

# *What Kind of Christianity*

A History of Slavery and Anti-Black Racism  
in the Presbyterian Church

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*For my spouse, Sarah, and our children, Maddy and Caleb,  
with unending gratitude and love*

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## *“What Kind of Christianity?”*

Katie Geneva Cannon, a womanist theologian and the first Black American woman to be ordained as a minister in the United Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. (in 1974), once asked, “Where was the Church and the Christian believers when Black women and Black men, Black boys and Black girls, were being raped, sexually abused, lynched, assassinated, castrated and physically oppressed? What kind of Christianity allowed white Christians to deny basic human rights and simple dignity to Blacks, these same rights which had been given to others without question?”<sup>1</sup>

In 1836, approximately 250 commissioners from across the northern and southern states gathered in Pittsburgh for the annual meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (PCUSA), the largest Presbyterian denomination in the nation with over 2,800 congregations and nearly 220,000 members. One of the matters these Presbyterians would grapple with was their church’s position on the enslavement of more than two million Black persons. It would neither be the first nor the last time Presbyterians at a General Assembly meeting would engage slavery, but this particular occasion presented one of the clearest opportunities for the denomination to answer important questions about where the PCUSA stood on slavery and what kind of Christianity it would profess and practice.

On May 19, the meeting began at 11:00 in the morning with a worship service. William W. Phillips, a white pastor of First Presbyterian

Church in New York City and moderator of the previous year's General Assembly, preached from Romans 1:16–17, a text emphasizing that Christians must not be ashamed of the gospel of Christ and imploring the just to live by faith.<sup>2</sup> Yet some Presbyterians were in fact deeply ashamed of their denomination's reluctance to participate in movements for the emancipation of enslaved Black persons. In 1835, the Chillicothe Presbytery in Ohio sent a letter to other presbyteries beseeching them to adopt its resolutions on slavery. The members of the Chillicothe Presbytery were aware that some of their fellow Presbyterians, even in northern states that had abolished slavery, either demurred on or outright declined to address slavery because they understood it as a political matter outside the spiritual jurisdiction of their church. In response, the Chillicothe Presbytery found Black enslavement to be a "heinous sin and scandal" demanding action from all Presbyterians because their church's "purity and prosperity" was at stake.<sup>3</sup> One of the presbytery's most controversial recommendations was more stringent disciplinary measures against slave-owning members, such as suspension from the Lord's Supper, a significant sacrament within the Presbyterian tradition. Although the General Assembly in 1818 declared "the voluntary enslaving of one part of the human race by another" was a "gross violation" of human rights and "totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the gospel of Christ," the exhortation to "forbear harsh censures" toward enslavers in the same resolution resulted in no concrete actions toward Black liberation and produced the kind of Christianity that the Chillicothe Presbytery could no longer tolerate.<sup>4</sup>

The General Assembly commissioners in Pittsburgh knew that they would have to engage slavery. In the previous year, "a memorial on the subject of slavery, signed by 198 persons" was presented to the General Assembly and referred to a committee of five white ministers, with Samuel Miller, a professor from Princeton Theological Seminary, serving as the chairperson.<sup>5</sup> This committee's report was first presented on May 23 and stated that the PCUSA had no proper means to interfere with Black enslavement because it was "inseparably connected with and regulated by the laws of many of the states in this Union" and a complex subject with a "great diversity of opinion and intensity of feeling" within the denomination. Because any action, either to support emancipation or defend enslavement, would surely distract and divide their membership and fail to assist the plight of enslaved persons—identified in the report with the oddly passive language as "those whose welfare is immediately contemplated in the memorials in question"—the majority

of the committee recommended “that it is not expedient for the Assembly to take any further order in relation to this subject.” One of the five members dissented and offered a minority report several times lengthier than the 211 words in the brief majority report. James H. Dickey, who had pastored several congregations within the Chillicothe Presbytery, appealed to the history of religious and social reform movements in the Presbyterian tradition, noting how their descendants in England and Scotland were “uncompromising opposers of tyranny,” and he observed that the “slavery of the Africans and their descendants” was becoming “more deeply rooted” and “intimately incorporated” in both their country and their church. Dickey’s minority report recommended that the PCUSA “take a more firm and decided stand on this subject” in order to embody and enact the kind of Christianity that would “bring about the emancipation of the slaves in these United States and throughout the world.”<sup>6</sup> The commissioners agreed to vote on the majority and minority reports one week later, on May 30.

But the vote on May 30 was postponed because another matter, an appeal from Albert Barnes, a white pastor of First Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, regarding church discipline for what the Synod of Philadelphia deemed as doctrinal error in Barnes’s preaching and writing on original sin, had yet to be resolved. Eight days later, on the morning of June 7, the commissioners voted to rescind the synod’s decision to suspend Barnes from his pastoral ministry by a vote of 145 in favor, 78 in opposition, and 11 abstentions. Immediately after Barnes had won his appeal, the commissioners returned to the reports on slavery. Both reports were read aloud, but a motion was made to again postpone a vote and consider a new recommendation that had just been presented. Whereas the majority report did not mention biblical support for Black enslavement, this recommendation contained stronger language regarding slavery as sanctioned in both the Old and New Testaments as “an existing relation” and “not condemned by the authority of God.”<sup>7</sup> The commissioners agreed to table their decision on slavery until the afternoon, which would grant them more time to contemplate this new recommendation alongside the two reports.

When the commissioners resumed meeting in the afternoon, another motion was introduced, which recommended “this whole subject be indefinitely postponed” for three reasons: (1) an interpretation of the constitution of the PCUSA that prevented the construction of ecclesial laws binding the individual conscience; (2) the “urgency” of other remaining “business”; (3) the “shortness of the time” permitting

to “deliberate and decide judiciously on the subject of slavery.”<sup>8</sup> Where was the Presbyterian Church when over two million enslaved Black persons were being abused, raped, and oppressed? In 1836, the PCUSA General Assembly was focused on examining the doctrinal intricacies and implications of one of its clergypersons. The commissioners devoted several days and multiple sessions to Barnes’s appeal. By comparison, the “subject of slavery” was introduced at one session with a majority report comprising a mere 211 words, postponed in two other sessions, and then indefinitely postponed by a vote of 154 in favor, 87 in opposition, and 4 abstentions.<sup>9</sup> Two weeks after his sermon exhorting fellow Presbyterians to practice their faith as unashamed ambassadors of the gospel, William W. Phillips voted in favor of an indefinite postponement on any discussion and decision regarding slavery.

