their church membership, their ordination &c.?⁹⁵

⁹⁵R. B. C. Howell, Nashville, to John A. Broadus, Charlottesville, 19 January 1858, Special Collections, James P. Boyce Centennial Library, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville.

Though Howell did not answer all of these questions, he intimated that Pendleton wrongly identified preaching as an official duty of the ministry. His thoughts regarding the weakness of Pendleton's thesis, then, were consistent with the arguments made earlier by Everts, Burrows, and Farnham.

Howell's full response to Pendleton's pamphlet may not have been perfect and unanswerable, but it was thorough, arguably even hair-splitting, in certain respects. Other respondents had attempted to isolate the key theological issues in the disagreement and present counter evidence to Pendleton's position. Howell, however, declared that the question which Pendleton asked at the beginning, the question which Pendleton attempted to answer in the pamphlet, was "irremediably indefinite."⁹⁶ Specifically, Howell criticized Pendleton's misuse of the word "ought." Ought, he argued, implies duty, and no one would want to argue that Baptists are duty bound to invite Pedobaptists to preach in their pulpits. Furthermore, Howell argued that Pendleton shifted the question to whether Baptists ought to recognize Pedobaptist preachers as gospel ministers. This question also is misleading, Howell asserted, because Baptists are not required to pass judgment on this issue. In language reminiscent of his 1847 ordination sermon, he stated, "Whether they are gospel ministers or not, is their own business not ours. We are not appointed judges in these matters." Having "cleared away the immense amount of rubbish that lay upon the subject," Howell identified the real question of the pamphlet as "not whether Pedobaptists really are gospel ministers, but whether we should recognize them as such."⁹⁷

After extensively criticizing the logic and choice of words in Pendleton's question, Howell argued what others before him had argued, that Pendleton had erred in assuming that preaching is an official act which only those who have received a

⁹⁶Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 2. Typescript 2:140.

⁹⁷Ibid., 147-48.

legitimate ordination can perform. Next, Howell noted that Pendleton thought a denial of pulpit affiliation to be a logical corollary to close communion. If a faulty view of baptism disqualifies someone from communion with Baptists, shouldn't it disqualify them from filling a Baptist pulpit? Though others responded directly to this criticism, Howell merely argued that the Landmarkers themselves could not live up to the logic of this position. For example, Pendleton himself had recently filled a Pedobaptist pulpit and had allowed the Methodist Annual Conference to use his.⁹⁸ Worse than this, Howell continued, Pendleton erred in basing his argument upon premises drawn from Edward Dorr Griffin. Following Dagg, Howell criticized Pendleton for borrowing premises from Griffin regarding the church and applying them to a local church, when Griffin actually intended "the church" to refer to "the visible church catholic," a visible church composed of all the saved. This doctrine, Howell said, "lies at the very foundation of nearly all the evils with which unhappily [Pedobaptists] afflicted the world."⁹⁹ While Pendleton explicitly denied the doctrine of the universal visible church, he borrowed Griffin's assertions without noticing that Griffin had assumed this doctrine in his statements.¹⁰⁰ Since Pendleton had explicitly stated that he based his entire argument on the premises he borrowed from Griffin, Howell drew the conclusion that Pendleton had "confessedly based his Landmark argument upon a fiction."¹⁰¹

⁹⁸Ibid., 162. Dagg argued in response to Pendleton's argument that communion and preaching require different qualifications. Preaching is a spiritual act while the Lord's Supper is a ceremonial act. While the ceremony of baptism is necessary as a prerequisite of communion, it is not necessary as a prerequisite of preaching. See Dagg, *Manual of Theology: A Treatise on Church Order*, 293-94.

⁹⁹Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 2. Typescript 2:154.

¹⁰⁰Pendleton denied the doctrine of the universal visible church on p. 42. Griffin, in his letter, did not give any indication that he referred to a universal visible church. Howell and Dagg, however, were convinced that this doctrine was a factor Griffin's argument.

¹⁰¹Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 2. Typescript 2:155.

The danger, as Howell saw it, resulted from a lack of clarity regarding the definition of the church. As he explained it, Scripture speaks “of the kingdom of Christ upon earth, and the churches of Christ upon earth. These are by no means identical, and must not be confounded together.” The kingdom of Christ, he argued, is invisible. There are no ordinances or officers and there is no government. This kingdom is composed of all who have received regeneration. Baptism does not initiate anyone into this kingdom. The churches of Christ, however, have a system of government, officers, and ordinances, all of which Scripture prescribes. All of these churches are independent, yet have this system in common. They can be more or less pure. Unfortunately they are not composed only of the regenerate, though they are supposed to be. Baptism, finally, is the initiating ordinance into these churches. Pendleton had erred, Howell argued, by not clarifying the distinction between the kingdom and the churches. To what church does baptism initiate? Howell was concerned that Pendleton had stressed so strongly the role of baptism as an initiatory ordinance and had not clarified that it initiates one into a visible church, not the universal church. In this way Pendleton confused the role of baptism and the relationship between local churches and the kingdom of God, an odd thing for a Baptist to do.¹⁰² Thus, Howell thought Pendleton’s Landmark doctrine misunderstood the place of preaching in the church and the role of baptism as an entrance into the church.¹⁰³

¹⁰²Ibid. Typescript 2:155-58.

¹⁰³A comparison of the most substantial refutations of the Landmark arguments, those made by Everts, Dagg, and Howell, demonstrates that these three did not agree among themselves about every issue involved in the controversy. Everts, for instance, argued that an inaccurate view of baptism does not disqualify a congregation from consideration as a church. Howell, on the other hand, thought a proper view of baptism was essential for consideration as a true church. Dagg viewed the ordination of pastors as tied to the calling the Holy Spirit to office in the universal church. Howell never took recourse to that view when he considered the legitimacy of Pedobaptist ordinations. In fact, in his discussion on the kingdom and the church, Howell referred to the kingdom as having no government or officers. Howell did not consider Pedobaptist churches true churches and probably did not consider their ministers as legitimately ordained. Nevertheless, he showed respect to them as co-laborers for the gospel and encouraged their efforts to proclaim Christ.

Howell considered the errors of Landmarkism to have a negative effect upon the mission of the church. By stating that Pedobaptist ministers have no right to preach the gospel, Pendleton's doctrine left Baptists in the position of having to denounce their efforts at reaching the lost. Drawing upon Philippians 1:15-18 and Mark 9:4, 9, as Burrows had done, Howell argued that Jesus and the apostles refused to forbid the ministry of men whose conduct was in some sense unscriptural. If this was their policy, Baptists should follow them. Regarding Pedobaptist preachers, Howell asked, "Shall we proscribe such men? Would this be scriptural? No, let them, if they will, preach Christ. We lament their errors; we will, if we can, refute and counteract them. We will seek to win them to the whole truth; but we will not denounce them, and so alienate them, and thus destroy our own power to do them any good. In so far as they preach Christ we "rejoice, yea, and will rejoice."¹⁰⁴ The church's mission, Howell contended, was to reach the lost and correct and restore those who are in error. The Landmark doctrine alienated Baptists from those who erred, thus preventing Baptists from bringing them into purer fellowship. Furthermore, the Landmark doctrine encouraged Baptists to denounce Pedobaptists' efforts to reach the lost, something the church should never do.

Howell was convinced not only that the Landmark doctrine was detrimental to the church's mission, but also that the efforts of the Landmarkers had disrupted the church's mission. He concluded his review with this statement: "We here dismiss this book, with the painful consciousness that it has done in the Southwest an amount of injury that all our best efforts cannot repair in fifty years." This woeful result, Howell continued, was not due to the merits of the book, but to "the peculiar advocacy it has received." As Howell explained, "It inaugurated at its very inception, a period of fiery denunciation, individual proscription, and personal assaults, and detraction, wholly

¹⁰⁴Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 2. Typescript 2:164-65.

foreign to the religion of Christ.”¹⁰⁵ Howell considered Landmarkism to be a destructive force in the Southwest. Because of their distasteful belligerency, its advocates had alienated Baptists from other denominations, frustrated careful attempts to bring Pedobaptists into a proper understanding of church government, and stolen from Tennessee the zeal for benevolent work that Howell, Whitsitt, and others had labored to build. Howell continued, “And what effect has the Landmark had upon our denominational schools, male and female, in Middle Tennessee, and North Alabama? Ten years since we had many, and they were all prosperous. Where are they now? Except a female school at Winchester, belonging to Z. E. Graves, a brother of J. R. Graves, a pet of the reformers, and specially [*sic*] of the Tennessee Baptists, they have all gone down. Not one of them remains.” The pastors of Middle Tennessee, he stated, were almost entirely Landmarkers, and since 1858 contributions to the work of the Southern Baptist Convention had decreased. The Landmark doctrine and the zeal with which its supporters had put it forward had brought dreadful consequences on the mission work of Baptists in the South.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵Ibid. Typescript 2:161.

¹⁰⁶Ibid. Typescript 2:164-66. Howell also had a very personal confrontation with the advocates of Landmarkism. J. R. Graves and A. C. Dayton, who along with Pendleton were the movement’s main leaders, were members of First Baptist Nashville. In addition, Dayton was also the Secretary of the Bible Board of the SBC. Since Howell was the SBC President, he was an *ex officio* member of that board. In April 1858, after pressure from Board members who were concerned that Dayton was using his position to promote Landmarkism, Dayton resigned and Graves issued a stinging rebuke aimed at the Board, partly directed at Howell, his pastor. After failed attempts at reconciliation by the congregation, First Baptist tried Graves for slander and excluded him in a trial that lasted from 12-18 October 1858. Eventually, the congregation excluded many of Graves’ supporters as well, a total of forty-seven. The controversy embroiled the Concord Association, the General Association of Tennessee, and in June 1859, the Southern Baptist Convention. When the dust settled, both the Concord Association and the General Association had excluded First Baptist and the church was in cooperation only with the SBC. Though reelected to the Presidency of the SBC in 1859, Howell immediately resigned in order to spare the convention further controversy. The most complete account of the controversy is Kenneth Vaughn Weatherford, “The Graves-Howell Controversy” (Ph.D. diss., Baylor University, 1991). For an analysis of the theological issues which arose from the controversy, see Hilton, “Robert Boyte Crawford Howell’s Contribution to Baptist Ecclesiology,” 139-219.

Conclusion

Throughout his ministry, R. B. C. Howell was concerned about the mission of the church. Groups that did not properly integrate God's sovereignty and human responsibility ran the risk of compromising that mission. Therefore, Howell was concerned to articulate the doctrines of election, reprobation, regeneration, justification, sanctification, and the extent of the atonement so that Baptists did not misunderstand God's sovereign prerogative in salvation or humanity's responsibility to seek reconciliation with the creator. Howell did not believe, however, that God intended humans to carry out his plan of redemption individually. He was convinced that the church held a vital place in God's plan to reconcile the world to himself, and thus that believers must properly understand the Bible's teaching on the church in order to fulfill their responsibility to engage in God's mission.

Through his books and sermons, Howell instructed his audience that God intended to use the church to convert the world. The church would triumph, he taught, and the pure gospel would prevail on the earth. As always, however, Howell did not neglect the use of means. In the midst of conflict with antission Baptists, Howell explained how churches should organize and cooperate to accomplish the purpose of converting the world. In the midst of tension with Pedobaptists, Howell taught that the triumph of the gospel would occur through the truest expression of the gospel, Baptist churches. Through polemical exchanges with Landmarkers, Howell taught that while Baptist churches are the most consistent, their claim to be the true church does not give them a warrant to discourage the mission work of other groups. The best way to promote the triumph of the gospel through Baptist churches was not to alienate Pedobaptists, but to convince them of their error while appreciating the fact that many of them preach the gospel.

Howell, therefore, was convinced that a sound mission theology must include a sound ecclesiology. Furthermore, he was unashamed to argue that the only sound

ecclesiology was Baptist ecclesiology. God did not intend to accomplish his mission without Baptist churches. As the next chapter will show, Howell's postmillennial eschatology, combined with an optimism that was characteristic of American culture in the antebellum era, led him to conclude that Baptist churches would triumph and motivated him to call Baptists to engage in benevolent enterprises that would spread the gospel and change the culture.

CHAPTER 6

THE TRIUMPH OF THE KINGDOM: MILLENNIALISM AND MISSIONS

O scenes surpassing fable, and yet true,
Scenes of accomplish'd bliss! which who can see,
Though but in distant prospect, and not feel
His soul refresh'd with foretaste of the joy?

William Cowper, *The Task*, VI.759-762¹

The scenes of accomplished bliss, so eloquently sketched by Cowper, served both as inspiration and motivation for R. B. C. Howell as he contemplated the task God had given the church. During his ministry in Norfolk, Howell spoke to his church about the need to spread the gospel overseas. Amos Sutton, an English Baptist Missionary in Orissa, India, had brought to America two statues which a British officer had taken from a Buddhist temple in Rangoon, Burma. Howell set the statues before his congregation and lectured on idolatry and the Buddhist religion. His purpose was to “lay the case of the heathen world before you and give you an opportunity of doing something to aid in spreading the gospel in those benighted lands.” As Howell closed the message, he turned the attention of the congregation back to the statues:

Look again at these stupid idols; look at the degraded, deluded, perishing, hundreds of millions of your fellow human beings going before God in all their guilt. Look up to the Saviour, who died for you, and for them, and has given you his blessed Gospel, and commanded that it be conveyed to every creature. And resolve in the strength of God that you will not rest, until—

“One song employ all nations,
And all cry, worthy the lamb &c.”²

¹William Cowper, *Poems, by William Cowper, Esq., together with His Posthumous Poetry, and A Sketch of His Life by John Johnson, LL. D.* (Boston: Phillips, Sampson, & Co., 1849), 2:143.

²R. B. C. Howell, “Lecture on Buddhism,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 14:152, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

The line at the end is from Cowper's *The Task*. As Howell attempted to inspire in the Cumberland Street Church zeal for the spread of the gospel he used the words of Cowper to remind them that the gospel would triumph on the earth and that the church would be the instrument to accomplish this. For that reason the congregation should not rest until "One song employs all nations; and all cry / 'Worthy the Lamb, for he was slain for us!'"³ Howell's conviction that the gospel would triumph on the earth and lead to the conversion of the nations provided for him another point of integration for the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. This doctrine fueled his involvement in numerous denominational enterprises such as foreign missions, ministerial education, ministerial financial support, denominational publishing endeavors, lay education, and Sunday schools. In addition, his millennial commitments provided motivation for his efforts to strengthen the American republic. In order to accomplish this goal, Howell advocated political involvement, temperance societies, the YMCA, and a spiritually focused family unit which included the institution of slavery. This chapter will elucidate Howell's view on the millennium and demonstrate the impetus this view of eschatology provided for the numerous missionary and benevolent enterprises he spent his entire ministry promoting.

Ushering in the Millennium

Cowper's poem looks forward to an era of unsurpassed bliss, an era which witnesses the universal spread of the gospel. In the lines of book six of *The Task*, Cowper celebrated the time when the inhabitants of Arabia, India, Ethiopia, and Java would spread their hands and worship the Lord: "From ev'ry clime they come/ To see thy beauty, and to share the joy,/ O Sion! an assembly such as Earth/ Saw never, such as

³Cowper, *The Task*, VI.791-92, in *Poems*, 2:144. Howell quoted these lines in other sermons as well. See, for instance, "Signs of the Times," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:918, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville; also several citations in "The Millennium," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:845-91.

