Vulcan Historical Review

Volume 18 Article 11

2014

"A Bountiful Harvest for the Granary of the Lord": Southern Baptist Eschatology and its Mode of Production

Kris Steele

"A Bountiful Harvest for the Granary of the Lord": Southern Baptist Eschatology and its Mode of Production

by Kris Steele

In 1851, the congregation of Little River Church called for a vote of exclusion for two men. These men were charged with belonging to the Sons of Temperance, an accusation that held particular significance in western North Carolina. Many members of the congregation found that belonging to secular, secretive organizations that claimed moral missions analogous to those of the church was both unnecessary and spiritually dangerous. The vote was called, and upon the count, all but twenty-nine church members had voted for exclusion. A second vote was called, this one to dismiss the dissenting twenty-nine from fellowship as well. Both motions carried, and the thirty-one temperance advocates and sympathizers were excommunicated from the church.[1] Non-fellowship agreements were taken seriously and were most often appealed to the corresponding association to which a particular church may belong. In the case of Little River, a query was brought before the board of the Lewis Fork Baptist Association regarding the verdict of the exclusion vote. The query asked "[is] it sufficient ground for an exclusion from fellowship according to the principles of the Baptist churches, for a member to join the Order of the Sons of Temperance[?]" The answer: "Yea."[2]

The men and women turned out of Little River Church, along with those dismissed from other churches in neighboring counties, would go on to found the Taylorsville Baptist Association and, within the preamble of the new association's constitution, state that "it is no violation of the word of God for any member of the church . . . to join any Society having for its object the promotion of the cause of temperance." Within the subsequent articles, the constitution also called to any "who are oppress[ed] or cramp[ed] by their Respective Churches" and for them to join "in the promotion of [the] Gospel of Christ and the Cause of Temperance."[3]

Such schismatic and dichotomous conflicts between southern Baptist churches in the first half of the nineteenth century are indicative of larger class conflicts regarding the social role of alcohol. In a period of rapid market development and evangelical revivalism, Baptists who found themselves distant and disconnected from urbanizing districts also found themselves at odds with the new social mentalities held by the emerging middle class. Notions of personal industry, frugality, and sobriety were frequently propagated by urban professionals in attempts to reconcile themselves with new, dynamic environments characterized by proto-industrial work schedules and regimented lifestyles. However, for mountain Baptists whose production schemes and cultural folkways had always involved the free flow of alcohol, the logic of temperance found little traction. For the many corn farmers in and around the Blue Ridge Mountains, it was more cost-effective to transport gallons of distilled whiskey rather than bushels of corn over the hills to various market centers.[4]

Inter-church debates over alcohol were also part

1 Minutes, *Lewis Fork Baptist Association,* 1851, in Baptist Historical Collection, (Winston-Salem: Wake Forest University Library).
2 Ibid.

3 *Taylorsville Church Book*, Alexander County Library, Taylorsville, North Carolina, 3-4.
4 Bruce E. Stewart, "'This Country Improves in Cultivation, Wickedness, Mills, and Still': Distilling and Drinking in Antebellum Western North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review* 83, no. 4 (Fall, 2006): 461-462, 478.

of larger conversations regarding the church's role in reform and missionary activities. Having been founded in 1830 for the primary objective of encouraging and sponsoring missionary efforts, within three years the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina was also sponsoring the development of temperance societies deemed "worthy of the patronage of all religious and philanthropic individuals." Such efforts were aimed at restoring fellow men "to the bosom of their families, and to the respectability of society."[5] The methods by which social respectability could be restored is characterized by what the State Convention's Board of Managers called the "cause of Zion."[6]

As the United States continued to experience a Protestant Great Awakening, in which official state religions were disestablished and denominations increasingly decentralized, many evangelicals began to challenge Calvinistic doctrines of election by emphasizing human spiritual agency. Salvation now entailed a personal choice in which the subject actively accepted salvation, often within emotionally charged atmospheres where pointed and calculated deployments of doctrine imbued congregants with the power and enthusiasm to reform the world. In this way, the Zion to which the Board of Managers referred is not the metaphysical or spatial dimension of God's new Jerusalem made manifest through the millennium. Zion, as inscribed by the convention, is that of an imagined parousia, only revealed or made legible through its correlative cause. Zion, as a discursive formation, existed in relation or proximity to human action; it would have to be produced.[7] Southern Baptist eschatology was determined by the actions and productions of people, not by a predestined ethereal arrangement.

