

JOHN WITHERSPOON, COMMON SENSE
AND ORIGINAL SIN

By

Daniel Craig Norman

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APPROVED:

THESIS ADVISOR:

Dr. Don Fortson

RTS/VIRTUAL PRESIDENT

Dr. Andrew J. Peterson

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Acknowledgments

I owe the idea for this thesis, along with a long-time developing interest in historical theology to a number of people. Shortly after beginning active duty in 1970 at Fort Gordon, Georgia, my wife and I began looking for a church in Augusta. In what still seems a bit odd, a fellow officer that we met at Officers Christian Fellowship urged us to visit a church that he himself did not attend. One service at First Presbyterian Church ended our search. Our new pastor John Oliver introduced us to preaching, worship, music, outreach and missions that can most succinctly be described by borrowing Wesley's words, that my heart was strangely warmed. The Army did not let us remain long at Fort Gordon, but my reformed pilgrimage had begun.

More than 10 years later, my pastor Paul Johnson encouraged me to read the book, *Reformed Theology in America*. In the course of our discussions, the topic of the philosophy of common sense was raised in conjunction with Charles Hodge and Princeton Seminary. During that same period of time, the philosophy of common sense was also introduced to my thinking by Al Greene, founder of Bellevue Christian School where our children attended. In the context of his discussions from time to time on philosophy of education, Al spoke of the negative affect of common sense realism on reformed theology and the Christian worldview common among late twentieth century American evangelical Christians. These references to common sense were quite limited, but left me with the impression that, for some reason, quite different views had developed within the greater reformed community on the legacy of common sense.

More recently, after pursuing my theological interests at Reformed Theological Seminary, I found myself looking for a thesis topic. For a variety of reasons, I was attracted to late 17th – early 18th century American historical theology. After considerable reading, I

sought counsel from my current pastor, Jeff Jeremiah, whose PhD in church history concerned a somewhat earlier era. Despite his help in narrowing my possibilities, I was still in a quandary when I had the opportunity for lunch with a friend that I had not seen for quite a while. Mark Noll thought he was simply renewing an acquaintance dating back to our undergraduate years at Wheaton, but I took the opportunity to seek advice on my thesis. The upshot of that long, very stimulating lunch was a new direction in my search for a thesis: John Witherspoon and the philosophy of common sense.

It has been quite an exciting adventure, since I was not sure for some time where the research would lead me. Along the way I have received helpful suggestions from Paul, Al, Jeff and Mark. As I proceeded, I received valuable guidance from my advisor and Professor of Church History and Practical Theology at Reformed Theological Seminary, Don Fortson. Don's familiarity with the varied theological issues and personalities of Witherspoon's era was quite evident as he prodded me with penetrating questions to not only bring key points into focus, but help me think about the practical implications for the Church today.

I also want to thank my wife Judy for her patience and understanding during this thesis, which took much longer to complete than I anticipated. It might be assumed that her patience and understanding was to be expected since we have spent the last six years in school part-time. But during that time, she finished two and a half degrees in less time than it took me to complete one. Finally, my daughter Amy's proof-reading substantially reduced the number of typos and oversights that I inserted into my draft version. This she did despite her more than full-time responsibilities managing a household of one husband and four small children.

Most of all, I am thankful to God for the opportunity to study. Along with John Witherspoon, it is my desire to glorify God in my life. It is to that end that I undertook this course of study.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Of the many intellectual conundrums in the history of the human race, probably no issue has been more universal in its reach, more subtle in its nuances, resulted in greater human conflict, nor led to greater consequence for human destiny, than the question of reason versus revelation. The historical evidence is overwhelming, beginning with the Garden of Eden where Eve found the clever reasoning of the serpent more appealing than the revelation of God.¹ The basic problem is that the human mind seems to possess an inherent belief in its own self-sufficiency. In the Bible, those who rely on their own faculties and ignore the revelation of God are called fools.²

On the other hand, reason is a God-given capability without which we would be unable to live. We function day-by-day under the presumption that the world is a rational place. Indeed, we use our reason to process whatever data we receive that requires a conscious, extra-instinctive response. Sensory data, innate or intuitive thoughts and revelation itself must all be processed rationally by the mind. Christian thinkers have long recognized that reason is fundamental to our existence, including our apprehension of spiritual truths, yet it often causes consequential and far-reaching difficulties in relation to revelation because it is not natural for the human mind to rely on reason in one instance and revelation in another. John Calvin, for example, said, “We see among all mankind that

¹ *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version*, Classic Reference Edition ed. (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001)., Genesis 3:1-6. All future biblical references will be taken from the ESV unless otherwise noted.

² Prov. 12:15, 1 Cor. 1:18-24.

reason is proper to our nature...”³ and “We must now analyze what human reason can discern with regard to God’s Kingdom and to spiritual insight.”⁴ In answer to the latter, he argues that prior to regeneration man is spiritually blind and therefore incapable of making rational judgments in the spiritual realm.

The Enlightenment and Christian Thought

The rise of science in the 17th century led by Isaac Newton was one of the primary conditions that ushered in the Enlightenment, a broad intellectual movement that originated in England, France and Germany. Proponents held that rational thought could free man from his dependence and bondage to authority and religion for progress in virtually any sphere of life. Reactions to the Enlightenment vis-à-vis religion varied considerably. Georg Hegel and Baruch Spinoza determined that traditional religion—indeed God—was no longer necessary. For Jonathan Edwards, Enlightenment philosophies were akin to Arminianism because they implied that human thought was independent of God.⁵ Some such as John Locke and Isaac Newton perceived a tension between reason and revelation, but believed that the two could be made compatible.⁶ Among those searching for compromise, there were a variety of approaches. In due course, the champions of reason and science forged a view of Christianity in which the Bible itself was read with a

³ John Calvin, McNeill, John T., ed., *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John Baillie, McNeill, John T., Van Dusen, Henry P., trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols., The Library of Christian Classics, vol. XX (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1970)., 2.2.17.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.2.18.

⁵ Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America*, paperback ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978)., 49.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

naturalistic lens, yielding such Christian heresies as Deism and Unitarianism. Earlier generations would have seen these views as not only heretical, but inconceivable.

It was in this world of raging philosophical and theological debates that John Witherspoon lived. And it was in regard to this very issue that he believed he found resolution, though certainly not as a Deist, nor even as Locke. Witherspoon was born in Scotland where the predominant form of the Enlightenment was not as hostile to Christianity as in the other countries of Europe, although there was considerable accommodation to reason. With respect to Christian doctrine, Witherspoon was quite conservative. It was his desire to retain traditional orthodoxy and coexist in a world where reason was gaining dominance. Moreover, he firmly believed that, properly understood, reason in no way conflicted with revelation.