Heav'n stoops down to see." Cowper's poem reflects a position known today as postmillennialism that includes the belief that Revelation 20:1-10 refers to a period of time before the final judgment, signified in the text as one thousand years, in which peace and prosperity will prevail upon the earth. In the latter days, before this millennium, the Holy Spirit will be poured out upon Jews and Gentiles, bringing in an age of peace and the conversion of the nations. After this period of peace on earth, Christ will return and commence the final judgment.⁴ Those who hold this position rely upon the Holy Spirit to usher in the millennium according to his timing, yet they often believe that the church is responsible through prayer, evangelism, benevolent work, and active citizenship to execute the tasks used by the Holy Spirit.

Postmillennialism in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

R. B.C. Howell and William Cowper were not the only believers in America and England respectively who held that improvements in human society would usher in the millennium. An author in a Presbyterian journal, the *American Quarterly Review*, argued in 1859 that postmillennialism was "the commonly received doctrine." Though this view had advocates in all periods, the author stated, one can find it advocated in the works of Englishmen Andrew Fuller, Moses Lowman, Daniel Whitby, and John Newton, and in the works of Americans Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Hopkins, and Joseph Bellamy. The author was aware that premillennial views had been prominent in seventeenth century England, particularly during the commonwealth era, and had received renewed interest more recently among a few groups in England and America. These groups, he assessed, influenced by their despair over the prospect of progress under the present

⁴For an account of postmillennial theology and exegesis in the English-speaking world since the English Reformation, see Iain H. Murray, *The Puritan Hope: A Study in Revival and the Interpretation of Prophecy* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1971). On pp. 57-82 of that work Murray, gives a detailed account of Puritan exegesis of Rom 11, demonstrating one key biblical locus for their views. From that chapter, particularly vv. 25-32, postmillennialists understood Paul to indicate that a widespread conversion of both Jews and Gentiles lay in the future.

dispensation and their anticipation of the return of Christ, had relaxed their exertion for the salvation of souls. The premillennial doctrine, he concluded, “has not been favorable to the cause of missions.” The author’s historical survey demonstrates a confidence in both the dominance of postmillennial thinking during the antebellum era and the superiority of that eschatological scheme for motivating mission work.⁵

While the author may or may not have been correct about the respective fruits of pre- and post-millennialism, he was well aware of his own context. Numerous contemporary scholars have noted the pervasive influence of postmillennial expectation among American Protestants prior to the Civil War.⁶ Postmillennialism thrived in America from the time of Jonathan Edwards, whom historian C. C. Goen called “America’s first major postmillennial thinker,” through the first decades of the twentieth century.⁷ Edwards’ postmillennial convictions developed over time. His first published work to elucidate a postmillennial hope was *The History of the Work of Redemption*, first

⁵“History of Opinions Respecting the Millennium,” *American Theological Review* 1 (November 1859): 652-55.

⁶For instance, James H. Moorhead, “Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought, 1800-1880,” *Journal of American History* 71 (December 1984): 525; Timothy L. Smith, “Righteousness and Hope: Christian Holiness and the Millennial Vision in America, 1800-1900,” *American Quarterly* 31 (Spring 1979): 21; Richard J. Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 1997), 3. Numerous scholars have written on postmillennialism in American history. For an account of postmillennialism which covers the entire period from Jonathan Edwards through the postmillennial views of late nineteenth century liberals, see Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968). For a short summary of the period, see Nancy Koester, “The Future in Our Past: Post-millennialism in American Protestantism,” *Word & World* 15 (Spring 1995): 137-44.

⁷C. C. Goen, “Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology,” *Church History* 28 (March 1959): 38. Goen’s statement can be misleading. One could get the impression that Edwards was the first American to hold to postmillennialism. Goen himself, however, indicated that some before Edwards held to postmillennialism, citing postmillennial language in the New England Congregationalists’ *Savoy Declaration* (1658). Nevertheless, Goen did not provide analysis of individual theologians from the seventeenth century. Despite this gap in analysis, Goen argued persuasively that Edwards did present adjustments to common postmillennial assumptions. Most importantly, Edwards argued that the sixth of seven vials had been poured out and that little remained to be accomplished before the advent of the millennium. Some earlier postmillennialists argued that the events of the book of Revelation had not proceeded quite as far. For further analysis of Edwards’ eschatology, see also Stephen J. Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 5, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 1-74.

delivered as sermons in 1739. In a later work, *An Humble Attempt* (1747), Edwards called upon his fellow New England clergymen to pray concertedly for an outpouring of the Spirit. Scripture promised, he declared, “a great advancement of the interest of religion and the kingdom of Christ in this world, by an abundant outpouring of the Spirit of God, far greater and more extensive than ever yet has been.” After laying out the nature of this future state as described in Scripture, Edwards concluded, “Surely ‘tis worth *praying* for.”⁸ While Edwards did not assert that the time of the millennium was near, he believed that the outpouring of the Spirit which would precede the millennium may be at hand.⁹ In his much beloved work, *An Account of the Life of the Late Reverend Mr. David Brainerd* (1749), Edwards related the passionate longing that Brainerd, a missionary to Indians, possessed for “the flourishing of Christ’s kingdom on earth,” even mere days before his untimely death.¹⁰ The work which would stoke the missionary fires for several generations closely associated mission work with the coming millennium.¹¹

Edwards’ views proved to be no passing theological fad. His successors in New England—Bellamy, Hopkins, and Timothy Dwight—echoed their predecessor’s convictions in their own writings.¹² Many Old and New School Presbyterians in the mid-nineteenth century, in both the North and the South, likewise exuded confidence in the

⁸Jonathan Edwards, *An Humble Attempt*, in *Apocalyptic Writings*, 329, 340.

⁹See Stein, “Editor’s Introduction,” 41-46.

¹⁰See for example Edwards’ funeral sermon for Brainerd, which is appended to the end of the Yale edition; Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, ed. Norman Pettit, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 7, ed. John E. Smith (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985), 551. For a discussion of the relationship between Edwards’ eschatology and the developing mission movement, see J. A. De Jong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea: Millennial Expectations in the Rise of Anglo-American Missions, 1640-1810* (Kampen: J. H. Kok, 1970), 124-37.

¹¹On the influence of Edwards’ account of Brainerd on the future mission movement, see Norman Pettit, “Editor’s Introduction,” in Jonathan Edwards, *The Life of David Brainerd*, 3-4; De Jong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, 136-37. On the association of the advent of the millennium with the mission movement in Brainerd’s diary, see especially De Jong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, 135-37.

¹²For an account of the millennial views of Hopkins, Bellamy, and Dwight, see Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation*, 57-63, 103-12.

progress of society toward the millennium.¹³ Methodists and Episcopalians also worked toward the coming millennium. Methodist Bishop Matthew Simpson, for example exclaimed, “A hundred years and the banner of the cross shall shine triumphant over every mountain top and every valley, and the islands of the sea shall give their treasures to Immanuel.”¹⁴ Baptists frequently asserted this hope as well. The committee on foreign missions of the Alabama Baptist Convention issued this report in 1837: “Heaven’s luminary is rising on all the world, and the Ottoman crescent, with the feeble lights of the pagan philosophers and modern reformers are gradually fading from the moral horizon. Shall any sleep on, heedless of the brightening glories of the millennial morn? May its rising beams fall on every eye, and arouse every sleeping soldier of the cross to effort and to arms!”¹⁵

These postmillennialists were convinced that the New Testament depicts an outpouring of the Spirit that will result in a massive conversion of Jews and Gentiles and a period of unparalleled peace on earth. Circumstances in their own day which seemed to indicate that human society was improving and the influence of Christianity was spreading bolstered their biblical convictions. Revivals had occurred frequently in America from the 1730s, when revival sparked in New England, to the eve of the Civil War, when a businessmen’s afternoon prayer meeting sparked a nationwide revival in 1858. These revivals had led to the conversion of countless Americans and the improvement of morals in the nation. The War for Independence had secured for America a government which many were confident would protect the freedoms of its

¹³For postmillennial views in antebellum Presbyterianism, see George M. Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience: A Case Study of Thought and Theology in Nineteenth-Century America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1970), 184-90; Jack P. Maddex, Jr., “Proslavery Millennialism: Social Eschatology in Antebellum Southern Calvinism,” *American Quarterly* 31 (Spring 1979): 46-62.

¹⁴Quoted in Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), 234.

¹⁵“Alabama Baptist Convention,” *The Christian Index*, 12 January 1837. The committee on foreign missions considered the influence of Islam and of secular philosophy to be diminishing.

citizens and provide a platform for the unhindered improvement of society. The mission movement, which began organizing in America at the turn of the nineteenth century, had made great strides by the 1830s. Also by the 1830s most of the denominations in America had made serious efforts to improve the education of both their clergy and laity through the founding of numerous denominational colleges. Finally, society was also improving through countless technological developments which were making life easier.¹⁶ The Bible seemed to support the coming of a golden age, and American history seemed to be proving that it was coming to pass.

As prominent as postmillennialism was in America, it was not merely an American phenomenon. Postmillennialism arose in England after the English Reformation, but it exerted a powerful influence on the missionary movement which arose among English evangelicals in the late eighteenth century, especially among the Baptists.¹⁷ Among the founders of the Baptist Missionary Society, organized on 2 October 1791, John Sutcliff, Andrew Fuller, and William Carey all looked forward to the fulfillment of Scripture promises in the conversion of the nations and the advent of the millennium.¹⁸ The writings of Jonathan Edwards profoundly influenced Sutcliff. As he

¹⁶Numerous scholars discuss the role these circumstances played in reinforcing postmillennial expectation in the antebellum period. See for example Koester, "The Future in Our Past," 137-44; Moorhead, "Between Progress and Apocalypse," 524-42; Carwardine, *Evangelicals and Politics in Antebellum America*, 3; Marsden, *The Evangelical Mind and the New School Presbyterian Experience*, 184-90.

¹⁷Thomas Brightman pioneered the postmillennial view among Englishmen with his popular commentary on Revelation, *Apocalypsis Apocalypseos*, published in 1609. Millennial speculation was high in England up through the end of the Commonwealth era in 1660. Some expositors espoused a premillennial view of the return of Christ and others a postmillennial view, but theologians on both sides agreed that the millennium lay in the future. For accounts of the surge of millennial expectation from 1600-1660, see Barry Howson, "Eschatology in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England," *The Evangelical Quarterly* 70 (1998): 325-50; De Jong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, 16-30, 36-43; Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 39-55. Despite the prominence of millennial speculation, many English pastors and theologians remained amillennial, a view promoted by Augustine which considered the thousand years of Rev 20 to refer to the present age of the church. Nevertheless, a large number, men like John Owen and John Cotton, followed Brightman and espoused postmillennialism. De Jong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, 36-40; Howson, "Eschatology in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England," 345.

¹⁸For accounts of postmillennial expectation amid the leaders of the Baptist Missionary Society, see De Jong, *As the Waters Cover the Sea*, 175-81, and Murray, *The Puritan Hope*, 131-55.

looked forward to the coming millennium, he anticipated the demise of Roman Catholicism, the proliferation of revival, and the conversion of the nations through the power of the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Andrew Fuller, whose three volume *Complete Works* became a much used resource among American Baptists during the antebellum period, presented a more detailed account of his millennial views in *Expository Discourses on the Apocalypse*, published in 1815. Through the course of his exposition, Fuller asserted that the church of his day was living under the period in which God pours out the seven vials of wrath upon the earth (Rev 16). This is a period, he explained, of warfare against the religion of Christ, a period in which “the most distinguished victories over error, superstition, and irreligion” will occur.²⁰ These victories will occur, he asserted, prior to the millennium and will help establish the glorious reign of Christ. As evidence that this was occurring during his time, Fuller pointed to recent wars, the proliferation of missionary and benevolent societies, the translation of Scripture into native tongues in Asia, the prevalence of evangelical preaching “not in one or two countries only, but almost everywhere,” and finally to the success of missionary work in India and South Africa.²¹

¹⁹For Sutcliff’s views on eschatology, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *One Heart and Soul: John Sutcliff of Olney, His Friends, and His Times* (Durham, UK: Evangelical Press, 1994), 154-63. Sutcliff’s postmillennialism is evident in two sermons: *Jealousy for the Lord of Hosts Illustrated* (London: W. Button, 1791) and *The Divinity of the Christian Religion Considered and Proved*, (Northampton, UK: T. Dicey and Co., 1797). Burdened by the need to pray for an outpouring of the Spirit in revival and conversion, Sutcliff also republished Edwards’ *An Humble Attempt*, though he distanced himself from some of Edwards’ eschatological speculations, stating regarding Edwards’ work that he did not consider himself “answerable for every sentiment it contains.” See Haykin, *One Heart and Soul*, 166. After reading Edwards’ work for the first time, Sutcliff called upon the churches of the Northamptonshire Association to commence holding prayer meetings for the proliferation of revival, the outpouring of the Spirit, and the conversion of the heathen.

²⁰Andrew Fuller, *Expository Discourses on the Apocalypse*, in *The Complete Works of Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1998), 3:305. Unlike Edwards, who thought the sixth vial had been poured out, Fuller thought that the church was living during the period when the second vial was being poured out; see *Ibid.*, 301-07.

²¹*Ibid.*, 305-06.

William Carey, in his celebrated treatise calling for united action for missions, echoed the expectations of his fellow Northamptonshire pastors, Sutcliff and Fuller. Carey argued that the Great Commission was obligatory on the church and called upon Baptists to fulfill their duty. However, “some learned divines,” he explained, had argued that before the time when the heathen would be converted, “the witnesses must be slain” (referring to Revelation 11:7-10). Carey referred the reader to Edwards’ *An Humble Attempt*, where the American theologian argued that this event had already taken place, and besides that, “this objection comes too late; for the success of the gospel has been very considerable in many places already.” The Spirit was already being poured out upon the nations.²² Carey summarized his argument thus: “If the prophecies concerning the increase of Christ’s kingdom be true, and if what has been advanced, concerning the commission given by him to his disciples being obligatory on us, be just, it must be inferred that all Christians ought heartily to concur with God in promoting his glorious design.”²³ Carey called upon Baptists in particular and all Christians in general to use the means God has provided—their own efforts—to serve as agents for the outpouring of the Spirit which Scripture had promised. The latter day glory was, at the very least, approaching, and Christians should therefore be busy about the mission God had given them.

Carey’s call for believers to use means for the conversion of the heathen was consistent with postmillennial thinking since at least the writings of Edwards. Edwards himself, in *An Humble Attempt*, encouraged believers to pray for the proliferation of revival in light of Scripture’s promises to pour out the Spirit in the last days. This integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, evident in Edwards’ work, inspired John Sutcliff and the Northamptonshire Baptists to pray for revival and for the

²²William Carey, *An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens* (Leicester, UK: n. p., 1792), 12. Edwards’ remarks, referred to by Carey, are on pp. 5:378-94 of the Yale edition.