Evangelical preachers found receptive audiences among the ranks of bourgeois social reformers who, when not occupying the pews in church, were spending their disposable time and income on other reform endeavors. The "cause of Zion" was used synonymously with the "great cause of missions, education, the dissemination of useful books, and tracts," in addition to the "cause of Temperance."[8] Bertram Wyatt-Brown has noted the degree to which Bible, Tract, and other reform societies adopted similar organizational structures as emerging industry and corporate systems.[9] In many respects, the developmental patterns of both the corporation and reform societies were symbiotic, insofar as the same people were often part of both institutions, magnifying the cultural valency of new power relations.

The technologies of power harnessed by the architects of Zion were the pulpit and the printing press. Unprecedented amounts of printed polemical material could now be distributed through increasingly open avenues of transportation. As stated by Wyatt-Brown, "[t]he efficient

SOUTHERN BAPTIST ESCHATOLOGY WAS DETERMINED BY THE ACTIONS AND PRODUCTIONS OF PEOPLE, NOT BY A PREDESTINED ETHEREAL ARRANGEMENT.

5 "Report on Temperance Societies," David S. Williams, *Baptist State Convention of North Carolina,* 1833.

6 "Annual Report of the Board of Managers," *Baptist State Convention,* 1854.

7 Jack P. Maddex, "Proslavery Millennialism: Social Eschatology in Antebellum Southern Calvinism," *American Quarterly* 31, no. 1 (Spring, 1979): 46-47. Maddex further argues that the millennium imagined by southern Christians was an affirmation of their own society, and not a destructive rejection of it.

8 "Annual Report of the Board of Managers," *Baptist State Convention,* 1854; "Report on Temperance," R. McNabb, *Baptist State Convention,* 1838.

9 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "The Antimission Movement in the Jacksonian South: A Study in Regional Folk Culture," *The Journal of Southern History* 36, no. 4 (Fall, 1970): 506-508. Wyatt-Brown also argues more in sectional terms, highlighting the degree to which "Yankee commercialism" affected the missions movement.

and economical use of giant steam presses, of the widening networks of canals, rails, and steamboat lines, and of the postal service required that the societies' central offices be located in eastern metropolitan areas."[10] Missionaries, acting as emissaries for the State Convention, rode out to the "western parts of the State" encouraging the construction of local temperance societies and denominational schools, circulating and disseminating the reform discourse.[11] James Thomas, an agent for the State Convention, traveled to western counties only to find that the "Temperance reform" was "evidently on the decline, and the use of strong drink [was] taking deep root." Writing back to the Convention, he claimed to have seen "not less than 17 distilleries in operation" during his travels, and that it was "wo[e]ful to tell, many professors of religion, who say they desire the prosperity of Zion, to do good, eschew evil, and abhor drunk[e]ness in all its forms, make, sell, use, give, and send abroad this awful evil, and they often quote the Scriptures to justify their course."[12]

PUBLIC, DOXOLOGICAL CELEBRATIONS OF HUMAN CAPACITY FOR REFORM MARKED A NEW POLICING OF THE PRIVATE SPHERE.