In his *Lectures on Divinity*, he observed, “perhaps there are few things more delightful, than to observe, that the latest discoveries in philosophy, have never shewn us anything but what is perfectly consistent with the scripture doctrine and history.”⁷ When Witherspoon speaks of the “latest discoveries in philosophy” or refers to philosophy in a favorable light, he has in mind the philosophy of Common Sense as it was developed in 18th century Scotland by philosophers Francis Hutcheson (1694-1747), Thomas Reid (1710-1796), James Beattie (1735-1803) and Dugold Stewart (1753-1828).⁸ As a product of the Scottish Enlightenment, it has been referred to using various permutations of the

⁷ John Witherspoon, *Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon, Late President of the College at Princeton, New Jersey*, 4 vols., vol. IV (Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1801)., 53. Unless otherwise noted, future citations from Witherspoon’s Works will be from the first edition and designated by volume and page, as Works:4.53.

⁸ John Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed. (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1982)., 33.

following terms: Scottish, Realism, Common Sense and philosophy. In the course of this thesis, we will use the term Scottish Common Sense Realism, abbreviated as SCSR.

The Scottish Enlightenment was one moderate expression of enlightenment thought that proponents believed was compatible with Christianity. In addition, they saw it's potential to oppose ideas of the more radical Enlightenment from people like David Hume and Rousseau.⁹ However, despite its moderation, SCSR was broad enough to allow for considerable controversy within the Church of Scotland, which had been reformed as Presbyterian in 1560. The crux of the controversy was how one defined Christianity.

John Witherspoon and the Philosophy of Common Sense

Although he did not contribute to the development of SCSR and is not considered much of an original thinker, Witherspoon is credited with introducing it to America. He accomplished this as president of Princeton College, where he instructed a significant portion of America's educated population during the latter part of the 18th century and indirectly, several generations to follow. Witherspoon, his successors and supporters, based at Princeton College and later Princeton Theological Seminary, believed that he was able to retain Calvinistic orthodoxy along with his enlightened philosophical framework. A number of critics do not agree. The purpose of this thesis is to evaluate the influence that Common Sense Realism had on his theology, especially with regard to the Fall. Guiding the development will be four questions:

⁹ Mark A. Noll, *America's God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002)., 95.

1) To what extent did SCSR influence his theology—in particular his view of the nature of man, the Fall and original sin?

2) How does Witherspoon employ SCSR in his sermons and lectures and what purpose does it serve?

3) Was Witherspoon conscious of the issues brought on by SCSR?

4) Did Witherspoon undergo a transformation in his theological views when he crossed the Atlantic in 1768?

Before addressing these questions beginning in chapter 4, brief background material will be provided. Chapter 2 contains an overview of Witherspoon's life in Scotland and America, especially concerning the events that relate to SCSR. Chapter 3 introduces SCSR in the philosophical context of the 18th century. Witherspoon was enmeshed in SCSR throughout his life. Although he subscribed to it, he strongly disagreed with the theology of many others who also did. Chapter 4 is an overview of his theological outlook in this enlightenment context—more specifically, what did he say about reason and revelation and how did he employ them as he articulated and defended his theology. Chapter 5 contains the center of the thesis where we consider Witherspoon's understanding of the doctrine of the Fall. How we understand this doctrine determines our view of the nature of man. What are the implications of SCSR for the nature of man. Or, if man's reason was damaged in the Fall, is SCSR also a casualty? Chapter 6 is an evaluation of Witherspoon's statements and positions that have been described in Chapters 4 and 5. In Chapter 7, we evaluate the perspectives of two prominent scholars who have addressed Witherspoon's view of sin and found him to be weak on the doctrine of human depravity. Chapter 8

concludes with a summary of what has been learned and a brief application to the Church today.

A study of this nature is limited by the available resources. Witherspoon did not leave a diary, nor a systematic theology and many of his works were lost before they could be published.¹⁰ With only a partial knowledge of his context and changing situation, there appear to be ambiguities and inconsistencies in his writings. This has led to conflicting interpretations by later scholars. But no one who has studied him denies that his impact has been quite significant for higher education, American Christianity and American government.

¹⁰ See the Appendix for additional details.

Chapter 2

Witherspoon the Man ¹¹

John Witherspoon was born in Yester, just east of Edinburgh in February, 1723 to a Presbyterian minister and his wife. From the instruction of his mother, he was able to read the Bible at age four. With a mastery of Latin, Greek and French, he entered Edinburgh University at age 13 and defended his master's thesis three years later. He remained in Edinburgh studying theology until 1743 when he was licensed to preach. He received a call to the parish at Beith, but before he was ordained, he faced a church trial in which his master's thesis was called unorthodox. The matter was quickly resolved in his favor after which he was ordained in April, 1745. Two years later he married Elizabeth Montgomery, the daughter of a Presbyterian pastor.

Judging from his sermons, his primary interest as a new minister was to preach the Gospel.¹² But it has also been observed that he was a man of action more than contemplation. It certainly was the case that when Witherspoon saw a need, he did not wait for others to come forward. He often found himself near unsettled situations that seemed to compel his involvement. Within six months after moving to Beith, Witherspoon took up arms to defend King George against a Stuart rebellion. Roman Catholic King

¹¹Unless otherwise noted, the material in this chapter is based on the following two biographies of Witherspoon. Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon*, 2 vols., (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925); Ashbel Green, DD, Savage, Henry Littleton, ed., *The Life of the Revd John Witherspoon* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1973).

¹² His sermons exhibit a fervent commitment to biblical exhortation, an insightful concern for the spiritual condition of his congregation, and a desire to see sinners converted and God glorified. Despite many other responsibilities, he brought his evangelistic emphasis to Princeton, where it is reported that a revival occurred in the third and fourth year of his tenure, of which "several eminent ministers of the gospel...dated their change of heart from what they experienced in college at this time." Green., 144.

James II had been exiled in 1688, but in 1745 his grandson Charles Edwards Stuart (1720-88) led a small invasion force from France attempting to retake the British crown. Though unsuccessful, there were a number of threatening skirmishes and before it was over Witherspoon found himself a prisoner of war for about two weeks. This experience so shocked his nervous system that it caused him considerable distress for the rest of his life. For example, there were times before his congregation on Sunday when he experienced “a sudden and overwhelming presentiment in the midst of a service that he would not live to finish his task.”¹³

Leader of the Popular Party

With his first general assembly as a young minister of 24, were initiated 20 years of contentious political maneuvering and wrangling—most likely exceeding anything he later experienced in Congress.¹⁴ The roots of the controversy went back to the beginning of the Scottish reformation over how ministers should be chosen.¹⁵ John Knox himself had advocated in the First Book of Discipline (1560-61) the election of ministers by the congregation.¹⁶ Actual practice had changed over time due to various political and ecclesiastical compromises, upheavals and even secession. In 1712 Parliament passed the patronage law reinstating the system that was in operation prior to 1649, which

¹³ Collins., vol. 1, 21. See also, Green, 34-40 for additional details.