One of the commissioners from the Chillicothe Presbytery, John Rankin, voted in opposition to the indefinite postponement. Rankin was a white pastor of a Presbyterian congregation in Ripley, Ohio, and two months after his vote he accepted a position to serve as an agent of the American Anti-Slavery Society (AASS), an abolitionist organization founded in 1833 that advocated for the immediate emancipation of enslaved persons. One of its founders, William Lloyd Garrison, observed in 1832 that white Christians in the United States were guilty of racial prejudice against Black persons in their discriminatory attitudes and actions toward free Black Americans and their participation in Black enslavement. Garrison believed white congregations and denominations like the PCUSA required a purification “as by fire” because of their resistance to the cause of immediate abolition and their reluctance to censure and cast out enslavers within their ecclesial bodies. Garrison castigated white Christians, including Presbyterians, for willfully employing the “sanctity of religion” as a mantle to obscure the “horrid system” of slavery.<sup>10</sup>

In 1824 and 1825, Rankin published a series of twenty-one letters in a local newspaper against Black enslavement. Rankin’s immediate audience was his brother, Thomas Rankin, who had purchased enslaved persons in Virginia, but Rankin desired to publish his letters in a broader effort to present his arguments against both slavery and anti-Black racism. Rankin asked his brother, and all white Americans, to confront the dehumanizing and oppressive evils of slavery. Rankin’s understanding of Christianity entailed a God who created all human beings as equal such that persons of African descent were not naturally or providentially inferior to persons of European descent, as some white



Presbyterians and other Christians believed, and called for an honest accounting of the physical abuse, sexual violence, spiritual oppression, and family separation that enslaved persons experienced. Rankin also addressed how Black enslavement was destroying the moral integrity of white persons for the ways it permitted, if not promoted, the depravity of enslavers in their cruel treatment of enslaved persons. One of the many criticisms Rankin detailed was the sinful reality that “every slaveholder has power to strip his female slaves” and “thousands of them are base enough to put such power into exercise.”<sup>11</sup>

A commissioner from the Hopewell Presbytery in Georgia, Eugenius A. Nisbet, also voted in opposition, but for different reasons from Rankin’s. Although Nisbet likely agreed with Rankin that the indefinite postponement of any action on slavery lacked clarity and courage, Nisbet desired for their denomination to adopt a stronger position with an unequivocal defense of Black enslavement and a firm rebuke of the abolitionists within and beyond the PCUSA. Two months before the General Assembly meeting, Nisbet’s presbytery gathered to prepare for the forthcoming deliberations on slavery in Pittsburgh. The presbytery designated its own committee to construct a report with “instructions to commissioners to General Assembly.” The members of the Hopewell Presbytery maintained that “no instance can be produced of an otherwise orderly Christian, being *reproved*, much less *excommunicated* from the Church, for the single act of holding domestic slaves, from the days of Abraham down to the date of the modern Abolitionists.” The presbytery also resolved that the General Assembly lacked the ecclesial authority to interfere with the political institution of slavery and that any such interference, including changes to church polity, would be interpreted as “tyrannical and odious.” As a commissioner, Nisbet was encouraged to “use all Christian means to prevent the discussion of domestic slavery in the Assembly” and “protest in our name against all acts that involve or approve abolition.”<sup>12</sup>

Nisbet was a white ruling elder with significant influence in his state’s legislature and jurisprudence as a politician, lawyer, and judge. In 1836, Nisbet’s career was on the rise as a state senator who was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives three years later and the Supreme Court of Georgia in 1845. Nisbet’s ardent defense of slavery is most evident in his role as the delegate to the Georgia Convention in 1861 who introduced the resolution to immediately secede from the United States in response to the presidential election of Abraham Lincoln. Nisbet was also highly regarded for his Christian faith. One

contemporary biographer described Nisbet in 1854 as deeply committed and connected to the Presbyterian Church such that religion had given to his life “a beautiful symmetry and form.”<sup>13</sup> As a commissioner to the PCUSA General Assembly in 1836, Nisbet urged his denomination to be unwavering in its disapproval of the AASS and all other abolitionist movements.

### **Confronting the Kinds of White Christianity That Participated in Black Enslavement**

In returning to one of Cannon’s searing questions asking what kind of Christianity allowed white Christians to deny basic human rights and simple dignity to Black persons, the most obvious answer is “the wrong kind of Christianity.” In 1845, Frederick Douglass, a formerly enslaved Black man who escaped his enslaver in Maryland, differentiated between genuine Christianity and the “corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” in his autobiographical narrative. In the years following his autobiography, Douglass emerged as one of the most prominent abolitionists, intellectuals, and social reformers of the nineteenth century. Like Douglass, we too are “filled with unutterable loathing” when we confront the history of slavery, anti-Black racism, and Presbyterianism in the United States. Douglass’s criticism of Christianity in the United States as comprising “men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members” is certainly true of Presbyterianism.<sup>14</sup>

Nearly twenty years after Rankin published his letters on the immoralities of Black enslavement and anti-Black racism, Douglass wrote that the “horrible inconsistencies” among white Christians continued. Some white congregations included in their membership enslavers who physically abused and sexually violated enslaved persons. White Christians upholding marriage and family as divine blessings denied millions of enslaved persons these basic human rights with the absence of laws protecting enslaved marriages and families from separation in auctions, sales, and transfers: “The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families—sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers,—leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate.”<sup>15</sup> In the same year of Douglass’s autobiography, a journal published by the Associate Reformed Synod of

the West lambasted Columbia Theological Seminary, a Presbyterian institution in South Carolina, for benefiting from a public auction of enslaved persons. The journal found it tragic to see human beings—“the following negro slaves, to wit: Charles, Peggy, Antonett, Davy, September, Maria, Jenny, and Isaac”—listed as property akin to animals, lands, and other capital in a local Savannah newspaper. But it was especially infuriated to behold a Presbyterian seminary in the listing as the recipient of the funds derived from the sale. The journal criticized the lack of shame or remorse from the seminary as “scandalous.”<sup>16</sup>

While “the wrong kind of Christianity” is the most obvious answer to Cannon’s question, this book maintains that a more historically precise and honest answer is “the Presbyterian kind of Christianity.” White Presbyterians actively participated in the enslavement of Black persons and the perpetuation of anti-Black racism. Individual members and congregations owned enslaved persons. All these Presbyterians unjustly profited off the uncompensated labor of enslaved persons. Some of these Presbyterians, including ministers, are guilty of committing acts of physical, psychological, sexual, and spiritual abuse against enslaved persons. Elizabeth Keckley, a formerly enslaved Black woman with a successful career as an artisan, including a stint working in the White House as a seamstress for First Lady Mary Todd Lincoln, recounted the cruel oppression she experienced from a family of Presbyterian enslavers. Keckley received her first beating at the age of four, and it was a lashing so severe that she never forgot the incident.