²³Carey, *An Enquiry*, 77.

spread of the gospel overseas. This same confidence in the promised work of the Holy Spirit inspired American Protestants during the antebellum era (even many not within the Calvinist tradition), to work not only for the spread of the gospel but also the perfection of society. As Timothy L. Smith has demonstrated, postmillennial optimism pervaded antebellum efforts at the promotion of revival, temperance, and holiness, and (in the North) abolition as well.²⁴ Antebellum Southerners touted their own version of perfection, arguing that God was using the institution of slavery to contribute toward the perfection of society in preparation for the millennium.²⁵ Hope that God was using human efforts to perfect society and bring about the conversion of the nations fueled antebellum evangelicals' efforts in both missions and social reform.²⁶

Howell's Postmillennialism

Howell never published an exposition of his views regarding the millennium. Though he wrote frequently in defense of missionary and benevolent work, his statements regarding a coming day of glory typically occurred without exposition. As is often the case with Howell's ministry, however, what he opted not to address thoroughly in his public writing ministry he presented more exhaustively in sermons to his congregations. Following a practice he often used, Howell preached his message on the millennium on at least three occasions, editing and changing the work for each subsequent sermon. The sermon notes he left behind indicate that he preached the sermon in Richmond on 9 April 1854 and probably again in Nashville in February of

²⁴Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth Century America*, 225-37; idem, "Righteousness and Hope: Christian Holiness and the Millennial Vision in America, 1800-1900," 21-45.

²⁵Maddex, "Proslavery Millennialism," 47-48.

²⁶Smith and Maddex demonstrate that many evangelicals, North and South, did not abandon postmillennialism after the Civil War. Premillennialism did gain adherents, however, and postmillennialism became increasingly associated with liberal Protestantism. See Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, 236; Maddex, "Proslavery Millennialism," 59-62; Koester, "The Future in Our Past," 142-44.

1862. Further exposition within the manuscript demonstrates that he must also have preached the sermon between 1843 and 1844.²⁷

As the manuscript indicates, Howell based the sermon on an exposition of Revelation 20:1-10. After reading the entire text aloud to the congregation, he asserted,

This happy period is assuredly predicted, and it is presumed is yet to come, when the whole world shall be subjugated to the reign of Messiah. The text teaches us that the state of the Church, during this specified season immediately preceding the close of time, will be most happy. Wickedness shall be driven from the world; the pure religion of Christ shall prevail in all nations; and the knowledge of the glory of God shall cover the earth as the waters cover the sea. That such, substantially, will be the millennial state, there can be no doubt.²⁸

Beyond this text in Revelation, Howell explained, the prophet Daniel also foretold the coming of this age. Not only did Jehovah pledge “his omnipotence to bring it to pass,” but he also called upon his people to work toward its fulfillment. Specifically, in the Lord’s Prayer, Jesus taught the disciples to pray for its advent. Furthermore, “The commission of the Apostles requires us to *labour* for the accomplishment of the divine will in this behalf, and not to cease until the kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our Lord and of his Christ.”²⁹ Given what Howell considered to be the clarity of the Bible regarding the millennium and the responsibility of believers in

²⁷The manuscript contains one lengthy section Howell had crossed out, possibly for the 1854 sermon, in which Howell interacted with the premillennial views of William Miller, views which he called “the present popular millennial theory.” Since Miller’s movement was popular during 1843 and 1844 but was widely discredited after October 1844, Howell must have preached this sermon on the millennium in Nashville during this time as well. Miller taught originally that Christ would return and would judge the world by fire in 1843. His teaching differed from that of British premillennialists at the time because he did not believe that the Jews as a nation would be converted or restored to rule in Palestine. Nevertheless, his preaching was popular. When 1843 came and went, he and the leaders of the movement settled on the 22 October 1844 as the date for the return of Christ. When the sun set on that day, the glaring reality that Christ did not return instantly discredited Miller’s movement, but he maintained a cohort of followers. For an examination of Miller’s movement in the context of nineteenth-century British and American premillennialism, see Ernest R. Sandeen, *The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 50-55. For analyses of Miller’s movement, see Ruth Alden Doan, *The Miller Heresy, Millennialism, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987); Everett Newfon Dick, *William Miller and the Advent Crisis, 1831-1844* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 1994).

²⁸Howell, “The Millennium,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:847-49.

²⁹Ibid., 849.

connection with its coming, he outlined for his hearers the nature of the millennium, the time of its coming, and the triumphs which would characterize the period.

In order to illuminate for his hearers the nature of the millennium, Howell first tackled issues of hermeneutics. The premillennial approach, he argued, rests upon a literal interpretation of Revelation 20:1-10. This requires the reader to believe that Christ will return physically and personally to earth and reign with the saints. Furthermore, God must destroy the wicked and raise the righteous at the beginning of the period. At the end of the millennium, God must allow the wicked to raise to life and make war upon the saints, followed finally by the last judgment. Howell rejected this theory, he said, because “its advocates give too much play to their imagination.” They are “dazzled by the imposing grandeur and glory of the prospect” and remain blind to “the many plain declarations of the word of God, which condemn the conclusions to which they seem to press with resistless enthusiasm.”³⁰ Howell was convinced that the reader should not interpret the text literally.

Howell instead followed a spiritual interpretation of the passage. He interpreted the reign of Christ on earth, specified in 20:4, as indicating his spiritual dominion over all nations in the hearts and affections of believers. Howell understood the resurrection of the martyrs in the same verse to indicate the resuscitation of the spirit of the martyrs within the souls of the living. The Christians of that time would again be what the saints and martyrs were in the days of primitive and pure Christianity. The thousand years he interpreted as an indefinite period of time. At the end of this period, in accordance with 20:8-9, piety will recede and wickedness will increase, gather, and revolt for the final time against God. After this Christ will return physically.³¹

³⁰Ibid., 853-55.

³¹Ibid., 855-56.

Howell preferred the spiritual interpretation over the literal for several reasons. First, the language of the book of Revelation, he said, is highly figurative. Moreover, the text in question contains numerous symbolic images, such as the dragon, the key, the chain, and the bottomless pit (or abyss). The reader should not interpret any of these things literally. Since the first three verses are symbolic, the rest of the text must be also. Second, Howell argued, the premillennial interpretation distorts the biblical teaching on the return of Christ. Here Howell followed Andrew Fuller's exposition. Christ's return, Howell stated, is to be his second coming. The premillennial view requires not only a second coming, but also a third, after the millennium in order to battle against Gog and Magog. Moreover, several biblical texts (Matt 25:31-46, 1 Thess 4:11, and Heb 9:27-28) indicate that when Christ returns, the final judgment will commence. Therefore, Howell concluded, Christ could not return to reign with the saints and after one thousand years commence the final judgment.³² Third, Howell argued, John's use of the word "souls" to refer to the righteous who will reign with Christ must indicate some kind of spiritual, not physical, resurrection. Howell also reiterated his argument that the thousand years is a figurative number and that the loosing of Satan at the end is a figurative resurgence of wickedness.³³ Howell concluded that Christ's reign during the millennium will be spiritual, the resurrection of the martyrs is spiritual, the binding and eventual loosing of Satan is figurative, and the millennium is symbolic of an indefinite period of time.

Howell next explained what he understood regarding the time the millennium would commence. It will not commence, he said, with revolutions, the breaking up of families or churches, or the ringing of angel trumpets. "The only change we shall witness," he concluded, "will be *spiritual*. Wickedness will be banished, and holiness will pervade the world."³⁴ This change would be gradual and no date should be set for

³²See Fuller, *Exposition of the Apocalypse*, in *Works*, 3:291-95.

³³Howell, "The Millennium," *Manuscript Notes of Sermons*, 10:858-73.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 876.

the inception of the millennial period. According to prophesy, certain great events must transpire before the millennium begins. However, “they are so shrouded in drapery, so concealed in metaphors, that their interpretation previous to their fulfillment, is extremely difficult.” Nevertheless, he concluded, “To me it appears probable that the millennium is now actually upon us.” Whether it had come already or not, the period in question would witness a return in the church to purity in doctrine and a great multiplication of the people of God. In language reminiscent of Fuller, Howell surveyed the condition of the world. Considering the spread of knowledge through the press; the ability to disseminate information; the waning of idolatry, Islam, and Catholicism; and the missionary efforts now succeeding abroad; Howell hopefully concluded, “I can hardly resist the conviction that the millennium has come already, and is diffusing its influence like the morning light spreading upon the mountains.” However, he asserted, he was not so confident as to insist upon it.³⁵

After discussing the nature of the millennial period and the timing of its approach, Howell outlined briefly the triumphs that would characterize the period. Based upon Revelation 20:6, he asserted that the Spirit of God would be poured out and revival would pervade the world. Ministers would be more devoted and congregations would take a greater interest in their pastor’s sermons. Christians would abandon worldliness and would be holy and zealous. Though not all people on earth would have a saving knowledge of Christ, the gospel would sweep across the globe without hindrance. Furthermore, he asserted, God would restore “visible church communion, worship, doctrine, and discipline,” to their original purity and the corrupted forms of religion would pass away. Finally, peace would reign among the nations.³⁶

³⁵Ibid., 884-86. Howell was convinced that the millennium was closer than either Edwards or Fuller had thought. Edwards thought that God had poured out the sixth vial and the seventh was approaching soon. Fuller thought that the world had already witnessed either the second or the third. By implication from Howell’s statements in this passage, he must have thought that God had most likely poured out all seven vials. He repeatedly stated, however, that he could not be dogmatic about the timing.

³⁶Ibid., 887-89.

As Howell closed the message he called upon his hearers to keep in mind three points of application. First (having in mind, no doubt, the followers of William Miller), he admonished them to avoid error. Though the motives of those who pervert the doctrine of the millennium may be pure, he asserted, “still the effect of error must be blighting, and mischievous.” Second, drawing upon the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels, he encouraged them to “be ready for the great events which await us.” Whatever the truth regarding the millennium, he continued, “the end will soon come with each of us; and as we are at death, so we must stand before Christ in the judgment.” With this point he closed: “Finally, let us all be christians, and let every christian seek to bring to pass that glorious period when christianity shall rest upon our entire world like a bright halo of light.”³⁷

This sermon is important for understanding the mission theology of R. B. C. Howell for several reasons. First, the sermon itself is unique among Howell’s writings in that it is the only surviving manuscript to contain a detailed exposition of his view on the millennium. Though occasional statements crept into his published writings, nowhere does he give the subject the attention he gave it in this sermon. Second, the sermon demonstrates Howell’s persistent interest in the proper integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Given the prevalence of postmillennialism in America during the antebellum era and the influence of postmillennialism on the founders of the mission movement in England, the fact that R. B. C. Howell held a postmillennial view should not seem unusual. Given Howell’s concern over the proper integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility, however, his postmillennial convictions are important even if they were commonplace. Throughout his writings, Howell pinpointed a number of theological issues—election and reprobation, regeneration and revival, the extent of the atonement, justification, sanctification, and the role of the church—that

³⁷Ibid., 890-91.

churches needed to address responsibly in order to understand properly their mission. With each of these issues churches must comprehend how the sovereign God works in a way that is consistent with human responsibility. Eschatology was yet another area that the church must understand properly. Howell's view on the millennium allowed him to assert that God in his sovereignty would pour out his Spirit upon the nations, bringing conversions and peace to all nations. Nevertheless, Christians should seek to bring that glorious period to pass. God was going to use the actions of believers as the means by which the millennium would come. Third, the sermon demonstrates another instance of the continuity of Howell's mission theology with that of the English Baptists who began the mission movement. In his views on the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of Christ on the cross, and the coming of the millennium, Howell showed obvious dependence on the writings of Andrew Fuller and in certain cases Robert Hall, Jr. In this case, Fuller's exposition of Revelation proved helpful to Howell.

Benevolence and the Use of Means

In the closing charge of his sermon on the millennium, Howell called on his congregation to seek to bring to pass that glorious period by fulfilling their obligations as believers. He did not, however, indicate what kind of activity this work would entail. In a sermon preached before the Baptist General Association of Virginia, 3 June 1853, he was much more specific. He began by outlining for the assembled ministers and laymen the work the General Association intended to accomplish across the state. He concluded that Virginia Baptists had much work to do, and though years may pass before they accomplish it, they must persist in it. Nevertheless, he said, "we have his promise that it shall be gloriously accomplished."³⁸ With this statement, Howell once again declared that God had promised to cause the gospel to triumph through the church. Later in the sermon Howell outlined measures the church should use to bring God's purpose to pass.

³⁸Howell, "The Signs of the Times," *The Religious Herald*, 8 September 1853.

First and foremost, he explained, the church is responsible for the preaching of the gospel and “whatever is appropriately connected with preaching,” specifically prayer, exhortation, conversation, and other forms of exertion. This means that weak and struggling churches must be able to procure and sustain pastors. Churches must send preachers into neighborhoods that lack gospel preaching with the goal of establishing churches as soon as possible. Places of special influence, Howell thought, such as towns and cities, should receive more attention than they had received. The preaching of the gospel, Howell asserted, was the church’s first responsibility.³⁹

Howell did not, however, leave his hearers with the impression that the preaching of the gospel was the church’s only concern. He called their attention beyond the work of the local church to “those collateral enterprises whose success is so intimately blended with your own.” Among these collateral enterprises Howell gave first place to ministerial education and financial support. The state desperately needed more ministers, but from where would they come? Virginia Baptists must encourage, call, equip, and sustain them at home. They must educate young men adequately in literature and theology and provide them with the financial means to devote themselves to the ministry full time. Next, Howell asserted that the churches must strengthen the Sabbath Schools, since these institutions fill the churches with members and even the pulpits with ministers. Also, Howell continued, the churches need to support efforts to proliferate denominational literature. Only by means of books, tracts, and newspapers can churches remove the ignorance which impedes the success of Virginia Baptists. Finally, he asserted, Virginia Baptists need to promote the progress of lay education. They had entrusted the education of their sons and daughters, particularly in the higher branches of learning, to others for far too long. The churches of the state needed to support schools

³⁹Ibid.

and colleges which would help the children complete their studies without hampering their temporal or spiritual development.⁴⁰

These enterprises—ministerial education and support, Sunday Schools, the denominational press, and lay education—were all endeavors Howell considered the responsibility of the Baptist denomination with regard to the mission God had given the churches. Despite the broad scope of activity outlined in this sermon before his Virginia brethren, Howell did not confine the mission of the church to the world even to the ambitious designs of these enterprises. He supported other denominational endeavors and other efforts for the improvement of society which he did not mention on this occasion. A further examination of Howell's thoughts and labors with respect to these various enterprises, both denominational and social, will illuminate why he thought these enterprises were the responsibility of Baptists and other Christians, given their context in mid-nineteenth century America and their God-given role in bringing about the changes that would lead to the triumph of the kingdom.