¹⁴ Collins not only describes the political infighting as “bitter,” but the conduct of the clergy made the complaints of the Popular party more than justified. “We read of ministers forced on parishes by aid of armed soldiery, of bloody riots at attempted inductions, of heresy charges discouraged, of ministers guilty of immoralities going unpunished while others were deposed for obedience to conscientious scruples...” Ibid., 30.

¹⁵ The debate over the selection of ministers was really only a pretext for a larger controversy, namely who would control and determine the direction of the Church of Scotland.

effectively gave control of selecting the minister to either the town council or, in the case of most rural churches, the nobility and gentry. This law was not too popular with the people and the upper classes were generally slow to press the church courts to enforce it. When they did, it was argued that “the authority of church courts did not apply in matters involving ‘conscience, of which God alone is Lord.’”¹⁷

Pressure for enforcement began to grow more rapidly after a 1751 organizing meeting of the Moderate Party at an Edinburgh tavern, attended by 15 individuals, including seven ministers. They resolved “that it was necessary to use every means in our power to restore the authority of the Church, otherwise her government would be degraded and everything depending on her authority would fall into confusion.”¹⁸ Their official concern was for order, discipline and subordination at every level of society, especially the Presbyterian Church.¹⁹ But they also found rapport with the intellectual and social center of the Scottish Enlightenment and approached personal piety and doctrinal orthodoxy with more of a casual attitude.²⁰ Threats to good order were seen in the rising evangelicalism

¹⁶ Richard B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 24.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 51.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 50. Although these terms have not always been employed with the same meaning, we will follow the definition of the Moderates or Moderate Party given by Sher, 17, 324-328, where the Moderate Party is identified as beginning with that 1751 meeting. The Moderate Party was led by William Robertson (1721-1793) and some of his friends including Alexander Carlyle (1722-1805), Hugh Blair (1718-1800), Adam Ferguson (1723-1816) and John Home (1722-1808), the first three of whom were Witherspoon’s classmates at Edinburgh. Moderates saw themselves as non-extremists, falling between “John Knox and David Hume, fanaticism and infidelity, tradition and modernity.” They emphasized the “moral lessons of Christianity.” Their core values were “religious tolerance and freedom of expression, reasonableness and moderation, polite learning and literature, humanitarianism and cosmopolitanism, virtue and happiness.”

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 52-54.

²⁰ Collins., vol 1, 29.

associated with George Whitfield and others, failure to enforce the patronage law, and threats of secession from those with doctrinal concerns such as Ebenezer Erskine.²¹

In opposition to the Moderates was a group known as the Popular party, which derived its name from those who opposed the law of patronage and wanted ministers elected by the local congregations. Calling them a party is quite misleading since they maintained no sort of organization and were divided on many issues, except for opposing the Moderates. It is also somewhat misleading to suggest that the Scottish church consisted of the Moderate and Popular parties. Greater insight is gained into the ecclesiastical situation that Witherspoon found himself by considering S. Mechie's loose groupings of the Church of Scotland at the mid-18th mark: a) "scholastic Calvinists" were those known for their rigid allegiance to the Westminster Confession of Faith and emphasis on predestination; b) "Evangelical Calvinists" did not deviate from the Confession, but their preachers were known by contrast for their evangelistic appeal for all to believe; c) "liberal Calvinists" valued societal respectability and the social benefits of Christianity, eschewed confessional and doctrinal commitment, but were in some ways devout; d) "Arians" reduced Christianity to its morality and treated subscription to the Westminster Confession as simply a formality. Most "members" of the Popular party were generally aligned with the second group.²²

²¹ Sher., 31-32. Erskine was unable to find resolution and became a leader of the Secession Church.

²² John McIntosh, *Church and Theology in Enlightenment Scotland: The Popular Party, 1740-1800*, ed. Stewart J.; Grant Brown, Alexander; Grant, Alison E.; Hutchison, I. G. C.; MacQueen, Hector L., Scottish Historical Review Monographs (East Lothian, Scotland: Tuckwell Press Ltd, 1998)., 20-21 Cited from S. Mechie, "The Theological climate in early eighteenth-century Scotland" in D. Shaw (ed.), *Reformation and Revolution: Essays presented to the Very Reverend Principal Emeritus Hugh Wall, D.D., D.Litt. on the sixtieth Anniversary of His Ordination* (Edinburgh, 1967), 268.

Although the Popular Party was fragmented and poorly organized, Witherspoon emerged as their de facto leader until he departed for America in 1768. His leadership and consequent recognition was given a great boost by the publication in 1753 of his lengthy satirical essay, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*. Francis Hutcheson along with his intellectual patron Lord Shaftsbury were the representative targets of the essay, although Witherspoon was attacking all who claimed allegiance to the Church of Scotland yet denied traditional beliefs. Hutcheson had died in 1746 before the Moderates had organized, but was generally regarded as their mentor for his liberalizing views. Despite their initial setbacks, with persistence and occasional effective attacks, the well-organized Moderates eventually prevailed with Robertson serving as Moderator of General Assembly for 16 years beginning in 1764.

President of Princeton College

In 1757, Witherspoon moved to the church at Paisley just north of Beith, where he remained despite other calls from Dublin, Dundee and Rotterdam, Holland. In 1766, Samuel Finley died after five years as President of Princeton College. Like other institutions of higher learning in colonial America, Princeton College was established for the purpose of training ministers. In 1739 the Synod of Philadelphia had decided to establish a new seminary that was more theologically and geographically acceptable than Harvard, Yale or the College of William and Mary. But shortly thereafter, the project was derailed by division, generally attributed to fallout of the Great Awakening, in such matters

as expressions of personal piety and required doctrinal adherence.²³ Following years of delay, a “New Side” pro-revival faction led by Jonathan Dickinson took the initiative to obtain a charter for the College of New Jersey in 1746. Following Dickinson’s short tenure as president were Aaron Burr, Sr., Jonathan Edwards, Samuel Davies and Samuel Finley, all of whom were partial to the New Side.²⁴

Despite the reunification in 1758 of the two “sides,” conflict continued and when Finley died in 1766, the trustees had difficulty finding a candidate agreeable to both parties. During the separation the New Side had gained in numbers while the Old Side appeared to be declining.²⁵ Witherspoon likely first came to the attention of the Princeton community during the fund raising trip of Gilbert Tennant and Samuel Davies to Great Britain in 1753. Davies has a favorable reference to “one Mr. Wetherspoon” and his *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* in his diary.²⁶ Witherspoon lacked academic experience, but he was viewed an attractive successor because of his notable academic credentials and reputation that appealed to both sides. Most thought he would help heal old wounds, but a few Old Siders opposed him.²⁷ When word of his appointment reached him in Scotland, Witherspoon was quite interested, but his wife was not. A long series of entreaties,

²³ Elizabeth I. Nybakken, "New Light on the Old Side: Irish Influences on Colonial Presbyterianism," *The Journal of American History* 68, no. 4 (1982). This article points out that it is simplistic to think of the conflict as involving two factions. In fact there were a number of sub-factions and various issues that led to division and continued to threaten unity throughout most of the 18th century.