Even more painful was when Keckley’s father was separated from her and her mother to migrate westward with another enslaver: “I can remember the scene as if it were but yesterday;—how my father cried out against the cruel separation; his last kiss; his wild straining of my mother to his bosom; the solemn prayer to Heaven; the tears and sobs—the fearful anguish of broken hearts.”<sup>17</sup> At the age of fourteen, Keckley was separated from her mother to live with her enslaver’s son, a white Presbyterian minister named Robert Burwell, in Virginia. Four years later, in approximately 1835, Keckley moved with Burwell to Hillsborough, North Carolina, and experienced physical abuse at the hands of both Burwell and a white school principal who was a member of Burwell’s congregation. At the behest of Burwell’s wife, who sought to subdue what she regarded as Keckley’s haughty spirit, Burwell and the school principal whipped Keckley on multiple occasions. The school principal also forcibly stripped Keckley naked. Shortly thereafter, Keckley was raped by another white man, Alexander Kirkland,

resulting in her pregnancy and the birth of a child. Robert Burwell is listed in the minutes of the PCUSA General Assembly of 1836 as the minister of a Presbyterian congregation of forty-nine members in Hillsborough and a member of the Orange Presbytery.<sup>18</sup>

Estimates on the exact number of Presbyterian enslavers are elusive but not indiscernible. In 1853, James W. C. Pennington, a Black Presbyterian pastor, surmised in his sermon to the Third Presbytery in New York City that white Presbyterians owned approximately 80,000 enslaved persons.<sup>19</sup> Two years earlier, the annual report of the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society published an estimate that Presbyterians, with 333,458 members in its two largest denominations, owned 77,000 enslaved persons.<sup>20</sup> In 1852, one white Presbyterian minister, John Robinson, thought it was “probable that about one-third of the ministers, and one-half of the members of the Church” in the southern states owned enslaved persons, and he suggested that “perhaps from one hundred to one hundred and fifty thousand of her members” in total were enslavers from the colonial period to the time of his writing.<sup>21</sup> In 1780, before the abolition of slavery in Pennsylvania, Presbyterians in Philadelphia and Chester County accounted for approximately 30 percent of enslavers who self-identified as belonging to a religious group. In Philadelphia, the three largest groups of enslavers were Episcopalian (132), Presbyterian (81), and Lutheran (28). In Chester County, the three largest groups of enslavers were Presbyterian (43), Episcopalian (41), and Baptist (7). Of 307 South Carolina Lowcountry planters who owned more than 100 enslaved persons on a single plantation in 1860, nearly all self-identified as Christian, with approximately 67 percent as Episcopalian, 14 percent as Presbyterian, 10 percent as Methodist, and 8 percent as Baptist.<sup>22</sup>

In a response to the Chillicothe Presbytery, James Smylie, a white minister in Mississippi belonging to the Amite Presbytery, estimated in 1836 that three-fourths of all Baptists, Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians in the southern states owned enslaved persons. Smylie argued that if slavery was as heinous a sin as the Chillicothe Presbytery understood it to be, then the overwhelming majority of white Presbyterians from the southern states were in fact “of the devil” and would ultimately call into question “whether God, is, or is not, a true witness.”<sup>23</sup> One historian, James O. Farmer, estimates that there were roughly 100,000 Presbyterians across several denominations from the southern states in 1860.<sup>24</sup> In my investigation of the General Assembly minutes in 1860 from the largest Presbyterian denomination, the Presbyterian

Church in the United States of America (Old School), I estimate that approximately 90,000 of the 292,927 members came from the southern states.<sup>25</sup> Therefore, I support Farmer’s estimate as plausible. After combining this estimate of 100,000 Presbyterians from the southern states with Robinson’s approximation (50 percent) and Smylie’s approximation (75 percent) on the number of Presbyterian enslavers, the result is a range of 50,000 to 75,000 Presbyterian enslavers in 1860.

### Constructing a More Accurate and Faithful Accounting of the Presbyterian Past

In *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, James W. Loewen finds several problems with how slavery is taught in high schools across the United States. Loewen observes that white Americans remain perpetually startled at slavery. Even many years after high school, white adults are aghast when confronted with the horror and pervasiveness of slavery in the American past. It seems they did not learn, or have quickly forgotten, that George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were among the multitudes of white Americans who owned enslaved Black Americans as their human property. Loewen surmises that the ignorance of white Americans on slavery can be traced back to high school classrooms. History textbooks incorrectly present slavery as an “uncaused” tragedy and “minimize white complicity” in the enslavement of Black Americans. Students are meant to feel sadness for the plight of four million enslaved persons in 1860, but not anger toward the approximately 390,000 enslavers, because these enslavers, and their unjust actions, do not appear in the pages of the textbooks. Loewen explains that the miseducation on slavery is one part of a larger pattern that attributes “anything bad in American history” to anonymous actors.<sup>26</sup>