Denominational Enterprises

Howell was heavily involved in numerous denominational endeavors from the very beginning of his ministry. Ministerial education and support, Sunday schools, tract societies, lay education, Bible societies, and foreign mission societies all received his support and benefited from his energy and leadership.⁴¹ The minutes and annual reports of the many societies and denominational organizations to which he gave his time

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Howell outlined a brief history of his involvement in denominational work at the close of his "Pastor's Book," a manuscript containing a list of marriages performed and members brought into churches during his four pastorates. Howell's list, however, is not exhaustive. See Howell, "Pastor's Record Book," Morton Boyte Howell Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville. For more information, see Linwood Tyler Horne, "A Study of the Life and Work of R. B. C. Howell" (Ph.D. diss., The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1958), 67-70, 142-87, 295-303; William Lumpkin, *First Baptist Church of Norfolk, 1805-1980* (n. p.), 18-29. Also useful: *Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Baptist Association, Held at Otter Dams Church, Surrey County, Virginia, May the 25th, 27th, and 28th, 1832* (Norfolk: Shields and Ashburn, 1832), 6-9. Howell, the clerk of the association, edited the minutes for that year.

provide ample evidence of his concern for each of these areas. The following subsections will provide a more extensive discussion on Howell's rationale for advocating specific denominational objectives. However, his published writings and the manuscripts which have survived do not provide researchers with extensive information on how he viewed each of these ministries fulfilling God's purpose for the church in the context of the needs of his day. The analysis therefore will focus on those issues regarding which significant evidence exists concerning his reasoning for them—ministerial education and support, Sunday schools, the distribution of Baptist literature, and foreign missions.⁴²

Ministerial education. R. B. C. Howell was convinced that one of the greatest impediments to the growth of the Baptist denomination and thus the progress of the church toward its goal of spreading the gospel across the globe was the lack of opportunities for ministerial education. His efforts to promote ministerial education spanned his entire ministry and in each case resulted from his conviction that Baptists in the South were not doing enough to address this need. During his pastorate in Norfolk, Howell served on the board of the Virginia Baptist Education Society, which founded Richmond College (later the University of Richmond), in 1834. Once Howell moved to Tennessee he helped organize the Western Baptist Education Society, which founded the Western Baptist Theological Institute in Covington, Kentucky, in 1845. Also, through the work of the Tennessee Baptist Education Society, he helped found Union University in Murfreesboro, which began operation on a limited basis in 1841 and was fully

⁴²Regarding the benefits of lay education for the progress of the Baptist denomination Howell said little. He gave several addresses at Baptist institutions, but in those addresses he did not focus upon the benefits of higher education for the strengthening of the church. Instead, he focused upon the need for higher education for the benefit of society. Regarding the translation and distribution of the Bible, Howell defended the actions of those Baptists who dissented from the decisions of the American Bible Society in 1836 when they refused to print a Burmese version of the Bible that translated βαπτίζω as "immerse." He supported the formation of the American and Foreign Bible Society in the same year and helped organize a Bible Association in Tennessee that would support the American and Foreign Bible Society. See Howell, "The Bible Society," *The Baptist*, May 1836; idem, "American and Foreign Bible Society," *The Baptist*, July 1836; idem, "The Bible Association of the Baptists of Tennessee," *The Baptist*, November 1836.

functioning by 1848.⁴³ Each of these schools Howell helped found had theological departments where ministers could obtain a theological education, and other colleges (such as Mercer University in Georgia and Furman University in South Carolina) had theological departments as well.

For numerous reasons, however, Howell did not consider the institutions he had helped found or the existing schools in other Southern states adequate to serve the needs of Baptists in the South and Southwest. The colleges Howell helped to found had theological departments which served within a larger college curriculum. Howell was convinced that the South needed a Divinity School, a school which focused exclusively on theological training and that would draw from the graduates of the Baptist institutions that already existed.⁴⁴ Howell's primary concern, however, involved the status of the school in Covington. As early as August 1845, Howell began to question the position of the President and Board of Trustees of the school with respect to the issue of slavery.⁴⁵ In 1847 the president and professors of the school decidedly declared their sympathy with the North by joining the American Baptist Missionary Union. Howell understood the import of this action and responded: "They no longer occupy, as heretofore, a questionable position."⁴⁶ He moved to organize an alternative to the school at the annual

⁴³Robert A. Baker, *The Southern Baptist Convention and Its People, 1607-1972* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), 200; Albert W. Wardin, Jr., *Tennessee Baptists: A Comprehensive History, 1779-1999* (Brentwood, TN: Executive Board of the Tennessee Baptist Education Society, 1999), 96.

⁴⁴See Howell, "Theological School," *The Baptist*, 14 February 1846.

⁴⁵Robert E. Pattison, President of the Western Baptist Theological Institute, was also a member of the Acting Board of the General Missionary Convention. When the churches of the South became aware that the Board had responded negatively to the Alabama Resolutions, indicating that they would not knowingly appoint a slaveholder for the foreign field, astute observers began to wonder how Pattison's convictions would impact the school in Covington. In several editorials Howell expressed the conviction that the Covington school would not meet the needs of Southerners and that the South needed a theological school of its own. See Howell, "Covington School, Ky," *The Baptist*, 9 August 1845; idem, "Covington School," *The Baptist*, 13 September 1845.

⁴⁶Howell, "Covington Institution," *The Baptist*, 26 June 1847. Northern Baptists organized the American Baptist Missionary Union in 1846 after the slavery issue divided the General Missionary Convention. Southerners, including Howell, viewed the association of the President and professors at Covington as a decided action against slavery in the Southern states.

meeting of the Indian Mission Association, held in Nashville at the First Baptist Church. Howell requested after the introductory sermon that the brethren remain to consider “a very important subject.” He addressed them concerning the need for a centrally-located seminary to serve the needs of the Southwest and called upon them to lay the subject before their friends and brethren throughout the South.⁴⁷ The assembly appointed a committee, of which Howell was the chair, to consider the issue and report back. Howell presented to the committee a report and a series of resolutions, which the committee approved. When the assembly reconvened, they likewise approved the report and resolutions.⁴⁸

The report reveals why Howell considered the issue of ministerial education important and why the churches of the Southwest should address the issue at that time. Howell stated that churches in sparsely populated regions, where the people have not had the opportunity to avail themselves of an education, would not benefit from having a classically educated minister. Furthermore, a minister of the gospel requires a love of the Lord Jesus Christ, aptness to teach, a love for men, a readiness to labor for the salvation of others, an ability to communicate, and orthodoxy in doctrine. Beyond this, and most importantly, ministers need “the pure influences of the Spirit of our God.” An education will not guarantee any of these things, and many useful ministers have possessed them though they were uneducated. Having given this qualification, Howell asserted that

⁴⁷As soon as Howell found out about the actions of the president and faculty in Covington, he began to consider how the South might procure an alternative. In a letter to William Carey Crane, dated 1 June 1847, he mentioned to Crane the actions of the president and faculty and stated his conviction that the South must have its own institution. He then asked, “Shall we bring up the subject here at the approaching annual meeting of the Indian Mission Association?” See R. B. C. Howell, Nashville, to William Carey Crane, Vicksburg, MS, 1 June 1847, William Carey Crane Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁴⁸The minutes of the meeting and the report and resolutions adopted were printed in “Proceedings and Report of a Meeting Held October 28th-30th, 1847, with Reference to a Theological School, for the South and South-West,” *Tennessee Baptist*, 18 December 1847. Howell also included an extract from the meeting’s minutes, the report, and the resolutions in “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee, From its organisation July 22d, 1820 to July 22d, 1862,” vol. 1, First Baptist Church, Nashville. Typescript 1:289-301.

American society was advancing intellectually and if Baptists want to reach the towns and cities of the South, they need ministers who are equipped to teach an educated laity. Other denominations in the South were making advances in education and if Baptists want to defend and advocate gospel truth adequately, they must have an educated ministry.⁴⁹

Having laid out his case for an educated ministry, Howell turned his attention to the question of a centrally-located seminary. As he had argued in his editorials, the school at Covington and the schools of the North were objectionable because of their advocacy of abolition. Though many young men were going to Pedobaptist schools as a result of this problem, these schools were equally objectionable on doctrinal grounds. Moreover, several Baptist schools in the South had theological departments, but these schools had not been effective at alleviating the problem. Because a more general appreciation of the problem did not exist at the time efforts began to found these schools, multiple institutions came into existence. As a result these institutions divided the energies of Southern Baptists, prevented a united Southern effort for education, and lessened the impact of their accomplishments. To alleviate this problem, Howell recommended combining the theological faculties, endowments, and libraries of the current institutions in the South at a centrally located point. This school would then draw the interest of Baptists all over the South, would attract more young men to theological education, and would cost the churches less than they pay now for their several schools. To close the report, Howell presented resolutions calling for one centrally located seminary, calling upon brethren throughout the South to unite toward this work, and urging those assembled at the 1849 meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention to address this issue.⁵⁰

⁴⁹Howell, "Proceedings and Report of a Meeting Held October 28th-30th, 1847."

⁵⁰Ibid. Howell wrote an article for *A Monthly Miscellany*, intending, no doubt, to reach readers throughout the South just prior to the 1849 SBC meeting, which is virtually identical to the report given in Nashville. See Howell, "A Great Southern Theological School," *A Monthly Miscellany; A Religious and*

After the meeting of the Indian Mission Association in 1847, in Howell's own words, "the matter rested for a short period."⁵¹ Writing to Crane in February 1848, Howell expressed his frustration that the Baptist editors in the South exhibited "the hesitancy of mingled embarrassment and fear" over the issue. Howell himself feared that the matter would "silently recede into dark forgetfulness."⁵² But it did not. J. R. Graves, who took over as editor of *The Tennessee Baptist* in 1848, stated with satisfaction in March 1849 that the proposal made in Nashville was receiving attention throughout the South.⁵³ The Southern Baptist Convention, in fact, was supposed to convene in Nashville in 1849, but fear of a cholera epidemic forced Howell and the others who assembled for the meeting to reconvene it elsewhere.⁵⁴ First Baptist Charleston offered to host, and the Convention met there instead. Though Howell did not attend, a committee formed to explore the issues he had taken the lead in raising. After much further planning and with the notable leadership of James P. Boyce, the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary opened its doors in Greenville, South Carolina, in 1859. Looking back on these events a few years later, Howell stated with satisfaction that "the design in a form not very different from that designated in the preceding report [of the 1847 meeting], was fully accomplished."⁵⁵ Southern Baptists had filled the need Howell perceived to exist

Literary Review, and Monthly Register of Discoveries and Improvements in the Arts and Sciences, Conducted on the Joint Stock Principle (March 1849): 80-84. A few years later, serving on the Committee on Ministerial Education for the Dover Association in Virginia, Howell delivered a report on the need for further efforts toward education in Virginia, using many of the same arguments. See *Minutes of the Sixty-Eighth Annual Session of the Dover Baptist Association, Held at Mount Olivet Baptist Church, Hanover Co., VA* (Richmond, VA: H. K. Ellyson's Power Press, 1851), 7-13.

⁵¹Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 1. Typescript 1:301.

⁵²R. B. C. Howell, Nashville, to William Carey Crane, Vicksburg, MS, 29 February 1848, William Carey Crane Papers, The Texas Collection, Baylor University, Waco, TX.

⁵³J. R. Graves, "Theological Education," *The Tennessee Baptist*, 29 March 1849.

⁵⁴See the announcement from Howell, "Southern Baptist Convention," *Tennessee Baptist*, 12 April 1849.

⁵⁵Howell, "Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee," vol. 1. Typescript 1:301. For other accounts of Howell's role in the founding of Southern Seminary, see Horne, "The Life

regarding ministerial education and had acted responsibly with the resources God had given them.

Ministerial support. Howell thought that another impediment to the growth of the Baptist denomination was the reluctance of churches to support their ministers fully. He used his opportunities as a leader in the denomination, both in print and in public, to encourage churches toward greater faithfulness in this regard. While some churches considered it improper to pay ministers, Howell acknowledged, most admitted that this was their duty.⁵⁶ Nevertheless, many churches failed to pay their minister a full salary. The results, as Howell understood them, were harmful to the cause of Christ. Some ministers, faced with the need to support their family, took on multiple pastorates. In a sermon devoted to the problem of multiple pastorates, Howell asserted that because of their busyness traveling so often from place to place, these ministers have less time to read and study and are unable to increase their knowledge and usefulness. As a result, “[h]abits of mental dissipation are thus formed which destroy all taste for intellectual pursuits, and they [the pastors] cease to be conscious of its necessity and importance.” The churches, however, also suffer. With preaching services held only once a month, the churches become small and feeble.⁵⁷ Other ministers, instead of taking on multiple

and Work of R. B. C. Howell,” 261-71; William A. Mueller, *A History of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1959), 10-11. Howell also dealt more generally with the need for ministers to study in order to preach the gospel effectively. Many ministers, he bemoaned, consider the truths of the gospel so plain and certain that they do not need aid in proclaiming them to the world. Furthermore, they often think that ministers “are under some sort of inspiration when preaching.” While he did not deny that the Spirit influences preachers and “makes them feel the importance of their work,” he asserted that the Spirit’s influence does not substitute for preparation. Paul’s admonition to Timothy in 1 Tim 2:15, serves as encouragement, he thought, to all Christian ministers. See Howell, “Ministerial Improvement,” *The Baptist*, September 1835. See also a further installment, “Ministerial Improvement III,” *The Baptist*, December 1835.

⁵⁶Howell, “Notes Not Preached, by the Pastor of the First Church, in Nashville, to His People, but which He Would Preach, If He Could, to All the Churches and Pastors in the South-West,” *The Baptist*, 11 January 1845. Antimission Baptists sometimes considered the practice of paying ministers to be unscriptural, but this was not universally the case. See, for instance, John M. Watson, “An Apology for Those Brethren who are Opposed to Baptist Conventions; Also an Exposition of Certain Duties of the Church to Its Ministers, as Enjoined in the Word of God,” *The Signs of the Times*, 15 December 1837.

⁵⁷Howell, “The Pastoral Relation,” *The Baptist*, 22 March 1845.

pastorates, opt for a different route, Howell explained. They support their family through means other than pastoral ministry. Whether they work as farmers, shopkeepers, or school teachers, these ministers eek out a living through the week and attempt to minister to their congregations at the same time. As a result, they are unable to proclaim the gospel as often as they desire unless they spend too little time in secular pursuits to earn a living for their families. Howell asked,

Where is the minister who but lately took upon him the vows of God, and went forth with glowing zeal and burning eloquence to disseminate the principles of our holy religion? Ah, where? He is in his field, his shop, or his school room, labouring, while his hearers and admirers roll in luxury and hoard their thousands, for a few cents a day to sustain the wants of poor human nature! His soul, indeed, leaps within him to tell the news of salvation to a dying world, and to urge the lost and fallen to flee from the wrath to come and lay hold on the hope set before them in the Gospel. But how can he do this? He cannot, unless he abandon all those who are most dear to him in this life, to almost certain want—at best to the lean and grudging charities of a cold proud heartless world.⁵⁸

Howell was concerned that when pastors opt to make a living in secular pursuits their availability to proclaim the gospel diminishes. Driven by a passion to proclaim the gospel, many men feel compelled to do what they ought not to do—neglect their own families. With their families suffering, they cannot adequately direct their attention to spiritual matters.⁵⁹ Beyond the harm done to minister's families and to churches, Howell also thought that the failure of churches to support their ministers also hindered many men from entering the ministry, thus contributing to the lack of qualified pastors among Baptist churches.⁶⁰ Thus Howell was convinced that both the church and the family suffer in numerous ways when the minister does not receive adequate pay.