²⁴ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973)., 272-273.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 273.

²⁶ Douglas Sloan, *The Scottish Enlightenment and the American College Ideal* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1971)., 104-105.

²⁷ L.H. Butterfield, *John Witherspoon Comes to America* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1953)., 83. Within a year after arriving, many Old Siders

including in-person lobbying by Benjamin Rush was unsuccessful until Elizabeth finally consented.²⁸ They arrived in Philadelphia on August 7, 1768, with five of their surviving 10 children.

At Princeton, Witherspoon was not simply the sixth president.²⁹ Instead of moving cautiously as one might who is new to both the college and the country, he began to make sweeping changes almost immediately. He raised admission requirements at the college and upgraded the grammar school to better prepare its graduates for higher education. He improved Princeton's library by purchasing 300 books in England even before he left for America.³⁰ He worked quickly to bring financial stability to Princeton, doubling its endowment during his first year. Enrollment increased even though admission requirements were tougher.³¹ He continued to enhance and modernize the curriculum, for example, by replacing the tutor and recitation system with lecture by a professor,³² and by giving greater emphasis to science and less to Latin.³³ He instituted a graduate program and in 1769 Princeton conferred the first honorary doctor of law degree in America.

His most consequential move at Princeton, however, was to alter the philosophical outlook from an idealism inherited from Jonathan Edwards to SCSR. The transformation

became much more favorably disposed towards Witherspoon because of his accomplishments—so that he did help with the rift.

²⁸ Ibid. This work includes all known correspondence between Witherspoon and his correspondents from the time of his initial offer from Princeton through his first year in America.

²⁹ His 26 years in office were longer than the total of his five predecessors.

³⁰ Approximately a 20% increase. Collins., 106.

³¹ When Princeton began, admission requirements included translating Virgil and Tully's oration into English, translating English into Latin and translating any selection from the gospels into Latin or English. Francis L. Broderick, "Pulpit, Physics, and Politics: The Curriculum of the College of New Jersey, 1746-1794," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 6, no. 1 (1949), 49.

³² Ibid., 62.

was swift: within a year after welcoming their new president, all four of the faculty had resigned.³⁴ Witherspoon associated idealism with Berkeley (although there were important differences between Edwards and Berkeley) and believed that it would lead to skepticism or materialism.³⁵ He considered SCSR to be the perfect alternative that would provide a solid defense against infidelity because it was consistent both with reality and Christian orthodoxy.

Besides his administrative and teaching duties at Princeton, Witherspoon continued his active role as a pastor, preaching to the local congregation each Sunday and on special occasions. He was also prominent in Synod of New York and Philadelphia, serving on several committees. He led unsuccessful efforts of reconciliation with the Scottish Secession Church and merger with the Dutch Reformed Church. Although the extent of his influence in the reorganization of the Presbyterian Church into a General Assembly is not completely clear, he was elected as its first moderator in May, 1789.³⁶

As tensions with Great Britain increased, he was drawn into politics on the side of those favoring independence, beginning in 1774 as a state representative of Somerset County and finally as one of five New Jersey representatives to the Continental Congress in 1776. As the only ordained member of the assembly, he also served as the de facto chaplain. During his national service until 1782, he actively participated in constitutional debate and served on over 120 congressional committees. Green relates that during the

³³ Mark A. Noll, *Princeton and the Republic* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1989), 29, 30, 35.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

³⁵ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology," *Church History* 24, no. 3 (1955), 262.

³⁶ Leonard J. Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1949), 263, 292-294.

debate on independence, Witherspoon spoke out emphatically against those who thought the country was not ready for “so important and decisive a measure.”³⁷ Despite his status as a relative newcomer, he was the only college president in America to take an active role in the Revolution.³⁸ British troops stationed in New York recognized his role when they burned him in effigy along with American generals Lee, Putnam and Washington.

Princeton closed during 1776-77 and did not fare well because of the war and Witherspoon’s preoccupation with congressional matters. The campus was occupied on and off for five and a half years by both American and British troops and sustained considerable damage. Scientific apparatus was destroyed along with most of the library.³⁹ Enrollment dropped and instruction during the war years was held at the President’s house.

After his last term in Congress, Witherspoon returned to Princeton to help his son-in-law Samuel Stanhope Smith rebuild. As Vice President, Smith had assumed many of Witherspoon’s responsibilities in his absence. Without the preoccupation of national politics, Smith had devoted his full attention to advancing Witherspoon’s agenda. After the war, Witherspoon was elected to the New Jersey State Assembly in 1783 and 1789, and in 1783 returned to Great Britain on an unsuccessful fund raising trip, after which he transitioned to semi-retired status. In 1789 Elizabeth died. Two years later he married Ann Dill, the young widow of one of his former students. From this union, two daughters were born, one living beyond infancy. Witherspoon remained active until his death on November 15, 1794, although the last couple of years he suffered from dropsy and blindness brought on by cataracts.

³⁷ Green., 159.

³⁸ Collins., 155.

Much of Witherspoon's legacy reflected in theology, ecclesiology, education and government followed from his immediate students. Among Princeton graduates who were his students were 114 pastors, 13 college presidents, a US President, a US Vice President, 10 cabinet officers, six members of the Continental Congress, 39 US Representatives, 21 Senators, 12 state governors, 56 state representatives and 30 judges, including three to the US Supreme Court. Having a direct impact on such a significant group of influential leaders was especially powerful given the population of the country at that time. Many of his students transmitted his ideas in their endeavors, especially through higher education.

Summary

From his earliest years Witherspoon's heart was in the ministry. He maintained a strong commitment to orthodox theology, despite the prevailing liberalism he encountered in his education and in the Church of Scotland. These challenges seemed to invigorate his resolve and lead him to fill vacuums in leadership whenever the opportunity arose. When he arrived in America, the challenges and context were different, but his approach was the same. Once again, he did not hesitate to exert leadership in areas he deemed to be critical: strengthening Princeton as an institution so that it could more effectively accomplish its mission, namely in its philosophy of education, admission standards, curriculum and finances. He worked for the unity and growth of the Presbyterian Church and when the opportunity to serve his new country's political needs also presented itself and Witherspoon did not hesitate, despite the fact that he had no ambition or inclination for government service.

³⁹ Broderick., 59.

His accomplishments as a leader in education, ecclesiology and were sufficient to give Witherspoon a lasting reputation. After reflecting a bit on his life, one cannot escape concluding that he was quite a remarkable man. His legacy has become noteworthy for theology because of how he appropriated SCSR in his teaching and preaching, and it is to SCSR that we know turn our attention.