When moving from high school classrooms to seminary and Sunday school classrooms, the miseducation on slavery is no less a problem. In fact, there are likely more problems in our teaching and learning about slavery in white Christian contexts. One problem is the glaring omission of any education on white Christian involvement in slavery and anti-Black racism. The ignorance of some white congregations regarding basic historical facts about slavery is alarming. A pernicious myth I encounter is the notion that most white Christians in the antebellum period were abolitionists pushing for the immediate emancipation of

enslaved persons. This is simply not true. Very few white Christians held this position, and there was little support for immediate emancipation in the Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations. Many white Christians defended slavery so vigorously that some Black and white abolitionists identified white churches as the most impenetrable strongholds against their cause. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a white pastor and professor at Columbia Seminary, emerged as one of the most vociferous advocates for Black enslavement. After serving as a pastor of Presbyterian congregations in Georgia and South Carolina from 1841 to 1855, Palmer taught at Columbia Seminary for roughly two years and returned to congregational ministry as the pastor of First Presbyterian Church in New Orleans in 1856. Palmer proclaimed in a sermon four years later that slavery was a providential trust that white Christians must preserve and perpetuate because the natural condition of Black Americans was servitude.<sup>27</sup> Palmer was neither reviled nor rebuked for his white supremacist views. Instead, he received acclaim from white southern politicians for his religious defenses of both slavery and secession. Palmer's white ecclesial colleagues also held him in the highest esteem. Several months following his virulently racist sermon, Palmer was elected to serve as the first moderator of the newly formed Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America in 1861.

James W. C. Pennington, Theodore S. Wright, and other Black Presbyterians emphasized the eradication of anti-Black racism as an essential component in their abolitionism. But too many white Christian abolitionists in the northern states fell woefully short in their advocacy against anti-Black racism. Archibald Alexander, a white pastor and the first professor of Princeton Seminary, who taught there for nearly four decades in the first half of the nineteenth century, supported the colonization movement to send free Black Americans to Liberia, because he felt the discriminatory contempt white Christians held against Black Americans was too insurmountable to overcome. In 1846, Alexander wrote that anti-Black racism was wrong and unreasonable, but he did not commit to working toward racial equality. Instead of teaching white Christians to repent of their sins of racial prejudice, Alexander preferred that Black Americans, once emancipated, leave the country and find another home on the African continent where their skin color would not be so despised.<sup>28</sup>

This book therefore aims to provide a more accurate and faithful accounting of the causes of Black enslavement. In addition to correcting

a legacy of treating the history of slavery and anti-Black racism as an uncaused tragedy, there is the need to address three existing interpretations that misdirect our attention and minimize white Christian complicity. The first incorrect interpretation is that white Americans living in the age of Black enslavement did not know all its evils, immoralities, and injustices. This spurious rationale suggests that if they had known, then surely white Americans, and especially white Christians, would have done more for the sake of abolition. Yet the inverse is true in terms of comprehension regarding slavery. White Americans understood the atrocities within Black enslavement far better and exceedingly more than we do today. As a young child in Charleston, South Carolina, the white abolitionist writer Angelina Emily Grimké was horrified at school one day when she saw the raw and bloody wounds on the back and legs of an enslaved child when he was opening the classroom windows. As the Black child reached for the windows, Grimké witnessed his face grimacing in severe pain. Grimké fainted once the enslaved child limped out of the room. The incident left an indelible mark in Grimké’s mind and was the initial catalyst for her lifelong abolitionist activism.<sup>29</sup> In the same city, a white Baptist pastor also encountered the wickedness of Black enslavement up close. While ministering at the First Baptist Church of Charleston, Basil Manly’s work involved preaching, teaching, and counseling in a congregation with both white and enslaved Black members. In his private journal, Manly detailed how one member, an enslaved woman, confided to him that “her master *compels* her to live in constant adultery with him” and that she would no longer receive Communion in fear of God’s punishment for the sin. Manly advised the enslaved woman to resist her enslaver’s sexual advances, but her enslaver continued to rape her for four more years. Manly never confronted the enslaver and instead purchased the enslaved woman himself in what he recounted as one of the most challenging moral dilemmas of his life and ministry.<sup>30</sup>

The second faulty interpretation lies in what I find is the primary focus of the teaching and learning about slavery in seminary and Sunday school classrooms—the centering of biblical interpretation. Rather than fully grappling with the histories and legacies of economic exploitation, sexual violence, and virulent anti-Black racism perpetrated by white Christians, seminary students and church members today are left with a neatly packaged lesson on slavery emphasizing the dangers of deficient biblical interpretation and proof-texting the Scriptures. Such instruction misses a crucial point that Black and white abolitionists

themselves made, which is the need to identify and confront the sinfulness of white Christians in their active participation and intentional complicity in Black enslavement. The attention devoted to biblical interpretation also implies that if white Christians then had access to the exegetical tools and hermeneutical sophistication we have now, they would have made different choices and acted more justly. But this fallacious line of thinking is no less dangerous than the perils of scriptural misuse for the ways it deflects blame and distorts truth. In addition to misdirecting our anger from actual individuals and institutions to more anonymous ways of reading the Bible, this interpretation is false. Black and white abolitionists appealed to the Bible to construct scriptural arguments to examine how Black enslavement was a sin against God, expose anti-Black racism as a betrayal of Christ's teachings, and endorse immediate emancipation as the only acceptable pathway for faithful believers. In 1851, John Gregg Fee, a white Presbyterian minister from Kentucky who helped to found Berea College, the first interracial and coeducational college in the state, gravely warned that white Presbyterians deploying scriptural arguments to defend slavery were ruining Christian witness by turning the Bible into a "cunningly devised fable" and a "fiction" in the eyes of those persons with clear moral vision regarding both the evils of slavery and the failings of too many white churches.<sup>31</sup>

Alongside this overemphasis on biblical interpretation one can find the third erroneous interpretation, which is a gross miscalculation on the stakes and consequences of slavery. In subtle yet perverse forms, white Presbyterians have expressed that the most tragic result from the age of Black enslavement is the division of their church. When the PCUSA General Assembly met in 1795, the commissioners responded to the Transylvania Presbytery in Kentucky, in which there were serious disagreements over abolition and slavery, with instructions to heed the call of Jesus to be peacemakers and not allow disputes on slavery to divide the presbytery. It was paramount that the presbytery "keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" and for its members to engage one another with a spirit of forbearance.<sup>32</sup> In the age of Black enslavement, white Presbyterians, including and sometimes especially Presbyterians from the northern states, grieved that "the subject of slavery," as they so often described the oppression of millions of enslaved persons, was causing divisions within congregations, presbyteries, and the General Assembly. They wept not for the abuse that enslaved women like Elizabeth Keckley endured. Rather, they shed tears of anguish over



their worries about ecclesial schism. Presbyterians were able to ward off regional divisions longer than Methodists and Baptists, who split into northern and southern denominations in 1844 and 1845, respectively. The second largest Presbyterian denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (New School), ruptured in 1857. The largest denomination, the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America (Old School), remained united until May 1861, one month after Confederate soldiers fired the first shots of the Civil War at Fort Sumter.