In the same letter, Thomas described his project in the biblical rhetoric of Isaiah, in which the dark wilderness, into which he ventured, was illuminated and rendered into a "fruitful field" and forest.[13] Sermons and lessons regarding proper habits of consumption were frequently discussed in terms of production patterns. Before concluding his own report in 1848, William Jones claimed that the "good seed of the word formerly sown in this State, is springing up; and if judiciously cultivated, will produce a bountiful harvest for the granary of the Lord." Such productive imagery preceded four additional pages of financial accounting.[14] The signatures of the methods of production and the fiduciary terms with which missions were inscribed were the immediate targets of protest by westerners who increasingly self-identified as "primitive" or "anti-missionary" Baptists.[15]

Primitive Baptists countered the threat of cultural hegemony implicit in Baptist reform discourse through church exclusions as well as through their own publications.[16] Joshua Lawrence, a Primitive Baptist, decried the "monied" interests which seemed to have corrupted a divine enterprise. He faulted missionary support of "such

10 Ibid.

11 "Fields of Labor," *Baptist State Convention,* 1846.

12 "Report of James Thomas . . . Agent," *Baptist State Convention, 1835.*

13 Ibid.

14 "Report of the Agent of the Convention," Appendix, *Baptist State Convention, 1848.*

15 Kenneth Moore Startup, *The Root of All Evil: The Protestant Clergy and the Economic Mind of the Old South* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1997). Here, Startup argues that southern clerical criticisms of capitalist culture is indicative of broader anti-commercialist tendencies across the South; Walter Brownlow Posey, *Religious Strife on the Southern Frontier* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), 43-75. Posey points out that denominations rarely maintained stable relationships, either within themselves or with other "sects."

16 Antonio Gramsci's characterization of cultural hegemony is of particular analytical utility. When discussing the epochal historical bloc, he finds its composition at the threshold of "spontaneous philosophy" and the material circumstances surrounding its articulation. In this case, the cultural, geo-economic, and theological preconditions of North Carolinians, when expressed in and through relations of production, constitute such a threshold. Mikhail Bakhtin's understanding of language as the site of heteroglossal, dialogic contests of ideology also assist in explaining how what Fredric Jameson calls the "master code of religion" houses such socioeconomic contests. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Quentin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International, 1971), 323; M.M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), repr. (Psychology Press, 2002), 74. Citations are to the reprinted edition.

merchandizing and covetousness, and greediness of filthy lucre in religion." In a diatribe titled, "A Watchman, crying with the children of Zion," Lawrence excoriated the "various intrigues of hypocrisy, practiced under the sanction of scripture and benevolence, to make gain by godliness, carried on by the societies of the day, of whom the devil may say, with more reason than he did of Job: Did they serve God for nought?—Do they divide the spoil of benevolence from the priest to the printer?"[17] Lawrence identified the secular alliances forged by missionaries, and saw such cooperation as innately corruptive.

In more theological terms, the "hyper Calvinist" perspectives of Primitive Baptists divided the spiritual from the secular realm. Anti-missionary Baptists, who had always called forth their own preachers by motion of the congregation, resented the notion that, as a denomination, they were responsible for founding schools, religiously instructing enslaved peoples, or augmenting consumption habits in accordance with largely alien, transplanted doctrines that seemed to be re-produced en masse.[18] Chief among the critics of evangelism, Lawrence, in his own *American Telescope*, rejected the idea that revivals could be planned or organized. Revivalism, like any other form of divine intervention, could not be genuine if its impetus was human engineering. This is, of course, antithetical to Charles Finney's famous claim that the "connection between the right use of means for a revival and a revival, is as scientifically sure as between the right use of means to raise grain and a crop of wheat."[19] Even Finney's understanding of eschatology was made legible through the imagery of agrarian industriousness.