Chapter 3

Scottish Common Sense Realism (SCSR) and its Pervasive Influence

For the most part, ideas do not develop in a vacuum and those credited with developing a new idea are indebted to others in their lives. When it comes to SCSR, although it may have come to full fruition in Scotland, it must be recognized that its roots can be traced to philosophers as far back as Aristotle.⁴⁰ Reid credits Aristotle, René Descartes, Francis Bacon and George Berkeley for his inspiration, but there were clearly others.⁴¹ Equally important are those whose influence was largely negative rather than positive, such as Reid's reaction to his contemporary Hume, with whom he carried on a running correspondence of mutual discovery and misunderstanding.⁴²

The Enlightenment and SCSR

The broad umbrella under which reason forged a dominant role in Western culture from the late 17th to the beginning of the 19th centuries is known as the Enlightenment, "the culmination of many centuries of classical and aristocratic civilization."⁴³ The general consensus among intellectuals was that reason and its ally science would bring about unprecedented progress by supplanting the old traditions, not only in the physical world, but also in religion, ethics and government. Despite these common themes of human potential and progress, there were many variations and not a little disagreement among its leading lights. It is within the Enlightenment that SCSR developed.

⁴⁰ Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology.", 259.

⁴¹ S. A. Grave, *The Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense* (London: Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1960)., 10, 132; Tim McConnel, "The Old Princeton Apologetics: Common Sense or Reformed," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 46, no. 4 (2003)., 653. McConnel describes Reid's link to Joseph Butler's *Analogy*.

⁴² Grave., 61-79.

Numerous attempts have been undertaken to trace the lineage of SCSR and place it in its historical context. A respected study by Henry May and summarized by Mark Noll describes four manifestations of the Enlightenment from an American perspective.⁴⁴ The *moderate* Enlightenment represented by Newton and Locke held that the methodology of rigorous empirical science along with newly discovered physical laws provide useful descriptions of the universe that are compatible with traditional Christian beliefs. Others such as Hume and Voltaire found enlightenment thought applicable to a broader set of disciplines. To them, not only traditional science, but also traditional religion and ethics had become obsolete. Just as astronomy had to jettison astrology, so religion had to separate itself from superstitions such as miracles and supernatural revelation while retaining natural religion. May calls this branch the *skeptical* Enlightenment. The *revolutionary* Enlightenment and its proponents such as Rousseau and Robespierre advocated a complete break with tradition.

Each of these three strains had a minor impact on America compared with the didactic Enlightenment that developed in Scotland. May uses the term *didactic* because of the teaching role assumed by many American clergy at the beginning of the 19th century to “rescue” and defend in their sermons what were deemed to be the positive elements of the Enlightenment.⁴⁵ With considerable variation in theological perspective, there was no consensus on which aspects of the Enlightenment were consistent with Christianity. The

⁴³ May., 361.

⁴⁴ Joel A. Carpenter and Kenneth W. Shipps, eds., *Making Higher Education Christian* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Christian University Press, 1987)., 59-61. Noll’s chapter is titled, “The Revolution, the Enlightenment, and Christian Higher Education in the Early Republic.”

⁴⁵ May., 338.

didactic Enlightenment refers to the way in which SCSR was active in America after being transmitted from Scotland during the 18th century.

Thomas Reid and SCSR

The primary architect of SCSR was Thomas Reid (1710-96), professor of moral philosophy at the University of Glasgow, 1764-96. While our primary interest is to describe that philosophy as Witherspoon understood it, it is useful to begin with Reid, because Reid was a first rate philosopher who made the greatest contribution to the mature formulation of SCSR. Witherspoon, on the other hand, was not a philosopher and his extant works do not provide a complete discussion on the subject. Unfortunately, like many philosophers, Reid is not that easy to understand, despite the fact that his views have been called “common sense.” Because it is called “common sense,” many have assumed that Reid’s ideas are simple and obvious.⁴⁶ But those who have studied him strongly disagree. Nicholas Wolterstorff says, “It has to be conceded that Reid’s discussion of Common Sense is confusing. And not just confusing, but confused: It both confuses us and reveals confusion in Reid. I judge it to be, in fact, the most confused part of Reid’s thought.”⁴⁷ In view of this introduction, it need not be emphasized that the following discussion of SCSR will neither be complete nor exhaustive. Hopefully it will shed some light for what follows.

⁴⁶ The Oxford American dictionary defines common sense as “good sense and sound judgment in practical matters.” This contemporary definition is similar to the common usage in the 18th century, but it does not describe the philosophy of Common Sense. But then as now, some implications of the philosophy of Common Sense seem much more consistent with ordinary common sense to the lay- person than many other philosophies.

⁴⁷ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Thomas Reid and the Story of Epistemology*, ed. Robert B. Pippin, First paperback ed., *Modern European Philosophy* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2004)., 218.

Before proceeding, a humorous aside is in order. Reid seems to have been quite aware of this general sense of confusion described by Wolterstorff. The following from Joel Weinsheimer includes Reid's comments on common sense from his *Philosophical Works*:

'Men rarely ask what common sense is,' Reid remarks, which is probably just as well, because those who do ask for a definition are unlikely to get a satisfactory answer. The reason is not simply that the principles of common sense are irremediably vague, though that is true; or that the term 'common sense' (which includes *koine aesthesis* and *sensus communis*) has become a semantic miasma over the centuries, though that is also true. Rather, definitions are rarely requested or offered because, as Reid says... 'Every man believes himself possessed of it, and would take it for an imputation upon his understanding to be though unacquainted with it'⁴⁸

Reid's philosophical outlook is motivated by the discipline of mathematics. What attracts him to mathematics is its foundation on certain "first principles" known as axioms and definitions. He sees principles of common sense as analogous to mathematical principles in that they are "intuitively self evident, deductively sterile and presuppositions of our thinking."⁴⁹ To be useful, these principles must also be shared. Furthermore, he says that significant progress in any discipline depends on general agreement within society on a set of common first principles. Reid was also greatly impressed by science. To Reid, Bacon and Newton had demonstrated through scientific achievements that a rational, empirical, inductive scientific method could free mankind from the traditions of "medieval deductionism." Reid considered Hume's philosophy a failure because (having begun with Locke), he was unable to establish the link between the mental (ideas of the mind) and

⁴⁸ Joel C. Weinsheimer, *Eighteenth-Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)., 136. Aristotle introduced the term *koine aesthesis* to refer to common sense, while the Latin equivalent is *sensus communis*.

⁴⁹ Grave., 149.

physical objects so that cause and effect in the physical world could be confirmed in the mind.⁵⁰

It was Reid's belief that like Newton, a logical, disciplined, inductive approach of discovery and formulation based on commonly held first principles could be applied in areas other than the physical sciences such as ethics. Noll calls this aspect of SCSR *methodological* common sense, one of the three main emphases of Reid and his common sense cohorts that found root in America. The other two were *epistemological* Common Sense, by which he (Noll) means that "our perceptions reveal the world pretty much as it is and are not merely 'ideas' impressed on our minds" and *ethical* Common Sense, also known as moral sense, which means that man has an innate sense of morality, from which specific rules of ethics can be derived.⁵¹

Reid believed that with this line of thought, he was simply being consistent with the created order. He reasoned that as our Creator, God has given us our natural senses for the express purpose of knowing the real world. Reid was simply recognizing this fact and showing that by discovering these first principles and stating them in clear and unmistakable terms, man could employ his senses more productively. To convey some idea of the nature of these "principles," the following is one of Reid's many lists taken from his *Essays*:

- 1) a belief in the existence of all things of which I am conscious
- 2) that my thoughts are my own
- 3) that my memories are reliable

⁵⁰ Theodore D. Bozeman, *Protestants in an Age of Science: The Baconian Ideal and Ante-Bellum American Religious Thought* (Chapel Hill, NC: Univ of North Carolina Press, 1977)., 6-9. A nice summary of this development can also be found in E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003)., 173-180.