Presbyterians remained in regional denominations until 1983. Yet this malicious misdirection on the tragedy of slavery has persisted such that the greatest, or at least most discussed, sorrow when looking back at the age of Black enslavement entails the broken bonds of fellowship and denominational divisions. In Presbyterian congregations, conversations, and history books, one encounters tremendous sadness over ecclesial divisions that lasted over one hundred years. Yet one struggles to find the requisite anger over the pain and torture that millions of enslaved persons suffered from white Presbyterian enslavers, supporters of Black enslavement, and guilty bystanders who chose to be complicit through inaction and indecision. In one Presbyterian history book, the “sad consequences” of the schisms over abolition and slavery do not center on enslaved persons or free Black Presbyterians. Instead, the historian writes wistfully of the painful separations that prominent white Presbyterian clergy experienced with melancholy vignettes of John Leighton Wilson, a pastor and missionary from South Carolina serving as a secretary of the Board of Foreign Missions in a New York City denominational office, bidding farewell to his ministerial colleagues to return to his southern home, and William Anderson Scott, a pastor from Tennessee ministering at Calvary Presbyterian Church in San Francisco, receiving scorn and ultimately a dismissal from his congregation after publicly praying for two presidents, Abraham Lincoln of the United States of America and Jefferson Davis of the Confederate States of America.<sup>33</sup>

Another Presbyterian history book concludes that the regional separations of Presbyterians in 1857 and 1861 were “unfortunate and a detriment to each church’s witness” and notes how some Presbyterians today “lament any barrier that prevents Christ’s followers from being one, especially when they bear the same denominational name” in a section entitled, “The Withering of Presbyterianism.”<sup>34</sup> I find it deeply troubling that the withering of Presbyterianism is attributed to these

ecclesial schisms and not the active participation of white Presbyterians in slavery. It is also infuriating that Black enslavement is presented as a barrier to church unity rather than a tragedy. When historical interpretations accentuate or isolate the regional ruptures within Presbyterianism, what goes missing is a crucial, if not central, point: the abject moral failings of white Presbyterians living in the age of Black enslavement. And the terrible result is that some white Presbyterians today feel more remorse for church disunity than the oppressive abuse and reprehensible violence that their Presbyterian predecessors inflicted upon enslaved persons.

In addition to an overemphasis on the ecclesial schisms within Presbyterianism, there exists an inaccurate legacy that presents Presbyterian history in the age of Black enslavement as a church divided and gives the impression that every white Presbyterian from the northern states was an abolitionist. Yet the largest Presbyterian denomination, the PCUSA (Old School), with three-fourths of its membership from the northern states, remained steadfast in its commitment to fully include enslavers and supporters of slavery as fellow members. Year after year, General Assembly commissioners elected and appointed white members from the southern states to preach, participate on committees, and serve as moderators and hold other important denominational positions. In the years following the divisions of the largest Methodist and Baptist denominations, white Presbyterians intentionally and strategically elected leaders from the southern states. In 1847, James Henley Thornwell, a white slave-owning theologian and one of the most prolific defenders of slavery, was elected moderator. Six years later, when the General Assembly gathered in Philadelphia, Benjamin Morgan Palmer, another unabashed and well-known proponent of slavery, was elected as the temporary clerk. The election in 1853 of John C. Young, a white pastor from Kentucky advocating for the gradual emancipation of enslaved persons, as moderator with 126 of 251 votes (50.2 percent) and then of Palmer as temporary clerk, with 130 of 222 votes (58.6 percent), reflect the denomination's commitment to the continuation of both ecclesial unity and Black enslavement.<sup>35</sup> After Young's election, which eased the consciences of some commissioners, a greater majority quickly voted for Palmer to make clear the denomination maintained its position that slave ownership was not subject to any church discipline. The elections and appointments of Thornwell, Palmer, and other enslavers from the southern states were only made possible because of significant support from white members in the northern states.

### The Fallacy of Presbyterianism as a Divided Church over Abolition and Slavery

It is therefore inaccurate to summarize Presbyterianism in the age of Black enslavement as a “divided church, divided nation,” as one historian does in a recent history of Presbyterians and American culture.<sup>36</sup> Were white Presbyterians really divided on abolition and slavery? Some individuals were internally conflicted. John C. Young detested slavery, but he also owned enslaved persons. Young eventually emancipated some of his enslaved persons, but he supported a gradual approach to ending slavery that drew the ire of Black and white abolitionists as a position lacking moral clarity and Christian conviction. I believe it is incorrect to present the larger “Presbyterian Church”—by which I mean the congregations, presbyteries, synods, General Assemblies, colleges, seminaries, and other institutions of the various denominations that existed in the North American colonies and antebellum United States—as divided such that we imagine in our minds today a grand drama with righteous abolitionists successfully persuading enslavers and enablers of slavery to join their cause in hallowed Presbyterian church buildings across the nation. A more accurate representation is what Angelina Emily Grimké experienced in her short time as a Presbyterian in Charleston. After leaving her family’s Episcopal church in protest of its religious teachings, Grimké joined a local Presbyterian congregation. She initially relished the church’s ministry, experiencing growth in her faith and spirituality, but with this growth came stronger convictions that slavery was irreconcilable with Christianity. Grimké shared these concerns first with the pastor, who told her that he agreed with her but that the most faithful response was to “pray and wait.” Dissatisfied with the pastor’s counsel, Grimké approached the church’s session. These ruling elders, all of whom were enslavers, noted Grimké’s young age and also encouraged her to wait. But the session also disagreed with Grimké and told her that she would learn to see the wisdom of Black enslavement as she matured out of her childish naiveté into adulthood. Grimké soon thereafter decided to leave the Presbyterian congregation. The pastor and other church members tried to convince Grimké to remain, in no small part because her family was wealthy and among the elite in Charleston, but Grimké simply refused to remain in a proslavery church.<sup>37</sup>