For Calvinists, and many of the Primitive Baptists, God's absence was ubiquitous. His designs appeared to be a wilderness to the subject whose own individual action carried no significant ethereal weight. God's will was unknowable and unalterable. The horizons of possibility offered by a theology that divorced human action form eternal consequences now came under threat by missionaries and reformers who dared to say that the parousia could be caused.[20] Public, doxological celebrations of human capacity for reform marked a new policing of the private sphere. To both local and non-local evangelicals, a westerner's "disorderly house" was both God's and the church's concern.[21]

The intensity of Calvinism within the western regions of North Carolina can be traced back to the colonial settlement patterns of Europeans. Among the first ministers to traverse the Great Wagon Road to Salisbury was the Reverend John Thompson, a notable Old Light who had left a trail of schools and educational institutions be-

17 "Communications," *The Primitive Baptist*, Vol. 8, No. 1 (Tarborough: 1843), ed., George Howard. Joshua Lawrence also published *The American Telescope*, under the pseudonym "A Clodhopper." For more on Primitive Baptist historiography, see John G. Crowley, "'Written that Ye May Believe,'" in *Through a Glass Darkly: Contested Notions of Baptist Identity*, ed., Keith Harper (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012), 205-226. Citations are to the digital edition.

18 Anne C. Loveland, *Southern Evangelicals and the Social Order, 1800-1860* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1980), 224, 186-256. In her work, Loveland shows the dialectical engagements between evangelicals, who insisted that enslaved people should be treated as "fellow heirs of immortality," and hard-shell Christians who resented the imposition of new strictures upon the private sphere.

19 Charles G. Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion*, ed. William G. McLoughlin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960; orig. 1835), 33. Citations are to the reprinted edition.

20 Anne C. Loveland, 101-102. Her analysis here shows the paradox of fashionable benevolence. Evangelical doctrine was predicated on an exclusion of the "worldly" or corruptive "fashions" of secular society.

21 In the 1858 meeting of the Senter District Baptist Association, a letter from Grassy Creek Church requested advice regarding congregants "that are making and selling spirits, and spoiling the youths of our country." The association suggested warning those who faced potential exclusion, but that "if any member should make or buy spirits, and allow a drunken crowd to drink at their house or still-house, so as to constitute a disorderly house, we advise our churches to exclude them." Minutes, *Senter District Baptist Association,* 1858.

hind him.[22] Examining early colonial development also reveals the central and critical role alcohol played in early market formations.

During the colonial period, North Carolina's economic development followed what has been called a "linear urban network."[23] Communication, transportation, and commodity transactions were largely determined by existing roadways. As settlers planted towns along these linear trajectories, taverns were among the first financial and commercial intermediaries to be established. While certainly home to socialization and imbibing among neighbors and travelers, taverns also provided key services related to menial, small-scale credit extension. Not unlike stores and grist mills, taverns could provide a degree of liquidity within a market dominated by barter commodity exchanges, especially for those farmers who distilled their excess corn into whiskey.[24] In the eighteenth century, alcohol was already providing an economic mechanism through which disconnected mountain farmers could articulate themselves within the larger Atlantic economy and world-system.[25]

A PAROUSIA WAS TO BE CAUSED BY RENDERING THE WILD INTO A FRUITFUL FIELD, TO BE COUNTED, QUANTIFIED, AND COMMODIFIED.

Alcohol also played a distinctive role as a cultural folkway. Free-flowing liquor could be found at elections, court dates, and militia musters at various points of the year.[26] The communal binge fostered a degree of egalitarianism among the white men gathered. Such social cohesion was further cemented through labor-pooling tactics, like barn-raisings, corn-shuckings, and log-rollings; all of which were thoroughly lubricated with collective consumption.[27] During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the increasing population of Ulster Scots in western North Carolina accompanied a correlative increase in whiskey distillation. The Scots-Irish brought a unique and industrious tradecraft that made expedient and efficient use of crops that exceeded domestic subsistence and consumption capacities.[28] The western region of North Carolina in-

22 Robert W. Ramsey, *Carolina Cradle: Settlement of the Northwest Carolina Frontier, 1747-1762* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1964), 186-188; John Kerr Fleming, *Historic Third Creek Church* (Raleigh: Office of the Synod of North Carolina, 1967), 38, 136; Maddex argues that "Southern Presbyterians—concentrated in the stricter Old School church—contributed to Southern intellectual life out of proportion to their numbers in the region." Maddex, 47.