Part of his task of informing Baptists about the practicality of providing for a minister's salary included demonstrating that the practice is scriptural. In his first book, *The Deaconship*, he asserted, "The law of the kingdom of Christ guarantees thus much to

⁵⁸Howell, "The Deaconship," *The Baptist*, 3 May 1845.

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰Howell, "Report on Education," in *Minutes of the Sixty-Eighth Annual Session of the Dover Baptist Association*, 11.

the preacher, as a proper return from those whom he serves.”⁶¹ Howell reached back into the book of Deuteronomy to show that this principle was in place under the Mosaic Law. God required the Israelites to support the tribe of Levi since he allotted them no land inheritance (Deut 10:8-9, 14:27, 18:1-2). In the New Testament, Paul explained that those who preach the gospel should “live of the gospel” (1 Cor 9:14). This, Paul emphasized, the Lord himself had ordained. To demonstrate this, Howell turned to the Gospels, citing Matthew 10:5-16 and Luke 10:12, where Jesus stated that the workman is worthy of his hire. Howell provided further exposition of Galatians 6:6, Luke 22:35, Philippians 4:15-20, and 2 Corinthians 11:8-9. In order to qualify for support, however, the minister must possess the sanction of the church to minister and the ability to teach, and must devote himself fully to the task. A man who does not devote himself fully to the work, Howell stated, does not deserve the support of the church.⁶² Scripture, therefore, mandated that the church support the minister financially, and Howell was convinced that the deacons should take the lead in this endeavor. When ministers suffer need, he asserted, “It is alone for want of faithfulness on the part of Deacons!”⁶³

In the midst of this discussion about money, Howell pointed his audience to the significance of the issue. Great results would follow when church members become cognizant of this duty. “When, in a word, every christian shall awake and shake himself from the dust,” he explained, “then will the blessings of the Lord pour down upon the Church, and shine like the light of heaven in the dwellings of Jacob. Songs of rejoicing shall cheer the vales, and hosannas of peace echo from every hill and mountain. The wilderness and the solitary places shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and

⁶¹Howell, *The Deaconship* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 91.

⁶²Ibid., 91-100.

⁶³Howell, “The Deaconship.”

blossom as the rose.” Echoing promises of a coming day of glory, Howell urged believers to work to bring it to pass. “The time, we trust, is not distant,” he surmised.⁶⁴

Sunday schools. As Howell mentioned in his sermon to the Baptist General Association of Virginia, he considered Sunday school work to be an important component in the future success of the church’s mission to spread the gospel across the globe and thus usher in the millennium. Appropriately, then, he gave attention to the spiritual development of children throughout his ministry. The report issued by the Cumberland Street Church to the Portsmouth Association in 1832 stated that “the Sabbath School conducted in our church, is flourishing beyond any former parallel.” The church recorded 140 students and seventeen conversions during the previous year. It further added, “The Sabbath School we regard as a most promising field of labour, and we look to it with deep interest, assured that it will, if properly managed, present annual harvests of precious souls which shall be gathered into the Church, the trophies of divine and victorious grace.”⁶⁵ When Howell moved to Nashville, he found the First Baptist Church without a Sunday school. Indeed, to his knowledge one did not exist anywhere in the state. After arriving in January, he announced in April that he intended to establish a Sunday school. Expecting confusion and concern, he preached a sermon on “the whole process and design” of the school, assessing the result to be that “all present were highly gratified.” The Sunday school flourished, Howell noted, for twenty seven years, until Federal troops occupied the city during the Civil War.⁶⁶ In fact, though the school may have languished somewhat during Howell’s time in Richmond, it grew dramatically upon his return in 1857. An editor of a Baptist paper, having visited Nashville during that

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵*Minutes of the Virginia Portsmouth Association, 1832, 7.*

⁶⁶Howell, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church, Nashville, Tennessee,” vol. 1. Typescript 1:94.

time, recorded that though the school boasted 112 students before Howell's return, enrollment increased to 200 after his return.⁶⁷

Howell considered Sunday schools an important avenue for the religious instruction of children, but not the only avenue. In a sermon to his congregation in Richmond, Howell explained the purpose, benefits, and proper curriculum. While in some denominations churches intended that catechism and confirmation classes would initiate children into the church, Howell explained that Baptists use Sunday schools to bring children to Christ before they bring them into the church. These schools not only evangelize the children, but also help remove children from temptation by providing them with constructive activities and teaching them religious truth. Addressing teachers, Howell instructed them to go through the Bible carefully, acquainting children with the geography of the Bible lands, the history of the places, and the exact meaning of the passages under discussion. Aside from explaining the Bible properly, the teachers should instruct the children in systematic truth and should teach them to sing. This last point Howell elaborated. The children should learn to sing Scripture—that is, songs using verses from Scripture. They should furthermore use the same tunes used in congregational worship. All of this work to instruct children, Howell concluded, would bring reward. “O how great that reward will be!”⁶⁸

Though Howell considered the work of Sunday school instruction important, he emphasized that it should never take the place of parental instruction. At an address to a Sunday school meeting comprising several schools of different denominations in Nashville, Howell warned the parents, “Allow me, therefore, to say to you that the Sabbath School may *aid* you and render *your* efforts more successful, but it can assume no part either of your labours, or responsibilities.” The parents should not consider their

⁶⁷“Baptists in Nashville,” *The Southwestern Baptist*, 26 November 1857.

⁶⁸Howell, “Sunday School,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 7:190-94, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

task accomplished when they have read a lesson to the children or repeated a prayer. They should fix in the hearts of the children their need for a savior and for the influence of the Holy Spirit. Howell continued, "Lead your smiling and beautiful charge, dear Parents, to the footstool of the Savior; teach them to rely, as guilty creatures, on his merits alone; and to commit their eternal interests into his hands." The parents should pray often with the children, teach them to approach worship with reverence, and honor the Sabbath.⁶⁹ Clearly, Howell was worried that parents might allow the Sunday school to serve as the primary means of religious instruction rather than a secondary means.

Nevertheless, Howell was sure that Sunday schools were playing a vital part in the triumph of the kingdom. "The Sabbath School," he said, "while it is spreading its holy influences throughout all christian lands, is efficiently preparing the way for the universal spread of the Gospel." Sunday schools, he thought, were a critical component in the spread of the gospel, because "those who are instructed early in life" are more likely, "all other things being equal," to become genuine converts and active and useful servants in the churches. Sunday schools also helped usher in the millennium by instructing children in morals, thus improving the state of society. Furthermore, he told the teachers, "You wield no small part of that agency which breaks the chains of moral despotism and corruption; and, with your compeers in the great work, you are thus actually preparing this great nation to appreciate, enjoy, and perpetuate, our cherished *political* institutions." Sunday schools further the cause of liberty and help the citizens of the United States protect their freedoms through "the general diffusion of intelligence, throughout the whole land." Without an enlightened people characterized by moral principle and integrity, he said, "our bright visions of future security and glory will soon end in scenes of desolation, carnage, and blood!" Ending on a high note, Howell

⁶⁹Howell, "An Address to the Parents of the Children, and to the Teachers of the Several Sabbath Schools, in Nashville, Delivered in the First Presbyterian Church. July 4th, 1844," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 11:889-92, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

encouraged the teachers to press forward with this image: “Thus the Sabbath School teacher is seen, shoulder to shoulder, with the minister of the sanctuary, with the enlightened statesman, and with the patriot and philanthropist, sustaining the ark of our religious and civil freedom.”⁷⁰ In Howell’s opinion, the Sunday schools contributed both to the spread of the gospel and the strengthening of the cause of liberty.

Denominational literature. Howell called upon his listeners at the 1853 meeting of the Baptist General Association of Virginia to become involved in the proliferation and distribution of denominational literature. Such work, he argued, would help bring about the triumph of the gospel in the state. As early as 1811, a group of Baptists in Boston organized the Evangelical Tract Society in order to supply gospel literature, but their efforts were meager. According to Benedict they produced “minor productions,” which he called “old untrimmed and rough-looking documents.”⁷¹ By 1824, with the General Missionary Convention ten years old and Columbian College in existence for three years, Baptists in Washington D. C. organized the Baptist General Tract Society, intended to resemble in scale the American Tract Society of the Congregationalists. Those involved recognized both the effectiveness of the Congregationalists’ society at publishing evangelical literature and the danger of allowing Pedobaptists to possess a corner on the market for such literature.⁷² Baptists had begun in earnest their efforts to proliferate denominational literature. Aside from this society, a

⁷⁰Ibid., 899-901. One cannot help but read Howell’s words with a sense of irony here. Howell was confident that Baptist Sunday schools and churches were spreading the gospel effectively and helping protect the nation from “desolation, carnage, and blood.” Seventeen years later, however, desolation, carnage, and blood filled the land. This reality caused many evangelicals to reconsider their commitment to postmillennialism, particularly in the South. See Maddex, “Proslavery Millennialism,” 59-62.

⁷¹David Benedict, *Fifty Years Among the Baptists* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1860), 24. John T. Christian is one of the few to write a Baptist history text who mentioned this organization. See John T. Christian, *A History of the Baptists of the United States from the First Settlement of the Country to the Year 1845* (Nashville: Sunday School Board, 1926), 2:455.

⁷²See James D. Knowles, “Baptist General Tract Society,” *The Columbian Star*, 14 February 1824; O., “Baptist Tract Society,” *Columbian Star*, 21 February 1824; “Baptist General Tract Society,” *The Columbian Star*, 6 March 1824.

private firm in Boston—Gould, Kendal, and Lincoln—also began to publish Baptist literature.

Despite these successes in publishing, distribution was still a problem, particularly in the South and Southwest. One of those supportive of the initial organization of the Baptist General Tract Society recognized this problem from the beginning. Writing to the editor just weeks prior to the formation of the society, one correspondent remarked, “The eastern states can be amply supplied by their numerous societies,—but how shall the wants of the southern and western states be gratified?”⁷³ This individual thought that the society should fill this void. Yet by the 1840s, after nearly two decades in existence, Howell was convinced that it wasn’t filling that void. Books produced in the Northeast simply were not reaching the Southwest. He complained, “The idea of supplying the South-west with books of this kind [in this case a Baptist hymn book], manufactured in Boston, is about as reasonable as the expectation that our farmers will send their corn to be ground by mills in Canada. Nor is much more to be anticipated in Philadelphia [the location in 1841 of the Baptist General Tract Society].” In evidence of this assertion, Howell explained that not a single book store or depository existed at the time in Tennessee, Mississippi, Louisiana, or Arkansas where one could obtain Baptists books, “nor an individual who makes it a point to dispose of [i.e., distribute] them through the country!”⁷⁴ In an effort to alleviate this problem, Howell became involved in the organization and support of several tract societies—the Virginia Baptist Book and Tract Society in 1833, The Tennessee Baptist Publication and Sunday School Society in 1841, and the Southern Baptist Publication Society.⁷⁵ Though

⁷³O., “Baptist Tract Society.”

⁷⁴Howell, “Hymn Book,” *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 14 January 1841.

⁷⁵“Virginia Baptist Book and Tract Society,” *Religious Herald*, 8 November 1833; *Proceedings of the Second Annual Meeting of the General Association of Baptists of Tennessee* (Nashville: W. F. Bang, 1843), 22; *Third Annual Report of the Southern Baptist Publication Society* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1850), 2.

Howell was not present at the organization of the Southern Baptist Publication Society in 1847, he lent his support to the endeavor early on, serving as a vice president from 1850-1851.⁷⁶ The Southern Baptist Publication Society, in its First Annual Report, related a conviction regarding the usefulness of Baptist publications which was similar to that communicated by Howell to the Virginia Baptists, demonstrating that others in the South were motivated by the same reasoning as Howell. They said, "It is surely our duty, (a duty which we owe to ourselves and to God) to avail ourselves of all proper facilities, and amongst them the powerful instrumentality of the press, to sound out the word of the Lord to the people, to spread abroad the principles which we love as Baptists, and which we are assured will universally prevail during the pacific reign of the millennium."⁷⁷

Foreign missions. By the time Howell was ordained at Cumberland Street Church on 27 January 1827, the Baptist Board of Foreign Missions had been in existence for approximately thirteen years. Baptists in both the North and the South supported the cause. Many of those who opposed the work of the Board objected on ecclesiological grounds; therefore, Howell addressed the ecclesiological issues they raised.⁷⁸ His defense of the foreign missions enterprise became a part of his overall defense of benevolent enterprises in general. Howell, therefore, never had to raise awareness of the need for a foreign mission society as he had to do with other enterprises. Nevertheless, on numerous occasions he preached sermons intended to motivate Baptists to support foreign missions.

On one such occasion he pointed his hearers to the example set by the Lord Jesus Christ. In 1851 the Southern Baptist Convention elected Howell President. Howell

⁷⁶When Southerners first called for a separate society, after the division of the missionary societies, Howell opposed the movement. Later, of course, he lent his support. See his editorial on the issue of separation, "The North and the South," *The Baptist*, 2 May 1846.

⁷⁷*First Annual Report of the Southern Baptist Publication Society* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1848), 21.

⁷⁸Chapter 5 contains Howell's analysis of these issues.

presided over that meeting, held in Nashville, and during the meeting the Convention requested that he preach the sermon on foreign missions at the next meeting, the 1853 meeting in Baltimore. Howell preached the sermon, “The Influence of Christ’s Humiliation,” from 2 Corinthians 8:9. The context of the verse, he pointed out, was the collection Paul was gathering from the churches in Greece. Paul presented this portrait of the Messiah, Howell said, “to quicken, if possible, their benevolence in behalf of the christians in Judea, now suffering under the double calamity of persecution, and famine.” He declared that his purpose was similar, to call upon the brethren assembled before him “to give to the famishing nations ‘the bread of life.’” The nations were perishing without God, and though Southern Baptists had wept over their miseries and prayed for their deliverance, Howell urged his audience: “you are aware that this is not enough. They can be saved only, by the gospel of Christ, which he had made it your duty to ‘preach to every creature.’” The Convention had assembled in fact, to devise the means for the more effective dissemination of the gospel, but the work would be difficult and would require the proper motivation in order to succeed—Christ’s command and example.⁷⁹

Howell presented to those gathered at the Convention a detailed picture of the incarnation, sufferings, and sacrifice of Christ in order to remind them of the magnitude of the grace offered to them and to the nations. He began his exposition of the text by highlighting the “riches” possessed by the Lord Jesus Christ. This phrase, he explained, indicates not only Jesus’ divinity and glory, but the fact that all heaven and earth belong to him, for he both created and sustains them. Jesus became poor, he continued, by dwelling on earth as a man in humble circumstances. The Messiah literally lived in poverty. He suffered persecution, torture, shame, and crucifixion. “Thus gloriously,” Howell concluded, “does his humiliation illustrate ‘the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.’”⁸⁰

⁷⁹Howell, “The Influence of Christ’s Humiliation,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 12:567-68, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

⁸⁰Ibid., 577-78.