John Rankin also concluded that the mainstream Presbyterian denominations were untrustworthy because of their proslavery positions

and practices. In the fall of 1836, Rankin wrote a letter to fellow Presbyterians in a local Cincinnati newspaper imploring them to remain united. Although the General Assembly four months prior voted to indefinitely postpone discussion of slavery, an action that Rankin himself voted against, Rankin urged Presbyterians to avoid schism because ecclesial disunity was “sinful” and in opposition to the “example and doctrines of Christ and the apostles.” He feared a division of the Presbyterian Church would result in “great evil” and “self-destruction.”<sup>38</sup> Over the next eleven years, Rankin realized that there were greater evils than church disunity. Rankin could no longer tolerate how white Presbyterians in the two largest denominations, the PCUSA (Old School) and PCUSA (New School), continued to falter on Black liberation, and he gathered some of his colleagues in Ohio to form a new denomination, the Free Presbyterian Church, in 1847. At the inaugural meeting in Cincinnati, Rankin and the other members of this fledgling denomination included in their organizing documents—alongside the Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF) and the same form of government utilized in the PCUSA (New School)—a *Declaration of Human Rights*, which unequivocally stated that Black enslavement was “destructive to all the ends for which man was created” and “one of the greatest evils that can be inflicted upon human nature.” The *Declaration* also refused church membership to any “person holding slaves” or “advocating the rightfulness of slaveholding” and denied fellowship with any Christian groups comprising enslavers or supporters of slavery.<sup>39</sup> Rankin and his wife, Jean Lowry Rankin, included participation in the Underground Railroad as a component of their ministry. Together they assisted the journeys of approximately 2,000 formerly enslaved persons to freedom, with the deployment of their house as one of the covert stations on a route of the Underground Railroad.

The examples of Jean Lowry Rankin and John Rankin are sometimes employed to advance the notion that Presbyterianism in the age of Black enslavement is best understood as divided between abolitionists on one side and enslavers on the other side. Although the abolitionist side, with faithful Presbyterians like John Gregg Fee and James W. C. Pennington, is certainly worthy of our attention today, I believe the heavy imbalance in how we remember the past leaves us with the wrong impression. These Black and white Presbyterian abolitionists were deeply unpopular and received scant support in the larger church. They were not elected to positions of ecclesial authority, and their voices carried little weight among other white Presbyterians.

If we highlight the Free Presbyterian Church as a shining beacon of the best of the Presbyterian tradition, we should also include how the denomination struggled to gain members, acquire resources, and exert influence. Six years after its founding, the Free Presbyterian Church in 1853 had approximately 1,000 members, in comparison to over 300,000 members across the two largest Presbyterian denominations.<sup>40</sup> Rankin’s denomination never grew beyond 2,000 members and consisted of mostly small congregations that were stretched financially in trying, and often failing, to meet the costs of building maintenance, pastoral compensation, and abolitionist witness in their church budgets. Despite, or more likely because of, their unwavering commitments to eradicate Black enslavement and anti-Black racism, the Free Presbyterian Church did not make inroads in changing the trajectory of the wider Presbyterian tradition.

The minuscule influence of the Free Presbyterian Church therefore more clearly illustrates the worst, rather than the best, of the Presbyterian tradition. There were Presbyterian abolitionists, but what does it mean that the most outspoken activists for abolition and racial justice either renounced their connections to Presbyterianism or were marginalized within Presbyterianism? In addition to John Rankin, four other Presbyterian ministers are among the twenty-five inductees in the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum: John Gregg Fee, Beriah Green, Elijah Lovejoy, and James W. C. Pennington. Like Rankin, Fee and Green left the mainstream Presbyterian denominations on moral and religious grounds. In 1837, Lovejoy was killed in a gruesome and violent act while defending the printing press he used to publish his abolitionist newspaper from a rabid white proslavery mob in Alton, Illinois. Pennington escaped his enslaver in Maryland and became the first Black student at Yale Divinity School. Pennington attended lectures there for two years, but he was not permitted to officially enroll as a student or speak in class. He later served as the pastor of the largest Black Presbyterian congregation in New York City, Shiloh Presbyterian Church, and received an honorary doctorate from the University of Heidelberg in Germany. But Pennington, like the other esteemed abolitionist inductees, was more influential outside of Presbyterianism. During his years as a Presbyterian minister, Pennington grew frustrated with his denomination, the PCUSA (New School), for its reluctance to act more decisively to end slavery, and he experienced racial prejudice from white members of his presbytery. Angelina Emily Grimké is also in the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum, in part because

she protested as a young woman against a white Presbyterian pastor's counsel to "pray and wait" for a solution to slavery with the words, "No, we must pray and work!"<sup>41</sup>

Yet most white Presbyterians living in the age of Black enslavement regarded abolitionists and racial justice activists like Angelina Emily Grimké, James W. C. Pennington, Jean Lowry Rankin, and John Rankin as troublesome nuisances and unrealistic radicals. Pennington appealed to white members in his presbytery to confront the enslavers and defenders of slavery in their denomination. He acknowledged that "some leading Presbyterian theologians among us have, in their zeal, undertaken to justify slavery from the Bible," but Pennington identified an accompanying problem—the silence and complicity of other white Presbyterians that allowed this immoral and racist proslavery theology to define their faith and witness. In this sermon from 1853, Pennington advanced a modest proposal for "a fair and open discussion" with the hope that some would speak out against existing proslavery positions and practices as contrary to what it meant to be Presbyterian.<sup>42</sup> But there was little discussion and no division among the faculty and boards of seminaries such as Princeton and Columbia and among the clergy and ruling elders of the largest and wealthiest congregations in the northern and southern states. Instead, there was a shared commitment to perpetuate Black enslavement.