23 Daniel B. Thorp, "Taverns and Tavern Culture on the Southern Colonial Frontier: Rowan County, North Carolina, 1753-1776," *Journal of Southern History* 62, no. 4 (November, 1996): 669. Thorp borrows the term from Charles J. Farmer in his *In the Absence of Towns: Settlements and Country Trade in Southside Virginia, 1730-1800* (Lanham, Md., 1993).

24 Thorp, 666-667.

25 For a more pointed world-systems theoretical approach to the economic development of the Carolina backcountry, see Wilma Dunaway, *The First American Frontier: Transition to Capitalism in Southern Appalachia, 1700-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996). Dunaway overturns long-held homesteader myths and illuminates the large degree of landlessness among, what she labels as "disaffected," farmers who were not quite proletarianized into a white wage labor class.

26 The "treating" that occurred around elections and political campaigns was seen as a corruptive and un-republican influence by temperance supporters. Bruce E. Stewart, "'Select Men of Sober and Industrious Habits': Alcohol Reform and Social Conflict in Antebellum Appalachia," *The Journal of Southern History* 73, no. 2 (Spring, 2007): 300; "'This Country Improves in Cultivation, Wickedness, Mills, and Still': Distilling and Drinking in Antebellum Western North Carolina," *The North Carolina Historical Review*83, no. 4 (Fall, 2006): 471.

27 Stewart, "'This Country Improves in Cultivation, Wickedness, Mills, and Still,'" 470; "'Select Men of Sober and Industrious Habits,'" 294.

28 For more on the Ulster Scot migration, see H. Tyler Blethen and Curtis W. Wood Jr., *From Ulster to Carolina: The Migration of the Scotch-Irish to Southwestern North Carolina* (Raleigh: Office of Archives and History, North Carolina Department of Cultural

creasingly produced more domestically distilled whiskey than the rest of the state.[29]

To conventioneers, it was of little doubt that the socioeconomic significance of alcohol contributed to the "depressed condition of religion" in the western counties. Evangelical preachers and Convention correspondents increasingly engaged in political activity.[30] Primitive Baptists not only resented the collaboration of secular and spiritual enterprises, insofar as it was seen to have corrupted divine messages, but they rejected the culturally hegemonic implications of bourgeois norms. This was exacerbated by a pre-existing geopolitical dyad that frequently pitted rural western regions against consolidated, notably wealthier eastern regions.[31]

In 1846, the "Fields of Labor" report suggested that "special attention ought first to be given to the towns, and then the most suitable places in the country. The New Testament plan is '*to begin at Jerusalem.*' The great mistake . . . has been the neglect of the towns, particularly in the middle and western parts of the State."[32] Nearly a year prior, the Convention had

> justly apprehended that the cause of benevolence must suffer in the Western part of our State, if the churches shall deem it unnecessary to send their delegates to the meetings of our annual Convention. Western Carolina presents an inviting field to the missionary, and our brethren in the mountains have manifested a commendable zeal in their efforts to supply their own destitution.[33]

Resources, 1998); Robert W. Ramsey, *Carolina Cradle: Settlement of the Northwest Carolina Frontier, 1747-1762* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1964).