Howell offered this exposition in order to impress upon those assembled at the Convention the necessity of a faithful proclamation of the gospel. Citing 1 Peter 2:21 and Hebrews 12:2, he reminded the audience that Christ's example should inspire them to action. They should work in humility, enduring suffering and sacrifice. Also, knowing what Christ has accomplished should move them to vigorous labor on behalf of the lost of all nations. He explained, "Men have been redeemed by the blood of the cross. But of that great truth the mass of the human family are still in the profoundest ignorance!"⁸¹ The means God has ordained for their salvation is the preaching of the gospel. "The word of the Lord must reach the people. The story of the cross must be everywhere made known. Truth must be announced, understood, and believed. Then, and not till then, will all men receive the salvation of God." To whom does the responsibility belong to announce this truth? Howell charged, "Upon you, my brethren, in conjunction with your fellow christians generally, rests the responsibility."⁸² Some would be required to go in person. Others must stay at home and provide time, thought and energy toward the success of the mission. Everyone, he concluded, should pray and contribute financially. Everyone must cooperate.⁸³

As he closed the message, Howell did not leave his audience in doubt regarding the success of the enterprise. Consistent with his view on the effectual application of grace by the Holy Spirit he asserted, "His [Christ's] satisfaction to divine justice cannot be ineffectual." Quoting Isaiah 55:11, Howell asked, "Will he [God] not bring to pass his own purposes of grace?" God had allotted "the heathen for an inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for a possession" (Ps 2:8). Howell was convinced that the missionary enterprise would be a success because God had promised to convert the nations and through the effectual work of the Spirit would bring this to

⁸¹Ibid., 584.

⁸²Ibid., 585-86.

⁸³Ibid., 589.

pass. Consistent with the postmillennial optimism that pervaded Howell's culture, he was convinced that the promise was on the verge of fulfillment. He declared, "Already the shout of the onset [of the armies of God] is heard, from various quarters, and victory is hovering over our banners. God according to his promise, is with us. He is blessing his word. Light is spreading. Darkness is receding. Ere long 'the whole earth, purified from its vices, and cleansed from its sins' shall embrace its great Deliverer."⁸⁴

In summary, Howell urged Baptists throughout his ministry to fulfill their responsibility toward numerous denominational enterprises and encouraged them that God would use their faithfulness to fulfill his promises of grace to humanity. Howell called Baptists to establish schools because he perceived the boon an educated ministry would bring to the mission of the church and he considered Southern Baptists' efforts up to that point to be inadequate. He charged churches to support their ministers because he was convinced that their unwillingness to do so was hampering their pastors' effectiveness. Howell advocated Sunday schools because he considered the conversion of children essential to the spread of the gospel and the protection of democracy. He supported the tract societies because he believed that printed Baptist materials would be essential to spread correct biblical principles. He also wanted to improve the distribution of Baptist books throughout the South and Southwest. Finally, Howell gave his energies to the foreign missions enterprise because the gospel had not permeated the nations of the world as it had permeated the English speaking world. Christ commanded that the church labor toward that goal and poured out his life in order to accomplish it. Through the agency of the church and the effectual work of the Holy Spirit, all nations would cry "Worthy is the Lamb."

⁸⁴Ibid., 591-92. The quote used by Howell in the final sentence is unidentified.

Social Involvement

Along with the conversion of the nations Howell expected the reformation of society. Howell therefore did not conceive of the mission of the church in ushering in the millennium as confined to efforts performed by denominational agencies, whether on the associational, state, or national level. He also considered social involvement important to the transformation of society. While churches, he thought, ought to carry out the mission of spreading the gospel through various means, individual Christians have opportunities to transform society according to Christian principles. The following paragraphs will illuminate Howell's views with respect to social involvement, which he elucidated mostly in editorials and in public addresses. He encouraged his congregation to participate in the political process in order to protect the freedom and righteousness of the nation and help spread that freedom and righteousness all over the world. He stressed the benefits educated men and women would bring to society. Perceiving the evils of strong drink, he also supported temperance societies and advocated legislative changes. Out of concern for the development of young men, he supported the Y.M.C.A. and spoke on several occasions regarding young men's opportunities and responsibilities. Finally, he perceived the importance of the family as an institution intended by God to serve as a means for the proliferation of the gospel and the transformation of society. Husbands, wives, children, and servants should understand their God ordained responsibilities in order to accomplish his purposes. Howell was confident that diligence in these areas would lead to the transformation of society through the agency of the church and the power of the Holy Spirit, according to God's promise.

Political activity. Howell recognized that political excitement could drain the spirituality of churches. The campaigns during the 1844 election, he lamented, had generated "a tempest of feeling" such as "has never before pervaded the South West."⁸⁵

⁸⁵Howell, "The State of Religion," *The Baptist*, 31 August 1844.

In the midst of such political excitement, spirituality had taken a back seat. He found this to be the case in his own congregation. He related as much to them in his annual sermon the following January. The congregation had imbibed a worldly spirit which he attributed to the “tempest of excitement which, the last summer and autumn, swept, like a tornado, through our land.”⁸⁶

Though he recognized that political involvement pursued in excess would threaten the spiritual vitality of the churches, he was convinced that Baptists in America had a special responsibility to protect and promote the security of the nation. The liberty of American churches to pursue their prosperity without hindrance, Howell asserted, was a direct result of the political activity of Baptists. First before the legislature of Virginia and next before the framers of the Bill of Rights, Baptists had lobbied for religious freedom in accordance with historic Baptist principles. The result of this labor was that the United States Constitution contained, “embodied within itself, in the form of organic law, the peculiar doctrines of the Baptists regarding the powers of civil government in the department of religion.” As a result, “nothing more was now wanting for the preservation of the peace, security, and perpetuation of the nation, but a strict and faithful conformity to the Constitution on the part of the Congress, the Judiciary, and the Federal Executive.”⁸⁷ Baptists, therefore, should work to promote the freedoms protected by the Constitution. In a July Fourth address in which Howell asserted the role of Sunday schools in raising up moral, enlightened, religious children to promote the prosperity of

⁸⁶Howell, “Annual Sermon, with a Review of the Progress of the Church in Nashville for Ten Years,” *The Baptist*, 4 January 1845. Through forty years of ministry Howell maintained the practice of preaching what he called an “annual sermon,” reviewing the blessings of God, the successes, and the trials of the previous year and considering the challenges that awaited the church. Not long after preaching his fortieth annual sermon he suffered a stroke and thereafter resigned. Shortly before he died he had the manuscripts of all forty sermons bound together in a single volume. See “Pastor’s Record Book.” Sadly, this volume does not seem to be extant.

⁸⁷Howell, *The Early Baptists of Virginia* (Philadelphia: The Bible and Publication Society, 1857), 231-32. Howell discussed the role of Virginia Baptists in influencing state and Federal government from pp. 139-74 and 200-22.

the nation, he closed, “We look to our whole country, and pray, and labor for its union, prosperity, and happiness.”⁸⁸

Howell envisioned that strengthening American liberty would do more than provide the freedom for Baptists to worship according to their consciences. He hoped that the freedom and righteousness which he thought characterized the nation would spread all over the world and thus play a role in the coming of the millennium. On 22 February 1837, Howell delivered a public prayer at a celebration of George Washington’s birthday in which the city of Nashville also paid honor to a brigade of Tennessee soldiers who had just returned from fighting the Seminoles in Florida. On that occasion Howell praised the Lord because he had in the past protected the country from invasion and “party discords.” Howell viewed this protection as evidence of divine approval. “Still,” he said, “our God has overruled to our aggrandizement, and preserved to us our free institutions, our liberties, and our holy religion, in this pristine purity, force, and vigour.” He prayed that God would continue to defend the nation, adding “and may our beloved Country stand forth . . . a beacon light of purity, freedom, and happiness, to the nations of the old world, and the new; a monument of thy distinguished mercy, till hoary time shall lay his weary limbs in the grave of eternity. May our land ever be the dwelling-place of pure religion, and thence may streams of salvation flow out to water the whole earth, through the righteousness and merits of Jesus Christ our Redeemer.” He hoped this era of peace, stimulated by the righteous example of America, would come soon. He prayed, “Hasten the fulfillment of thy promise to give perpetual concord to our jarring world. Cause all nations to beat their swords into plough shares, and their spears into pruning hooks, and learn war no more. May they emulate each other only in holiness and the

⁸⁸Howell, “The Relations between Baptist Principles and Political Liberty,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:733, The Robert Boyte Crawford Howell Collection, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

useful arts; and may the glory of the Lord cover the whole earth as the waters cover the sea.”⁸⁹

Education. Howell understood political freedom to be a crucial element in the progress of society toward the peace and prosperity God promised. One important means of securing and protecting freedom, he thought, was education. Howell spoke on several occasions at commencement services for both male and female academies, and in each case he made a similar argument. Speaking at the commencement services of the University of Nashville in 1839, he stated, “Intellectual [independence], will necessarily lead to religious independence; and wherever these exist, they will conduct their possessors, indubitably, to political freedom.”⁹⁰ Howell emphasized to the young graduates, however, that the training of the mind alone would not secure for the country “the highest benefits of intellectual attainment.” Instead, “it is absolutely necessary that we should unite with it an elevated degree of moral and religious cultivation.”⁹¹ Along with intellectual attainment an individual would need motives drawn from pure religion, motives which take into account the interests of heaven and hell, time and eternity, and the glory of God. Howell continued, “These will preserve clearness, and power of conception, lead to perseverance in application, cherish purity of heart, and, exercised in connection with a blameless life, will conduct us infallibly to the highest intellectual achievements, and crown us with the brightest honors of learning.”⁹² These two—intellectual attainment and pure religion—are necessary “to insure the perpetuity of our

⁸⁹Howell, “A Prayer. Offered in the M. E. Church, Nashville, on the Celebration of the Birth Day of Washington, and to Do Honour to the Tennessee Brigade of Volunteers Recently Returned from Florida, 22 February 1837,” Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 14:316-20, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

⁹⁰Howell, *An Address Delivered before the University of Nashville, at the Annual Commencement, October 2nd, 1839, in the Presbyterian Church* (Nashville: B. R. M’Kennie, 1839), 5.

⁹¹Ibid., 6.

⁹²Ibid., 14.

free republican institutions.” While Mexico, he argued, has achieved its independence, “they are not free, because they are not intelligent.” France, on the other hand, created a republic, “but she abolished religion at the same time, and her boasted freedom became a ‘reign of terror.’” Howell continued, “We have small reason, therefore, to hope for the stability and perpetuity of our beloved republic, unless, with intellectual culture, moral and religious principle grows up, and holds equal balance in the hearts of our fellow citizens.”⁹³ He closed by stating that in later years, looking back on the accomplishments of intellectually trained, spiritual men, many would sing their praises.

Howell considered the intellectual cultivation of women equally necessary to national prosperity. In an address to students at the Nashville Female Academy, he said that “to secure and perpetuate perfect civilization, refinement, and happiness, in society, female education, moral, religious, and intellectual, to as great an extent as circumstances will allow, is necessary as the presence of the sun to the light of day.” The proper cultivation of women is necessary, he argued, because the character of a man is formed at home. Thus men will be what women are. The two will rise or fall together. Beyond this, he argued, the education of women is necessary for their own sakes. He was convinced that in his culture, fathers were not giving young ladies an adequate amount of instruction and were pushing them into adulthood too soon, without adequate time to comprehend the difficulties and complexities of life. In a similar address, he explained his point this way: “So rapid often is the progress of southern female life, that at twenty-five, when with our sex is first felt the gushings of a manly spirit, woman is already sinking into the grave! Hopes which a fervid imagination has too fondly cherished, are forever disappointed.” To his audience he urged, “For the sake, therefore, both of

⁹³Ibid., 18-20. Howell made similar remarks in an address at the 1845 commencement of Georgetown College. The address, in fact, is an abbreviated version of the University of Nashville address. See Howell, *The Responsibilities of Educated Men. An Oration Delivered before the Society of Alumni of Georgetown College, at the Annual Commencement, June 26, 1845* (Georgetown, KY: Published by the Society of Alumni, 1845). By stating that Mexicans in his day were “not intelligent,” Howell probably meant that few in that country were educated adequately. Given his racial opinions with respect to Africans, however, the statement could have carried racial overtones as well.

learning and happiness, I desire more time for the young ladies of the South.” He wanted to make clear, however, that he was not advocating detaining women from marriage for too long. He added, “But I would give to her mind full development, which cannot be done without deep, laborious, and protracted thought. I would recall her fancy from the wild regions of romance, and give her a more correct knowledge of human nature in its true forms. I would impart to her discrimination, logical acumen, and an easy, graceful literary taste. I would thus give her a fair prospect for a happy and useful life.”⁹⁴

Without an adequate education, he lamented, women often suffer from a crushed and disillusioned spirit. Thus Howell called on fathers to take seriously the education of their daughters and on Baptists to take seriously the cause of female higher education.

In addition to addressing young men and women regarding the benefits of education, Howell also addressed the working class. The Mechanics’ Library Association of Nashville, founded to provide accessible reading material to working men who wanted to improve their education, asked Howell to address them. The laboring classes, he argued in this lecture, should pursue education for their own benefit and for the benefit of society. Intellectual cultivation can help laborers improve the quality of their work and perhaps discover new ways of accomplishing it. Furthermore, the laboring classes make up the majority of every community and thus their votes make a significant impact. He stated, “They, therefore, hold in their hands the destinies of your government.”⁹⁵ Thus Howell saw education as a benefit to all Americans, men and women, professional and working class.

⁹⁴Howell, *The Relations of Woman to Human Happiness. An Address Before the Chowan Female Collegiate Institute, at the Anniversary at Murfreesboro North Carolina, August 10, 1853* (Richmond, VA: H. K. Ellyson, 1853), 17-18.

⁹⁵Howell, “A Lecture. The Influence upon Artizans and the Arts of a Love of Learning. Delivered before the Mechanics’ Library Association of Nashville, Tennessee, November 23d, 1841,” *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 10 March 1842, and 17 March 1842.

Temperance. In this same lecture to the Mechanics' Library Association, Howell argued that two things would improve the state of degradation that plagued the Southwest: the education of the masses "and the removal from the dissolute of the excitements of whiskey." Howell had supported the temperance movement during his pastorate in Norfolk.⁹⁶ When he moved to Tennessee, however, he perceived the manufacture and consumption of whiskey to be one of the most serious social problems the state faced. Only the need for an educated working class ranked comparably. Especially disgraceful, in his opinion, was the reality that many Baptist ministers and deacons were guilty of distilling whiskey and profiting from its sale. Howell included in the pages of *The Baptist* a resolution from the Dixon's Creek church that anyone wishing to join must assent to a previous resolution enjoining total abstinence from strong drink. Furthermore, any deacon of another church, known to drink whiskey, who happens to visit the church at the time of communion, would not receive an invitation to assist in the administration of the Supper. Ministers guilty of the same would not receive an invitation to the pulpit. Howell affirmed the resolution and used the opportunity to "pour out the chagrin of our soul upon the subject." He stated plainly, "If it be an awful fact that all drunkards shall have their part in the lake that burneth with fire and brimstone, ought not such ministers and deacons tremble when they remember that they are the instruments of this damnation! How will they escape the curse of him who putteth his bottle to his neighbor's mouth, and maketh him drunken? How long shall the Baptist Church groan under the curses, and disgrace brought upon it by such ministers, and members!"⁹⁷

Howell was not the only one to notice the extent of the problem. In 1839 the Tennessee Legislature passed a law outlawing "tippling houses;" those found selling

⁹⁶See Lumpkin, *First Baptist Church of Norfolk*, 22.