The refusal among most white Presbyterians to heed Pennington's call was intentional. At one level, white Presbyterians were like other white Americans living in the age of Black enslavement. Less than 2 percent of the 27 million white Americans in 1860 were enslavers, but the sinful institution of slavery was so ingrained in the civic, economic, religious, and social systems of the United States that many non-enslaving white Americans did not want to disrupt the foundational order of their lives. In 1846, Albert Barnes lamented that slavery was a central feature of life across the United States. All the "great questions of industry, literature, agriculture, commerce, and morals" involved slavery such that there was not a town, school, or church throughout the northern and southern states untouched by this unjust institution.<sup>43</sup> But at another level, these white Presbyterians also self-identified as Christians. They professed to have a higher calling as a people redeemed by the grace of God through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ to act justly so that all may flourish. At their first meeting as the General Assembly of the PCUSA in 1789, the commissioners published a letter to George Washington. One month after Washington took his oath of

office as the new nation's first president, Presbyterians committed to work toward a “pure and virtuous patriotism” as citizens endeavoring to “add the wholesome instructions of religion” in service to God and country.<sup>44</sup> Yet white Presbyterians chose to practice the kind of Christianity that upheld and propagated, rather than dismantled and opposed, Black enslavement.

My decision to present white Presbyterians as choosing to perpetuate slavery and anti-Black racism is meant to serve as an important corrective to the notion that Presbyterians could not solve the dilemmas of Black enslavement. One of the most problematic legacies that has been passed down for generations is a myth about the relationship between Black enslavement and Presbyterianism. We are led to believe that the evils of slavery ensnared Presbyterianism and left white Presbyterians powerless and rudderless. The truth is that white Presbyterians consistently leveraged their power to make a myriad of calculated decisions and deliberate actions that harmed Black Americans. The idea that white Presbyterians were passive agents who found themselves stuck in an irrepressible conflict over abolition and slavery is not only false, but this fallacy also generates feelings of undeserved sympathy for the white Presbyterians who oppressed and supported the oppression of millions of enslaved persons. Even John Robinson, in his lengthy defense of the PCUSA (Old School) in 1852 against abolitionist criticisms of the denomination as immoral and anti-Christian, recognized that no one could “rationally claim” that white Presbyterians were blameless: “It is freely admitted, nay, held, that there is guilt, great guilt, on the part of members of the Presbyterian Church, growing out of slave-holding.”<sup>45</sup> But Robinson stopped short of full confession and attributed “the guilt of slavery” to civil realities more than ecclesial relations. Whereas Barnes argued that the centrality of slavery to American life was grounds for immediate abolition, Robinson cautioned that Black enslavement was “so completely woven into the structure of society” that it could not be eradicated at once, or even in a generation.<sup>46</sup>

Robinson described Presbyterians as “moderate” and “wise” in their decisions to postpone open discussion of slavery and refuse motions to censure and excommunicate slave-owning members. Although Robinson personally abhorred slavery, he believed the prayers of white Presbyterians on behalf of enslaved persons comprised the most faithful pathway.<sup>47</sup> Abolitionists within and outside Presbyterianism expressed outrage in tearing apart the implications and ramifications of Robinson's proposal. They questioned the compositions of these prayers

and surmised that some intercessions were for the kinder treatment of enslaved persons rather than their emancipation and that other petitions beseeched the Almighty God for a solution to Black enslavement that neither damaged economic profits nor disrupted existing social mores segregating the superior white race from the inferior Black race. In 1831, William Lloyd Garrison, in the inaugural issue of *The Liberator*, explained that the aim of his abolitionist newspaper was to “strenuously contend for the immediate enfranchisement of our slave population,” adding that he would not apologize for his use of abrasive and accusatory language, which some white Christians, including Presbyterians like Robinson, found inflammatory and un-Christlike. Garrison deemed it necessary to “be as harsh as truth” and lambasted the kind of Christianity that appealed to gradual abolition, African colonization, and other moderate compromises: “Tell a man whose house is on fire, to give a moderate alarm; tell him to moderately rescue his wife from the hand of the ravisher; tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen;—but urge me not to use moderation in a cause like the present.”<sup>48</sup> But Robinson and other white Presbyterians would not relent in prioritizing ecclesial unity over Black liberation. However, Garrison’s vivid metaphors were not completely irrelevant to them. In their hearts and minds, they connected the images of a burning house and an imperiled wife to the crisis of church disunity instead of the calamity of Black enslavement.

### **“My Master Taught Theology to Him”: Presbyterian History as a Tragedy, an Indictment, and a Reckoning**

For over thirty years *The Liberator* roused and provoked white Christians to action for the righteous cause of Black liberation. On several occasions, the weekly newspaper published and reprinted articles about Presbyterians. In 1838, one issue reprinted two articles. One article criticized the Charleston Union Presbytery for advancing a motion seeking a repeal of a denominational declaration that identified slavery as a “gross violation” of human rights and “totally irreconcilable” with Christianity. The presbytery in South Carolina viewed the earlier resolution from the General Assembly in 1818 as hostile and “injurious to the Christian character” of all white Presbyterians in the southern states. This article rebuked the presbytery for its assault on both Christian abolitionists and the Christian God, emphasizing the blasphemy



entailed when falsely claiming divine approval for its enslaving sins. Another article on the same page reprinted a statement from Samuel Eli Cornish—a Black pastor who organized the first Black Presbyterian congregation in New York City—critical of white Christians for their rampant discrimination against the free Black population in the city.<sup>49</sup> In the fall of 1861, several months into the carnage of the Civil War, the newspaper published its own article denouncing Presbyterianism as the most proslavery of all the religious groups: “In no church have the ministers and church-members been more determined in the maintenance of slavery; in none have greater hardness of heart and blindness of mind been manifested, both in the systematic allowance of the worst features of the system, and in the manufacture of arguments by which to maintain its necessity and propriety.” The author added that Presbyterians had significant influence as the third largest religious group in the nation in terms of “relative numbers and weight of membership,” behind Methodists and Baptists, and therefore bore their share of responsibility for the immense evils of Black enslavement.<sup>50</sup>