⁵¹ Mark A. Noll, "Common Sense Traditions and American Evangelical Thought," *American Quarterly* 37, no. 2 (1985), Noll, *America's God.*, 233-234.

- 4) that my existence is self-consistent
- 5) that things really exist which I perceive by my senses
- 6) that I have “some degree” of power over my actions and the determination of my free will
- 7) that my natural capacity to distinguish truth from error is reliable
- 8) that the other person has an intelligent inner life
- 9) that actions as well as words indicate thoughts in the mind of myself and the other
- 10) that testimony and personal opinion are matters of regard
- 11) that there are events which are self-evident
- 12) that nature will remain phenomenological self-referential: things will be as they have been in similar situations⁵²

Reid’s ideas on common sense were developed to refute the challenge from skepticism in Locke, Descartes, Nicholas Malebranche and Hume and from idealism in Berkeley.⁵³ To suggest that we cannot know what really is or that there is no reality beyond the mind was quite unsettling to most all Christians. SCSR was appealing because it asserted that human intuition and perception are generally reliable guides to know what is real. Furthermore it allowed Reid to claim that morality could be known in a manner similar to natural phenomena. Speaking of the practical effect on the American cultural landscape, Noll observes,

What the Scottish philosophers and the American educators had done was to restate Christian morality in a scientific form without having to appeal to the special revelation of Scripture or to the authoritative traditions of the church. In fact, Scottish Realism seemed to provide the only means in the Age of Reason for retaining a belief in scriptural authority and usefulness of the church, since it could demonstrate their reality on the basis of commonsense perceptions of the physical world and the transmission of the internal moral sense.⁵⁴

⁵² Michael W. DeLashmutt, "Nathaniel William Taylor and Thomas Reid: Scottish Common-Sense Philosophy's Impact Upon the Formation of New Haven Theology in Antebellum America," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 58, no. 1 (2005)., 62-63.

⁵³ Despite his rejection of idealism, Reid was indebted to Berkeley for a number of key ideas, including his teaching on natural signs, which he considered to be evidence that the philosophy of common sense came from God. Grave., 151-161.

⁵⁴ Carpenter., 63.

Witherspoon and SCSR

Witherspoon was a contemporary of Reid, but compared to his dependence on Hutcheson, Reid was barely acknowledged. Late in life Witherspoon claimed he had, in fact, not been influenced by Reid at all. His somewhat defensive response that he had published an article in the Scots magazine defending the philosophy of common sense before any of Reid's works almost makes him appear jealous of Reid.⁵⁵

Hutcheson preceded Reid at Glasgow University by 35 years. Hutcheson's reputation was as a great lecturer in philosophy, but in theology he was known for general accommodation with learned society. "Rational and undogmatic, he was a humanist whose understanding of man's nature was dominated by the idea of benevolence rather than that of the fall."⁵⁶ Although he died before the long dispute between the Moderate and Popular parties of which Witherspoon was a part, Hutcheson was recognized by both sides as the inspiration for the Moderate cause.⁵⁷ Because in this role Hutcheson also served as the principal figure for Witherspoon's satire against the Moderates, it seems just a bit incongruous to think of Hutcheson as his primary source for his course on Moral Philosophy.

What Witherspoon found attractive in Hutcheson was his belief in an innate moral sense and an approach to ethics closely coupled to experience.⁵⁸ Although he based his ethics on this fundamental idea from SCSR and relied on Hutcheson's *System of Moral*

⁵⁵ Collins, *President Witherspoon.*, 199.

⁵⁶ Andrew L. and Bulloch Drummon, James, *The Scottish Church 1688-1843* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1973)., 86.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 65.

Philosophy for his lectures, his use of Hutcheson was somewhat selective. He rejected Hutcheson's notion that moral sense was based on emotion. So, according to Scott, Witherspoon incorporated ideas from Joseph Butler, namely the idea that our moral sense has a rational basis and that this moral sense is what the Bible calls our conscience.⁵⁹ Witherspoon taught, "The moral sense is precisely the same thing with what, in scripture and common language, we call conscience. It is the law which our Maker has written upon our hearts, and [so] both intimates and enforces duty, previous to all reasoning."⁶⁰ Witherspoon's goal was to provide a moral philosophy that was acceptable to both Christians and non-Christians. He was attempting to bridge the gap between positions represented by Hutcheson and Edwards. Hutcheson had little, if any, concern for revelation and Edwards believed that true virtue came only from God.⁶¹ Witherspoon's point was that reason and revelation are compatible—that the moral philosophy derived through reason is consistent with that derived from revelation.

Witherspoon is generally credited with introducing SCSR to America because his influence was so widespread in theology, education and government. Without diminishing his influence, it should be noted that SCSR was known in America before Witherspoon. Although not as fully developed as Reid, the writings of Hutcheson and others were available in America before 1750.⁶² Given Hutcheson's reputation as the "most influential

⁵⁸ Mark A. Noll, "The Irony of the Enlightenment for Presbyterians in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 5, no. 2 (1985), 155.

⁵⁹ Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed., 37-38.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶¹ Noll, "The Irony of the Enlightenment for Presbyterians in the Early Republic.", 158.

⁶² Richard B. and Smitten Sher, Jeffrey R., eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 115-130. Peter Diamond, author of the chapter titled, "Witherspoon, William Smith and the Scottish Philosophy in

moral philosopher of the era,” Edwards, who agreed with Hutcheson that all mankind had a God-given moral sense, strongly disagreed that his moral sense was a “reliable guide” to virtue.⁶³ Francis Alison who taught moral philosophy at the College of Philadelphia apparently adopted Hutcheson with no reservations.⁶⁴

Interestingly, Witherspoon was not the only Scottish professor promoting SCSR during the latter half of the 18th century. James Wilson arrived in 1765, served in Congress, signed the Declaration of Independence, and served on the U.S. Supreme Court. He is credited with “the earliest attempt to delineate and establish an independent American legal tradition.” Despite his greater dependence on Thomas Reid, Wilson more strongly emphasized the role of revelation on moral philosophy than Witherspoon, particularly with respect to public laws. Wilson lectured that “human law must rest its authority, ultimately upon that authority of that law, which is divine.”⁶⁵

Where it took root, SCSR seemed to permeate every avenue of thought.⁶⁶ “Nowhere was the Enlightenment more fully assimilated by an established Church than in Scotland.” Most often this assimilation is associated with the Moderates, but David Bebbington observes that “the leaders of the Popular Party were equally imbued with

Revolutionary America” suggests that authentic SCSR depends on Reid. With more precise analysis, he says that since Reid is the author of SCSR and Witherspoon is not a philosopher and did not depend on Reid for his views, “it is slightly misleading to contend that he [Witherspoon] introduced Scottish common sense philosophy to America.”, 130

⁶³ George M. Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards a Life* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 465.