29 Similar discrepancies can be seen in proportions of homemade manufactures and aggregated accommodations of Baptist Churches. Western counties like Ashe, Burke, Catawba, and Iredell all held financial ratios higher than that of the state as a whole. The largest discrepancies came from within western urban areas, and this is in large part due to the rural dispersal of Baptist churches, rather than an overt reflection of the poverty-stricken Baptist accommodation areas. Altogether the "top four whiskey-manufacturing counties . . . in 1840 (Surry, Burke, Wilkes, and Ashe) together accounted for 48 percent of the mountain population and 89 percent of the alcohol distilled in the region." Census data from Ashe, Burke, and Iredell counties reveal ratios of 12.15, 12.16, 14.87 respectively. These are compared to the 10.34 of the state in general. Catawba County accounts for $29,358 in homemade manufactures, while providing nothing in the form of aggregate accommodations of Baptist churches. This could be a calculation error, a concurrent mistake made by the census distributor. However, these western counties were frequently and explicitly mentioned in State Convention correspondence for dispraise regarding the "depressed condition" of Baptist activity and fiduciary support production. Stewart, "'This Country Improves in Cultivation, Wickedness, Mills, and Still,'" 463; U.S. Census Office, Seventh Census, 1850, *Compendium of the Enumeration of the Inhabitants and Statistics of the United States*, as made available by the University of Virginia Library. http://mapserver.lib.virginia.edu/; Guion Griffis Johnson, *Ante-Bellum North Carolina: A Social History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1937), 342; Minutes, *Baptist State Convention, 1846.*

30 Preachers Richard Jacks and Richard Gentry both signed the Ashe County Sons of Temperance petition for prohibition in 1854. Gentry and his son had been dismissed from fellowship at Old Fields Church three years prior. Richard Jacks was an even more polarizing figure, causing some Anti-missionary churches to question whether they should re-baptize members who had been baptized by Reverend Jacks. J.F. Fletcher, *A History of the Ashe County, North Carolina and New River, Virginia Baptist Associations* (Raleigh: Commercial Printing Co., 1935), 34; Minutes, *Mountain Baptist Association,* 1848.

31 Marc Kruman, *Parties and Politics in North Carolina, 1836-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 154-157. Here, Kruman argues that the political arena held the social negotiation of the state's transition to greater market involvement, and cultural issues like temperance cut across party lines, threatening the party system. He demonstrates the various methods the state General Assembly relegated decisions to localized tax and restriction policies.

32 "Fields of Labor," *Baptist State Convention, 1846.*

33 The Minutes, *Baptist State Convention, 1845.* The minutes continue, emphasizing that "the opinion is gaining ground that more should be done for Home Missions than we have done." One of the significant points of distinction Christine Leigh Heyrman makes is the degree to which home, private life fell increasingly under the purview of churches and pastors. See Christine Leigh Heyrman, *Southern Cross: The Beginnings of the Bible Belt* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).

At the annual Jefferson Baptist Association meeting, after an impromptu protracted meeting and revival, the construction of "a school of high character at some suitable point within associational limits" was proposed. Among the resolutions was "that the committee be instructed in making the selection of a suitable location for said school to have particular reference to the most wealthy and densely populated community."[34]

Such financial preoccupations reveal the increasingly professional nature of clerical and ecclesiastical activity. The managerial activities of missionary enterprises were also occasioned by the social and cultural mores of the growing professional (middle) class. For the missionaries and their State Convention, a Baptist that "act[s] with that energy and independence which the dignity of [their] position should inspire" was a frugal, sober, and productive Baptist.[35] The agricultural industriousness implicit within missionary discourse not only shows the synergism of proper consumption and production modalities, but the cultural hegemony wrought by a Zion, not to be found in the Calvinists' frontier wilderness, but a parousia to be caused by rendering the wild into a fruitful field, to be counted, quantified, and commodified. As scholars like Giorgio Agamben continue to illuminate the theological genealogies of modern political economy, economic analyses of evangelical theology can help explain, not just the cultural hegemony contained within church doctrine, but how congregants made sense of their own lifestyles in spiritual terms.[36]

34 Minutes, *Jefferson Baptist Association, 1854*; Fletcher, 51.

35 "Annual Report of the Board of Managers," *Baptist State Convention, 1854.*

36 Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government*, trans. Lorenzo Chiesa and Matteo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 277-286. Agamben in his research traces the signature of *oikonomia* from its original liturgical roots to contemporary ideas regarding the invisible hand. Citations are to the digital edition.