⁹⁷Howell, "Temperance in the Church," *The Baptist*, June 1836.

whiskey and other hard liquor thereafter found themselves facing a judge. According to Howell, the vast majority of Tennesseans praised the new laws. “Public opinion imperiously demanded these laws. Our citizens called upon their Legislature for protection against the army of locusts that were destroying the land.” In addition to outlawing the sale of whiskey, the law prohibited the practice of dueling and the sale of lottery tickets. Howell considered all of these measures to be positive developments and called for two more—laws against the theater and horse racing. Nevertheless, the act the legislature passed, he thought, demonstrated well several positive traits of Tennesseans—boldness, independence, and uncompromising resolution.⁹⁸

Young men. As Howell considered the changes needed in order to bring greater righteousness and peace to society, he considered a large amount of the responsibility for these changes to lie upon young men. In a sermon based on Psalm 119:9, to his Nashville congregation, he stated, “The eyes of the church, and of the world, in every age, are fixed upon the young men, as their chief hope.” The defense of the nation and the development of its commerce, arts, sciences, and literature depend upon the energy and industry of young men. Given this reality, young men must preserve themselves from “the corruptions and vices incident to our present condition” so that “the prosperity of religion, and the foundations of social order are both secure.” Young men are subject to a variety of temptations drawn from a natural desire for excitement and social engagement, as well as the “violent passions” that can seduce them into “the most deadly sins.” Young men, therefore, need to keep themselves pure, both for the sake of the church and for the sake of society.⁹⁹

⁹⁸Howell, “Tennessee Character,” *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 28 March 1839. The law did not go unchallenged, however. Howell addressed this several months later: “The Tippling Law,” *The Baptist Banner and Western Pioneer*, 19 December 1839.

⁹⁹Howell, “Young Men,” *The Baptist*, 31 August 1845.

In order for young men to keep their way pure, Howell argued, they need pure religion, true spirituality, not mere morality. Not only will mere morality not save the sinner in the world to come, but it will also not remain firm through adversity. In order to remedy this situation, young men must receive cleansing from the Lord Jesus Christ, take heed to God's word as the standard for purity, and in fact study the Bible. Young men, he asserted, also need the support and encouragement of others, especially of those their own age. Therefore, Howell encouraged the congregation to "secure, by your intelligence, piety and affectionate attentions, the confidence of your youthful companions, and lead them to the Saviour, to holiness, and to eternal life." Howell considered this responsibility especially applicable to ladies, who in all the relations of life "exert a boundless influence over us."¹⁰⁰ He considered this advice to be applicable to young men as well, however. After men in Richmond had organized the Young Men's Christian Association, Howell gave those assembled this same charge. They sought, according to their purpose statement, to extend Christian fellowship and sympathy to the young men of the city, particularly to those new to the city. Howell advised them make their concern for the young men known to them and to encourage the young men to honor the Sabbath and fill their leisure time with activities which "shall elicit, and invigorate high moral principle."¹⁰¹ The strengthening of young men, then, would prove a boon to both the church and society.

The family. Howell considered the strengthening of families, not merely of young men, to be another necessary component to the prosperity and security of the nation. Liberty, education, moral righteousness, and industriousness were all crucial

¹⁰⁰Ibid.

¹⁰¹Howell, "The Conservatism of Christianity, A Lecture before the Richmond Young Men's Christian Association, at St. James' Church, March 2nd, 1855," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 13:438-44, Virginia Baptist Historical Society, Richmond. The first Y.M.C.A. groups in North America were organized in Montreal and Boston in 1851. The Richmond Y.M.C.A. was formed in 1854. See C. Howard Hopkins, *The History of the Y.M.C.A. in North America* (New York: Association Press, 1951), 15-25.

components for the kind of society God would use as a beacon of light to the nations. Without strong families, however, the nation could not flourish. Summarizing the argument of the first chapter of his book, “The Family,” Howell reasoned, “If the family is the happiest earthly association of which men in the present life are capable; if it be the source, and support, of all our best affections; if it really does originate, and sustain, all the industry, and economy, found existing in the world; remove it as an institution, from the nation, and you would reduce it to instant chaos, and cover it with darkness, and death.” Stated plainly, he said, “The family is necessary to the national power, and excellency, and renown.”¹⁰²

Beginning with the institution of marriage itself, Howell outlined God’s plan for a happy, godly home. He devoted a chapter each to the institution of marriage, the responsibilities of husbands, and the responsibilities of wives. He defined marriage as an institution ordained by God in which the man and woman enter into “a solemn compact,” “a sacred union.”¹⁰³ He explained the blessings that God intended to flow from marriage and the considerations which ought to guide the man and woman as they enter into marriage. The husband, as God had designed, is the head of the family. Howell quoted 1 Corinthians 11:3-5 and Ephesians 5:22-24 and argued that God established this headship in the family for the sake of everyone: “Otherwise perpetual confusion will mark inevitably, all its [the family’s] proceedings.” The husband ought to love, honor, and cherish the wife and should at times yield to her wishes, “but her reputation, dignity, and happiness, no less than his, demand that he should not abdicate the throne.”¹⁰⁴ The wife must respect and esteem her husband. He asserted, “Upon her strict conformity to this injunction will depend in a high degree, her inclination, if not her actual ability to

¹⁰²Howell, “The Family,” 23, 26, The Morton Boyte Howell Collection, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

¹⁰³Ibid., 31-32.

¹⁰⁴Ibid., 59-60.

appreciate, and discharge, every other duty.”¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Howell wrote, the wife must obey her husband in everything reasonable, but “when the husband places himself between his wife, and Christ,” she must “sacrifice all for Christ.”¹⁰⁶ The wife should seek to please her husband and above all else ought to seek earnestly his salvation.

Howell devoted three chapters to the task of rearing children and promoting their spiritual welfare. He began by providing biblical admonitions which underlined the importance of the task and reinforced his point by reminding the reader of the negative example set by Eli, the Hebrew High Priest. He asserted, “No severer punishment has ever fallen upon men than that which has been the penalty of the unfaithful parent.”¹⁰⁷ Parents, he explained, must train their children to honor God, must provide them with mental and moral training, must introduce them to habits of industry and economy, and must supervise their reading and companionship. Parents should also undertake the religious instruction of children, taking care to avoid two extremes: the one of resolving not to influence the child on the subject of religion, the other of baptizing the infant into the church and rear the child as a member of that body. Their religious cultivation should involve parents studying the Bible with them, training them in prayer, setting a godly example for them, and teaching them to honor the Sabbath. Howell gave further advice to children, to brothers and sisters, and to parents on how to utilize amusements to the benefit of the family and the glory of God. He emphasized that the responsibility for a godly, happy family rests upon believers: “Your family will infallibly be what you yourself make it. By your disobedience to God, by your neglect of his ordinances, by your abuse of his blessings, or by all these together, it may become a place of sorrow, and misery, and death.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 81.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 86.

¹⁰⁷Ibid., 107.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 30.

Howell devoted three other chapters to an aspect of family life he considered scriptural and relevant to his time—servants. He engaged in a biblical and historical defense of the institution of slavery which had prevailed in the Southern states prior to the cessation of hostilities at Appomattox Court House. In fact, though he completed the book nearly a year after the war was over, the subject of slavery comprised one of his primary motivations for writing the book. He made clear in the preface that he wrote the book partly because no work like it existed which combined a practical treatment on the roles and responsibilities of family members with a rigorous defense of slavery. The best book of its kind, in his estimation, William Hague's *Home Life*, contained an excellent treatment on husbands, wives, children, and family worship, but was "adjusted to a particular latitude, and to the Domestic Institutions of New England."¹⁰⁹ Despite the fact that the Federal government had emancipated the slaves, Howell argued that the institution was both scriptural and in the best interests of the slaves themselves. Specifically, they received treatment better than what they had known in Africa and had far greater opportunities to receive the gospel. Furthermore, he argued, the Africans could not live in the same society on equal terms with those of European descent. Freedom, he asserted, would be the worst thing to happen to the race. White Southerners had sustained the men of the colored race. He explained, "That power which preserved them is now utterly destroyed. Already they are perishing by tens of thousands. As the coloured race has disappeared in England, so they will ere long disappear from America."¹¹⁰ Even after the Civil War, therefore, Howell wanted to convince his readers

¹⁰⁹Ibid., 3. See William Hague, *Home Life: Twelve Lectures* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1854). Hague graduated from Hamilton College in New York in 1826 and served churches in New York, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and New Jersey. See William Cathcart, *The Baptist Encyclopedia* (Philadelphia: Louis H. Everts, 1881), 1:485.

¹¹⁰Howell, "The Family." The chapters on slavery show signs that Howell must have reorganized them at a late stage. For this reason the page numbers fluctuate and some sections are not numbered at all. The latter quote is from the second to last page of chap. 12. Regarding the assertion that freedmen were perishing by the tens of thousands—one struggles even to take him seriously, much less believe his assertion or agree with his argument. Howell did, however, remain consistent in his convictions regarding Africans throughout his ministry. Even early in his ministry he was convinced that equality

that the biblical view of the family, the institution that influences society more than any other, includes a role for slaves.

In his book on the family Howell remained consistent with the social philosophy he had advocated throughout his ministry. He had argued in other works that the prosperity and progress of the world toward God's plan required the defense of freedom and the strengthening of American institutions. Foremost among these institutions was the family. One note missing from his work on the family (which crept in, for instance, in a similar address he made on Sunday Schools), was his confidence regarding the progress of the world toward the millennium. In addition to comments Howell had made throughout his ministry, Hague's work contained postmillennial musings. Charging believers to implement God's plan for marriage, Hague said, "What a mighty stride would have been made towards the attainment of that state of millennial bliss which the Harp of Prophecy has for ages celebrated!"¹¹¹ Howell stated openly his admiration of Hague's work and often expressed his belief in postmillennialism, but he did not make any projections or offer any encouragements related to the coming of the latter day glory in this work. The Civil War had crushed his hope that the millennial age was dawning. In December of 1861, with the North and South divided by war, Howell reworked an earlier sermon, entitled "The Duty of Christians with Regard to Peace," and addressed his anxious congregation. In the midst of his exposition, admonition, and encouragement, he stated soberly, "In reference to our own country at least, and especially in regard to civil strife, fondly had we hoped that this halcyon day [the

between the races in America could never be achieved. He encouraged his Cumberland Street congregation to support the work of the African Colonization Society because it provided an opportunity to work for the conversion of Africa and because it provided an opportunity for men of the colored race to attain a higher status in society than they could attain in America. He concluded in that sermon, "If we reflect a moment, we shall see that this [the plan of the African Colonization Society to send Christian freedmen to Africa to establish a colony] is the only method by which the colored population of our own country, can be benefited by emancipation; while it is at the same time, the best and only means by which to spread christianity over Africa." He made the latter statement because he thought the African climate was too harsh for whites. Howell, "Colonization, or the Conversion of Africa," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 14:19, The Howell Family Papers, Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville.

¹¹¹Hague, *Home Life*, 23.

millennium] had already dawned upon us. A dissolution of our great national Union, at some period, not very distant, we had thought probable, but not a furious conflict of arms between the parties.” Howell continued, saying that he had thought that the true spirit of religion prevailed in the land to too great an extent to allow such a conflict to occur. He concluded, “Unhappily we were mistaken.”¹¹² Whether or not Howell changed his views on the millennium as a result of reflection upon the events of the Civil War is unknown. The tragedy of the war, however, motivated Howell to sober his estimate regarding the impact evangelicals were having on American culture, and at the very least most likely influenced him to avoid mention of the millennium in his work on the family. Despite the absence of the coming of the millennium in the work, Howell’s social philosophy as demonstrated in “The Family” remains consistent with his earlier editorials, sermons, and public addresses on social issues.

Conclusion

R. B. C. Howell was a man of his times in terms of the relationship between Christ and culture. In continuity with the British Baptists who initiated the mission movement, and in agreement with Jonathan Edwards and a large number of American believers in his own day, Howell was convinced that God would use the church to transform human culture and spread Christianity all over the world until it permeated every nation. He considered the Holy Spirit to be the sovereign agent who would bring this event to pass in accordance with biblical promises. Yet the means by which the Spirit would operate, he taught, included the preaching of the gospel, prayer, edifying conversation, and participation in numerous benevolent enterprises. Motivated by the situation of his culture and what he considered the teachings of Scripture, he called upon Baptists to found colleges and a centrally located seminary in order to stimulate

¹¹²Howell, “Memorial of the First Baptist Church,” vol. 2. Typescript 2:331. Howell preached the earlier sermon bearing the same title in Nashville on 4 August 1844. See Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 8:31-44, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

ministerial education. He charged them to support their ministers adequately in order to provide them with the opportunity to discharge their duties to their maximum ability. He encouraged the work of Sunday schools to foster the spiritual development of children, and he supported the organization of tract societies in order to distribute denominational literature. Though he never embarked for the foreign field, he frequently served as an advocate for international missions. Howell also encouraged the Christians in his day to work to protect the institutions of society and labor to mold them more into the shape of godliness. Of utmost importance, he was convinced, were the protection of liberty and the strengthening of the family, though he strongly advocated temperance reform, the education of the working class, and the development of young men as well.