This book supports *The Liberator’s* assessment that Presbyterians in the United States were among the most proslavery of all religious groups and consequently among the most responsible for centuries of oppression against millions of Black Americans. This history is therefore also a tragedy, an indictment, and a reckoning. Joseph S. Moore, a historian of transatlantic Presbyterianism and slavery, concludes that “Presbyterians changed the actual situation of slavery very little” but suggests that slavery did in fact change Presbyterianism. Moore proposes that the disagreements over abolition and slavery created another Presbyterian “orthodoxy” alongside other doctrinal controversies, such as the debate over subscription to the WCF.<sup>51</sup> Just as where one stood on the doctrine of adopting every article in the WCF determined the kind of Presbyterianism one inhabited, so too did a Presbyterian’s position on abolition and slavery. But the notion of treating abolition and slavery as two different orthodoxies, akin to holding a strict or a loose view of subscription to the WCF, does not adequately capture the gravity and magnitude of white Presbyterian participation in Black enslavement. The historical reality that some Presbyterians were ardently proslavery ought not be described in dispassionate language or couched in arcane theological terms as a debate between two contrasting ways to interpret the Bible. Instead, we must confront the real consequences of what *The Liberator* rightly ascertained was the “active complicity” of white Presbyterians in perpetuating slavery.<sup>52</sup>

The first part of the book therefore focuses on the tragedy of Black enslavement from the colonial period to the middle of the nineteenth century. Some history books emphasize how white Presbyterians were defending a literalist approach to scriptural interpretation and practicing an evangelistic form of Christianity that prioritized spiritual salvation over legal emancipation. At first glance, these two emphases are not at all surprising, since they are the very points white Presbyterian enslavers and supporters of slavery underscored themselves. But we must look deeper to comprehend what everyone living in the age of Black enslavement knew more closely and intimately than we will ever know. All white Presbyterians understood that slavery featured the painful separation of enslaved Black families, the rape and sexual assault of enslaved Black women, the physical torture of enslaved Black children, and the withholding of free access to literacy and Christian instruction. Theodore S. Wright, the first Black graduate of Princeton Seminary and a Presbyterian pastor in New York City, charged that these cruel, dehumanizing, and racist elements of slavery wounded both Black bodies and souls in a speech before the New York State Anti-Slavery Society in 1837. In his address before the U.S. Congress in 1865, Henry Highland Garnet, the pastor of Fifteenth Street Presbyterian Church in Washington, D.C., and the first Black American to speak in the Capitol Building, defined slavery as “snatching man from the high place to which he was lifted by the hand of God, and dragging him down to the level of the brute creation,” with the deleterious effect of obliterating the *imago Dei* within the enslaved person.<sup>53</sup>

The second part of the book follows as an indictment that delineates the various offenses of white Presbyterians in relation to Black enslavement and anti-Black racism. Several historians have identified the first half of the nineteenth century as a period of tremendous flourishing for Presbyterians in the United States. Presbyterians increased their membership, founded new congregations, established seminaries, accumulated wealth, and exerted influence in the halls of power across rural towns and urban cities throughout the nation. For example, the PCUSA comprised 17,871 members in 1807. Seven years later, membership had more than doubled to 37,767 members. By 1817, membership had almost tripled in one decade to 47,568 members. In 1836, the PCUSA grew to 219,126 members—more than twelve times the membership from 1807.<sup>54</sup> But what some historians have missed or minimized in their interpretations is that this period of growth, which one history book characterizes as “the flowering of American

Presbyterianism,” concurred with the rise of Black enslavement.<sup>55</sup> The enslaved population grew from approximately 700,000 persons in 1790 to over 3,200,000 persons in 1850. Though some white Presbyterians professed a strict division between ecclesial and civil affairs, the actual boundaries between Christianity and politics were porous and ambiguous. Proslavery Presbyterians maintained that slavery was a political institution outside the realm of ecclesial authority, but they also charged that it was right for churches to protest any political action endeavoring to limit Black enslavement. In his racist sermon from 1860 defending the enslavement of Black Americans as a “divine trust” that God did not desire to be broken, Palmer explicitly weighed in on the politics of the day from his pulpit.<sup>56</sup>

The third part of the book then constitutes a reckoning that investigates the ramifications of these foundational sins. An accounting of how white Presbyterians participated in Black enslavement and perpetuated anti-Black racism is one part of a larger history. Another part of this history comprises how proslavery Presbyterians changed, influenced, and transformed Presbyterianism in the United States during and after the age of Black enslavement. Although slavery is no longer with us—the arrival of federal soldiers in Galveston, Texas, on June 19, 1865, finally ending Black enslavement—some of the practices and theologies defending slavery remain in Presbyterianism today. Moreover, the growth of Presbyterianism in the first half of the nineteenth century did not merely manifest alongside the expansion of Black enslavement as two separate and unrelated movements. William Wells Brown, a formerly enslaved Black man and one of the most accomplished authors in the nineteenth century, recalled his encounters with the white pastor of his enslaver’s Presbyterian congregation. Brown found that the “whole aim” of the pastor’s ministry was to “please the slaveholders” in the church: “When they wanted singing, he sung; when they wanted praying, he prayed; when they wanted a story told, he told a story.” Brown concluded this pastor did not teach any Christian theology to the slave-owning church members, but instead “my master taught theology to him.”<sup>57</sup> Presbyterianism may not have changed the actual situation of American slavery, but American slavery certainly corrupted Presbyterianism. It is not difficult to make this determination about the tarnishing of Presbyterianism. Rather, the only difficulty lies in discerning the depths of the corrosion.

In Google’s early years as a start-up company, some of its engineers adopted a mantra that became their guiding ethic: “Don’t be evil.”

After an initial meeting with the *Washington Post*, these engineers were concerned that a partnership with the newspaper might betray their commitment to producing search results without external interference or economic influence. One engineer therefore wrote on a whiteboard, “Don’t be evil,” to frame their pursuit of revenue with a moral reminder about their values. These three words became the first line in the company’s code of conduct, but over time Google wrestled with how to abide by this principle as it grew into a technological behemoth and one of the most powerful entities in the world.<sup>58</sup> For Christians, the standard of “Don’t be evil” is likely too low a bar for individuals and ministries professing the grace of Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit. And yet Presbyterianism in the age of Black enslavement failed to meet this bar. In 1851, John Gregg Fee warned white Presbyterians that their ongoing participation in slavery would result in the demise and ruin of Presbyterianism: “A church that can sanction and fellowship one of the greatest outrages upon humanity, they feel to be worse than no church, a delusion, a den of wolves, where the lambs of the flock are in danger of being devoured.”<sup>59</sup> Unfortunately, too few white Presbyterians then shared Fee’s outrage and heeded his counsel. And all Presbyterians today continue to live with the consequences.

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