⁶⁴ Sloan., 88.

⁶⁵ Fred J. Hood, *Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837* (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 89-92. Like Witherspoon, he was also widowed and speculated in real estate, but with more disastrous results.

⁶⁶ Although our interest is theological, this recent semi-popular study links the Scottish Enlightenment to advances in a wide range of disciplines. James Buchan, *Crowded with*

Enlightenment values.”⁶⁷ This assimilation was not uniform as seen by the continuing strife between the Moderate and Popular factions of the Church of Scotland. Each side adopted the philosophy consistent with its theological priorities.

SCSR and America

In America, the dissemination and adoption of SCSR was enhanced by missionaries such as Witherspoon. As a result of his labors along with others, it could be observed that “no other single philosophical movement has ever exerted as much influence on theology in America as Scottish Realism exerted on the antebellum theologians.”⁶⁸ Compared to many other theologians, Witherspoon exercised considerable caution and restraint in his adoption of SCSR and that restraint continued for generations that followed him at Princeton Seminary.⁶⁹

As DeLashmutt notes, “it wasn’t Hodge and the College of New Jersey which made the most use of Scottish common-sense philosophy. Rather it was...in New Haven...the seat of Jonathan Edward’s theological legacy...”⁷⁰ Though claiming Edwards’ mantle, Nathaniel William Taylor employed SCSR to adapt central orthodox doctrines to the rationalist mindset of his day. Taylor demonstrates his Common Sense immersion with the

Genius the Scottish Enlightenment: Edinburgh's Moment of the Mind (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2003).

⁶⁷ Nigel M. de S.; Wright Cameron, David F.; Lachman, David C.; Meek, Donald E., eds., *Dictionary of Scottish Church History and Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1993)., 294, from Bebbington’s article, “Scottish Enlightenment.”

⁶⁸ Holifield., 175.

⁶⁹ As one example, consider Charles Hodge. The influence of SCSR on his thinking is seen in his understanding of the nature of man. After citing a number of references in Hodge’s *Systematic Theology*, Ahlstrom says, “Hodge himself draws back from his conclusions. Actually the influence of rational humanism is diffused throughout the work and is discernible not so much in particular as in the nuance of the whole book.”Ahlstrom, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology.”, 266, 272 fn51.

following observation: “And what sort of philosophy, reason or common sense is this—a sin before the first sin—sin before all sin? Do you say there must be difficulties in theology? I ask must there be nonsense in theology?”⁷¹

In addition to Taylor, the influential trends of SCSR at Cambridge were more far-reaching theologically, though not geographically. One of Harvard professor David Tappan’s “most distinguished” students was William Ellery Channing. Through the reading of Hutcheson under the direction of his “moderate Calvinist” professor, Channing had a “religious awakening” in which he discovered the essential goodness of mankind. Thus, Reid, Stewart and others helped develop the Unitarian views of Channing, who was a prominent and effective spokesman for over 40 years following his 1798 graduation. “By 1810, Harvard was for all practical purposes a Unitarian institution, and the Scottish Philosophy became almost official both in the College and the new Divinity School.”⁷²

Of course, much of the spread of SCSR occurred through the graduates of institutions like Princeton. Rev. David Caldwell taught at a humble institution known as the Log College near Greensboro, North Carolina, called “the most important institution of learning in North Carolina” of the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Until he retired at the age of 95, he had been the school’s only teacher for over 40 years. Caldwell graduated from Princeton in 1761, seven years before Witherspoon arrived. Yet among his meager

⁷⁰ DeLashmutt., 68.

⁷¹ Ibid., 75. Cited from Nathaniel William Taylor, *Concio ad Clerum: A Sermon on Human Nature and Freedom*, Section 1 [on-line]; available from <http://www.moody.edu/undergraduate/bibletheo/Quiggle/ge420/taylor.htm>; accessed 28 February 2003.

⁷² Ahlstrom, “The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology.”, 262-263. Bozeman surveys the absorption of SCSR ideas among Princetonians especially in chapters 2, “The Presbyterian Old School: A Case Study Profile” and 7 “Baconism and the Bible: Hermeneutics for an Age of Science.”

teaching resources, he had somehow acquired a copy of Witherspoon's syllabus for his *Lectures in Moral Philosophy*.⁷³

The affect of SCSR on American Christianity was not limited to the early 19th century. It has continued until the present. In addition to the Presbyterian and liberal examples noted above, fundamentalism has also been affected as documented by George Marsden.⁷⁴

Summary

Imported from Scotland, SCSR was the primary manifestation of the Enlightenment that found acceptance in late 18th and early 19th century America. SCSR's primary philosophical architect was Thomas Reid. Reid founded his ideas on the premise that religion and ethics were analogous to science in that first principles, sensory data, induction and intuition could be rationally processed to enhance our understanding. Despite Reid's work on SCSR, Witherspoon does not rely on Reid or much refer to him. Instead he turns to Reid's predecessor Hutcheson, although somewhat selectively. Witherspoon found aspects of Hutcheson's moral philosophy quite useful, but not his theology. Other academicians and clergy in mid-18th century American also found their SCSR inspiration primarily from Hutcheson.

Several influential American clergy such as Nathaniel William Taylor and William Ellery Channing were quite enamored with enlightenment thought, leading to serious compromises in orthodox doctrine. Witherspoon, on the other hand, exercised

⁷³ Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963)., 246.

considerable restraint, a restraint motivated by his commitment to orthodox theology. He firmly believed that orthodox theology and SCSR were consistent and together would enable Christianity to succeed in a hostile world without compromise. Subsequent scholars have not all shared his view of the harmony between the two.

⁷⁴ George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

Chapter 4

Witherspoon's Approach to Theology

The link between philosophy and theology, while unmistakable, consequential and even far-reaching, never seems to be as straightforward as might be expected.

Philosophical strains are not easily defined and their impact on various individuals and ideas is quite diverse and sometimes surprising. Perceptions and interpretations are neither complete nor completely accurate and the set of particular issues which motivate each individual seems to be unique, aside from the influence of personalities and personal relationships. In short, the influence of philosophy on theology in history is a multidimensional phenomenon—more a process of diffusion and circulation than transmission or propagation.