Despite a discouraging assessment regarding the advent of the millennium at the very end of his career and silence regarding whether the Civil War had motivated him to reconsider his view, up until 1861 Howell consistently presented postmillennialism as the scriptural view of the coming of the kingdom. This view, he thought, properly integrated the sovereign prerogative of God in his work in history with the responsibility of man to promote the work of the kingdom. Howell frequently pointed to what he considered the promises of Scripture regarding the coming of the millennium for inspiration and encouragement in the building up of the benevolent empire among Baptists.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

The Integration of Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility

Missiologist Charles Van Engen described mission theology by breaking down the phrase “theology of mission.” The discipline, he explained, is first “theology.” It is concerned with all of the traditional themes of systematic theology, fundamentally concerning God, his intentions and purposes, and his use of human instruments. Secondly, it is “theology of,” an applied science. He explained: “At times it looks like what some would call pastoral or practical theology, due to its applicational nature. This type of theological reflection focuses specifically on a set of particular issues—those having to do with the mission of the church in its context.”¹

R. B. C. Howell lived in a context in which mission theology was an issue of importance to the Baptist denomination. Theological developments during the early American republic brought changes which challenged Baptists’ understanding of their mission at its foundation. The democratic impulse spurred by the American Revolution spawned equal and opposite pressures in Baptist life. On the one hand, some Baptists developed anti-elitist tendencies and resented the perceived encroachment of New England theology and methodology upon what they perceived to be the primitive pattern for church life. These Primitive Baptists opposed benevolent societies of all kinds, particularly mission societies, which were in any way connected with churches, and often refused to provide financial support for ministers or provide opportunities for theological

¹Charles Van Engen, “Theology of Mission,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of World Missions*, ed. A. Scott Moreau (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 949

education. On the other hand, the democratic impulse of the Revolution inspired many pastors and theologians to break with the theological traditions of the past, of the Old World, and embrace new theological traditions which many of them considered to be more faithful to the biblical pattern. Thus pastors and theologians boldly proclaimed their freedom from the Calvinism which had held sway in New England. Out of this movement came Alexander Campbell's reformation movement and many of the evangelists of the Great Revival, which swept the Southwest in the first decades of the nineteenth century. These groups embraced theological and methodological changes which brought division to Baptist associations throughout the South. In addition to these pressures, New England theology, which so closely identified itself with Calvinism, was itself undergoing reconstruction in its understanding of the ground for human accountability. Because of this, theologians such as Charles G. Finney and Nathaniel W. Taylor rejected the imputation of Adam's sin to his posterity, the imputation of Christ's righteousness to the believer, and the inability of humans to repent and believe without a special work of the Holy Spirit on the heart. Despite all of these changes to traditional Calvinism, they still claimed the legacy of Jonathan Edwards. In the midst of this theological shift came a methodological shift. Finney and his advocates embraced many "New Measures" designed to provoke a response from listeners and generate revival. As a result of pressure from these three fronts—antimissionism, populist Arminianism, and New England theology—Baptists in Howell's day closely scrutinized the mission of the church with regard to evangelism, education, foreign missions, and social reform.

As a theologically-minded pastor, newspaper editor, author, and denominational statesman, Howell responded to these pressures throughout his ministry. He did not set out to construct formally a "mission theology" from which Baptists would be educated. Mission Theology as a formal academic discipline did not emerge until the middle of the twentieth century. Rather, as he addressed what he perceived to be the errors of these various movements, he consistently pointed toward the perceived harm

their doctrinal views would do to the mission of the church. He identified the integration of the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility as the major theological issue which these movements had blurred. The Primitive Baptists, he argued, formulated their understanding of divine sovereignty in such a way that they undermined human accountability. Thus, they left no room theologically for the use of means for the conversion of souls or, in fact, for the quest for sanctification. They had a very truncated view of the church's mission, both with regard to the lost world and with regard to its own purity, because they had no theological foundation for human responsibility. Other Baptists in sympathy with a democratized, Arminian theology, Howell thought, brought into the church an unhealthy fixation upon techniques designed to provoke human response or focused only upon a verbal confession of faith. In Howell's estimation they misunderstood the depth of human depravity, the doctrine of original sin, and the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion. As a result, their churches held a view of salvation that did not magnify the grace of God and ultimately allowed unconverted men and women into membership. They, too, had misunderstood the doctrines of divine sovereignty and human responsibility and were undermining the mission of the church by perverting its message and promoting techniques that do not elicit real change in individuals. While the hyper-Calvinistic Primitive Baptists had left no room for the use of means and thus misunderstood the mission of the church, the more Arminian groups had distorted the message and threatened to neutralize the mission.

In addition to the poles of hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism which threatened to distort the church's message and disrupt its mission, Howell dealt with what he viewed to be distortions to ecclesiology which would undermine the church's mission. He emphasized in the midst of pressures from both poles that God had ordained to use the church as the means, empowered by the Holy Spirit, to accomplish his purposes on earth. Howell sought to defend not only the assertion that the church is God's ordained means, but also the method by which the church ought to conduct that mission together with the

attitude it ought to have with respect to Christians who disagree. Scripture teaches that the church is a missionary body, he asserted. Furthermore, the most consistent, most scriptural, and most conducive ecclesiology for promoting the mission of the church is Baptist ecclesiology. Despite this assertion, he perceived danger in the efforts of Landmarkers to exalt the local Baptist church at the expense of the doctrine of the universal church. Such a theology, he concluded, distorts scriptural teaching and undermines Baptist efforts toward those of other denominations.

Controversy can have a powerful, shaping effect upon the life and doctrine of a church or denomination. Controversy can force believers to face foundational theological issues and clarify where they stand with respect to them. It can also draw churches toward an understanding of how their methodologies are in tension with their theological presuppositions. Through much of Howell's ministry he addressed controversial issues with a desire to strengthen churches and bolster the missionary enterprise. Thus he addressed issues raised by Primitive Baptists, Campbellites, Charles Finney and other Arminian revivalists, traditional Calvinist theology, Wesleyan perfectionism, infant baptism, and Landmarkism.

In one important respect, however, Howell formulated his mission theology in concert with his theological context rather than as a corrective to contemporary theological movements—namely, his eschatology. In agreement with so many during his day, Howell espoused the postmillennial confidence that God was using the church as the means through which the Holy Spirit was transforming human society. If the doctrines of the divine decrees, original sin, human depravity, regeneration, the nature and extent of the atonement, and sanctification provided the theological foundation for the church's mission, and if Baptist ecclesiology provided the structure for the church's mission, eschatology provided for Howell the motivation for the church's mission. God was using the benevolent operations of the church to spread the gospel all over the world and bring

change to human society. Postmillennialism provided the final pillar to support Howell's mission theology.

This examination of Howell's theology has demonstrated that Howell considered theological presuppositions important for ministry. Missiologists who study mission theology, as explained by Gerald Anderson, Charles Van Engen, and others, argue that theological presuppositions should inform and shape the mission endeavors of the church. Baptists and other evangelicals today would benefit from a closer examination of theological presuppositions. A recent President of the Southern Baptist Convention, Jerry Vines, explained in a chapel service at Southeastern Seminary in 1995 that he had wrestled with how to reconcile divine sovereignty and human responsibility. He encouraged the students not to pay heed to "man-centered theology." "I could care less," he maintained, "what Calvin believed and I could care less what Arminius believed—I want to know what the revealed Word of God has to say."² R. B. C. Howell, in one of his sermons on predestination, made a similar statement. Regarding both Calvinists and Arminians he stated, "Their defects are that they are based too much upon abstract speculations regarding the government of God, and the nature and powers of men, and not enough upon the declarations of the divine word."³ Despite disclaiming what he defined as Calvinism and Arminianism, Howell paid close attention to the integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility. Vines, on the other hand, asserted that the Bible teaches divine sovereignty and human responsibility and concluded, "I don't worry about reconciling them. I just preach and God takes care of the reconciliation."⁴ If Howell's work as a theologically minded pastor and author is of any

²Dwayne Hastings, "Calvinist or Arminian? Argument Empty, Vines Says," *The Christian Index*, 14 September 1995, 3; cited in Thomas J. Nettles, *By His Grace and for His Glory: A Historical, Theological, and Practical Study of the Doctrines of Grace in Baptist Life*, rev. and exp. (Cape Coral, FL: Founders Press, 2006), 271.

³R. B. C. Howell, "Predestination," Manuscript Notes of Sermons, 10:966, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archives, Nashville.

⁴Hastings, "Calvinist or Arminian? Argument Empty, Vines Says."

value to the present generation, perhaps it can remind them that one cannot preach the gospel or pursue the mission of the church at all without some implicit scheme for integrating divine sovereignty and human responsibility. The integration of these doctrines has implications for every area of theology and for the mission of the church. Pastors and church members must examine these theological presuppositions in the light of Scripture or risk advocating either a message that distorts the gospel or methods that undermine the church's God-given mission.

Prospects for Future Research

This project began simply as an effort to present a somewhat comprehensive picture of R. B. C. Howell's theology. Though historians had neglected his thought, Howell left behind a wealth of material by which they might come to understand his theological convictions. Howell was somewhat unique among Baptists (both North and South) with respect to the abundance of his published writing and his ambition to preserve his own private notes. Researchers can explore the thought of few nineteenth century Baptists to the depth possible with the study of Howell. Nevertheless, researchers concerned with examining particular theological issues that concerned Baptists during the nineteenth century have plenty of primary source material. Baptists began publishing newspapers filled with theological material in the 1820s and continued to fill the pages of their periodicals with theological reflection for the next century. In addition, countless circular letters, pamphlets, and sermons came off the press and offer scholars and lay people alike a window into the minds of Baptists during this period, some well known and many obscure. All of the issues that concerned Howell, as presented in this dissertation, received the attention of others in Baptist life, though very few wrote on all of them to the extent that Howell did. Baptists and all evangelicals would benefit from a detailed exploration of the theological convictions that informed the ministries of Baptists in the nineteenth century.

Baptists and other evangelicals would also benefit from an examination of the mission theology of their forbearers. All evangelical denominations benefit from the institutions founded in previous generations, in many cases institutions established in the first half of the nineteenth century. These denominations have changed over time. Subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle theological shifts have accompanied shifts in methodology and mission strategy. In many cases the two are not unrelated. Southern Baptists, in particular, could benefit from an examination of the theological presuppositions that have informed their missionary efforts since 1845. How has the shift away from postmillennialism toward premillennialism altered missionary strategy or the promotion of the missionary cause? How has a shift in the understanding of the integration of divine sovereignty and human responsibility among many Baptists influenced changes in methodology? An examination of the theological convictions that informed past efforts will enhance the understanding of the past in the present and possibly strengthen future endeavors through the serious theological reflection that results.

In the midst of the rigorous theological examination of this dissertation, one important subject has lain neglected—Howell the man. Past biographical accounts, though largely unpublished, have provided a wealth of information about Howell's life and ministerial contributions. The present analysis has endeavored to demonstrate many of his theological convictions. No work on Howell, however, has fully utilized the manuscript resources provided by Howell himself—his letters, books, and editorial work—to present a sensitive portrait of Howell's life. His influence on the formation and stabilization of many Southern Baptist institutions was greater than many have realized. The emergence of J. R. Graves as the most influential figure among Baptists in the Southwest, combined with the bitter schism which resulted from his conflict with Howell, has overshadowed in many accounts the influence the latter had on the thinking of Baptists during the early days of the mission movement. Scholars often distill Howell's character from his activities during the conflict with Graves, but fully thirty years of

pastoral ministry, preaching, and denominational activity transpired before this event which ought to contribute toward this picture. In addition, a helpful number of letters to family members and ministerial associates assist in providing a more personal portrait. Southern Baptists of this generation would benefit from a balanced assessment of the ministry, personal life, and theological contributions of the most important leaders of the first generation.

APPENDIX

KEY EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF R. B. C. HOWELL

10 March 1801	Robert Boyte Crawford Howell was born to Ralph and Jane Howell in Wayne County, North Carolina
6 February 1821	Baptized by R. T. Daniel. One week later he preached his first sermon and three weeks later he was licensed to preach.
November, 1824-May 1826	Studied at Columbian College in the Preparatory and Theological Departments.
July 1826-January 1827	Missionary to Virginia Portsmouth Association
January 1827-January 1828	Interim Pastor, Cumberland Street Church, Norfolk, Virginia.
27 January 1828	Ordination at Cumberland Street Church.
January 1828-July 1834	Pastor, Cumberland Street Church.
23 April 1829	Married to Mary Ann Morton Toy.
1831	Published <i>A Review of 'The Office of Sponsors in Baptism.'</i>
January 1835	Commenced publication of <i>The Baptist</i> in Nashville, Tennessee. It ran monthly until January of 1839.
January 1835-April 1850	Pastor, First Baptist Church, Nashville.
January, 1837	Published the first of ten letters on the subject of missions, addressed to John M. Watson.
1841	Published his first book, <i>The Terms of Sacramental Communion.</i>
June, 1844	Reissued <i>The Baptist</i> as a bimonthly periodical.
1846	Published <i>The Deaconship.</i>
June, 1846	Voted Vice-President of the Southern Baptist Convention. He held this position until 1851.
1849	Published <i>The Way of Salvation.</i>

- April 1850-July 1857 Pastor, Second Baptist Church, Richmond, Virginia.
- 1851 Published *The Evils of Infant Baptism*.
- June, 1851 Elected President of the Southern Baptist Convention. The Convention reelected him to this position at the 1853, 1855, 1857, and 1859 meetings, though at the latter meeting he resigned immediately after being elected.
- 1854 Published *The Cross*.
- 1855 Published *The Covenants*.
- 1856 Delivered an address to the American Baptist Historical Society entitled, "The Early Baptists of Virginia." He later expanded the work into a book which was published posthumously.
- July 1857-1 July 1867 Pastor, First Baptist Church, Nashville.
- 12 October, 1858 First Baptist Nashville commenced formal proceedings against J. R. Graves, leading to the exclusion of Graves and 47 others.
- 11 February, 1862 Fort Donelson captured by Federal troops and Confederate troops receded South of Nashville, making the occupation of Nashville imminent. Howell remained in the city to serve his flock.
- 28 June, 1862 Howell and several other Nashville ministers imprisoned for refusing to take an oath of allegiance to the United States government. Howell wrote a letter to Governor Andrew Johnson explaining his position. He was released several days later due to poor health.
- 5 April, 1858 Died after suffering from a stroke.

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ABSTRACT

R. B. C. HOWELL AND THE THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR BAPTIST PARTICIPATION IN THE BENEVOLENT EMPIRE

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This dissertation examines the theological writing and preaching of Robert Boyte Crawford Howell, Southern Baptist pastor, editor, author, and denominational leader in the mid-nineteenth century. It argues that Howell promoted Baptist denominational participation in what many historians call “the benevolent empire” by demonstrating in his soteriology, ecclesiology, and eschatology the consistent connection between divine sovereignty and human responsibility in God’s mission to the world. The dissertation demonstrates that Howell responded to the challenges brought to the burgeoning missions and benevolent movement among Baptists, particularly from antimission Baptists, populist Arminians, the Restoration Movement, pedobaptists, and Landmarkers, by constructing a theological foundation for the church’s mission built upon a carefully integrated view of divine sovereignty and human responsibility.

Chapter one outlines the rise of the missions and benevolent movement among American denominations in the nineteenth century, known by historians as “the benevolent empire,” giving attention to the beginning of Baptist denominational work. The chapter further describes Howell’s ministerial labors on behalf of missions and benevolence throughout his ministry and the desire he articulated to provide a solid theological foundation for the movement.

The dissertation is organized according to systematic-theological categories in order to demonstrate the integration Howell endeavored to achieve in each doctrine in the midst of pressures from various opponents. Chapter two analyzes Howell's view of the divine decrees, providing analysis of his position on election and reprobation. Chapter three analyzes Howell's views on human depravity and the role of the Holy Spirit in the regeneration of the soul and revival in the church. Chapter four analyzes Howell's view of Christ's work on the cross, focusing on the covenant of redemption, the nature and extent of the atonement, justification, faith, repentance, sanctification, and perseverance. Chapter five sets forth Howell's convictions about God's mission for the church, the polity that God had ordained for the accomplishment of that mission, and the proper perspective on cooperation with other believers for the sake of missions. Chapter six explains Howell's postmillennial convictions and the impetus his missions and benevolent work received from this doctrine. Chapter seven contains a summary, conclusion, and prospects for future research.

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