Witherspoon's Commitment to Orthodoxy

In reading various sermons, essays and letters as well as the lectures that he delivered at Princeton, we see a man dedicated to the promulgation of the Christian faith, both in the pulpit and in the classroom. At Princeton he was concerned with sound doctrine, but that was not his only concern. Before beginning to address the topics of theology proper in his *Lectures on Divinity*, he devotes his first lecture to personal spirituality. It is his desire that his prospective pastors balance acquisition of theological knowledge by seeking “for inward, vital comfort, to know in whom you have believed, and endeavour after the greatest strictness and tenderness of practice.”⁷⁵ In order for these

⁷⁵ Works:4.12.

young men to successfully “devote their life and talents to service of Christ,”⁷⁶ he knows that first of all, they “must rely on Christ alone for salvation,”⁷⁷ and develop a fervent, private prayer life, which he refers to as the “duties of the closet.”⁷⁸ This is essential for developing true Christian character, living a life that will glorify God, and providing a shield against temptation.

Witherspoon is not paying lip service to piety. He refers to the tender heart of Josiah⁷⁹ as a model of godliness and emphasizes the importance of regular, private prayer, living by faith, practicing self-denial, dedicating one’s ministry to glorify God, and guarding against temptation.⁸⁰ While Witherspoon served as pastor of the church at Princeton where he preached each Sunday, Ashbel Green reports that he “was ardent and exemplary to promote intensively the cause of the Redeemer as visibly paramount to all other considerations.” During the third and fourth years of his tenure at Princeton, Green reports that an early fruit of his diligence was a spiritual revival among the students.⁸¹

His commitment to sound theology was challenged long before his ministry in America. While a student at the University of Edinburgh, he was classmates with Hugh Blair and others, who would later become leaders of the Moderate party. Opposing traditional orthodoxy, Blair’s M.A. thesis that natural law made revelation unnecessary indicates how polarized they had become even as young students.⁸² Witherspoon’s conflict

⁷⁶ Works:4.11.

⁷⁷ Works:4.13.

⁷⁸ Works:4.14.

⁷⁹ 2 Kings 22:19.

⁸⁰ Works:4.12-15.

⁸¹ Green., 144.

⁸² Sher, *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment.*, 104-105.

with the Moderates was to continue with increasing intensity until he departed for America.⁸³

It has been suggested that Witherspoon underwent an “intellectual conversion” when he came to America.⁸⁴ After all, in his attacks on the Moderates in Scotland, Hutcheson and Shaftsbury were often directly named, whereas in America, Hutcheson is his primary source for his lectures on moral philosophy.⁸⁵ Although, the nature, scope and extent of his “conversion” is beyond the scope of this investigation, it should be noted that besides his vocation, his ecclesiastical and intellectual context has also changed.

In America, Witherspoon no longer finds himself trying to defend orthodox theology against successful attacks within in his own denomination. As president of one of only a handful of colleges in America, he is shown greater respect as a leader and thinker. From his new vantage, he observes greater threats to Christianity from Deism, Unitarianism and infidelity. SCSR was well suited to confront these foes because both sides had their roots in the Enlightenment. As Witherspoon said, “as it is impossible to hinder [the infidels] from reasoning on this subject, the best way is to meet them upon their own ground, and to show from reason itself, the fallacy of their principles”⁸⁶ In addition to confronting Deism, less than eight years after stepping on shore, he providentially found himself joining the America’s founders to draft the constitution. SCSR served as the conduit for him to apply his theological views on the nature of man in that pivotal

⁸³ As noted above, pp. 8-11.

⁸⁴ Mark A. Noll, Hatch, Nathan O., Marsden, George M., *The Search for Christian America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1983)., 88-91.

⁸⁵ Sher, *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment*, Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed., 27-28.

⁸⁶ Works: 3.270.

legislative setting. In Scotland, his focus had not been on government and political theory at all, despite the politically oriented quarreling with the Moderates.

The individual most closely connected to this “intellectual conversion” is Thomas Hutcheson and between Scotland and America, his interaction with Hutcheson is considerably different. In Scotland, he views Hutcheson as the guiding light of the Moderates since their theological views were similar to his and all of Witherspoon’s generation had studied Hutcheson. His attacks on Hutcheson in *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* are theological in nature—from within the context of the Presbyterian Church. But theology was not his primary focus during his Princeton lectures in moral philosophy.

At Edinburgh, Witherspoon had received a liberal arts education and the personal benefit he recalls deriving is certainly one reason why he promotes it to his divinity students at Princeton. The whole of Lecture II in the divinity series argues the case that a minister should have a liberal arts education, especially languages, moral philosophy, history and eloquence.⁸⁷ Although Hutcheson was by far his most important source for his lectures on moral philosophy, Witherspoon uses him selectively. As Scott points out, “Although Witherspoon is not as vehement in his criticism of Hutcheson as he is of Shaftsbury, nonetheless he does not basically agree with him. Witherspoon is particularly disturbed over the utilitarian implications in Hutcheson’s ethical philosophy...” Witherspoon agrees with them that man possesses a moral sense, but disagrees that it is

⁸⁷ Works:4.20. He also lists grammar, mathematics, astronomy, oratory, law, physic, poetry, painting, statuary, architecture, music, anatomy, botany, chemistry as beneficial, 4:18.

based on affection.⁸⁸ At the conclusion of the lectures, he provides a bibliography of approximately 30 authors, including Hume, Thomas Hobbes and Niccolo Machiavelli, with whom his disagreements were quite fundamental. So for Witherspoon, someone did not have to agree with him theologically to take agreeable positions in ethics and one did not have to take agreeable positions in ethics to be useful as a source of learning.

Reason and Revelation

In assessing the influence of SCSR on understanding the effects of the Fall on man, it is instructive to first consider how Witherspoon synthesized reason and revelation. The issue of reason and revelation is not the theme of any single lecture or sermon, but it frequently arose in the course of an address. Often when he was engaged in convincing his audience of a particular truth this issue was present, either explicitly or lurking in the background. Of his extant works, probably the most complete discussion of the effects of reason and revelation on theology can be found in his *Lectures on Divinity*.

Related to the use of reason and revelation is the question of why did he appeal to reason so often? More fundamentally, why is reason so prominent in his thinking? In the preface to a 1764 republication of his essays on justification and regeneration, he says that his objective is to return people to “the truth as it is in Jesus.” And to reach this truth, he appeals to “every man to endeavor to support those principles which appear to him to be founded on Reason and Scripture, as well as to attack without scruple every thing which he believed is contrary to either.”⁸⁹ This statement raises several questions. Why is reason

⁸⁸ Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed., 36-37.

⁸⁹ Works:1.3.

included in this statement, for which his focus is not some abstract set of principles, but “the truth as it is in Jesus”? Is not Scripture sufficient to convince us about the truth of Christ? Does Witherspoon believe reason and revelation are equally important? What should be done when they appear to conflict?

By way of introduction to this discussion, it should be noted that our God-given rational faculties are an essential part of our constitution as human beings and are critical for survival. One function of our minds is to serve as a gatekeeper to process information that we receive from other sources. Certainly we cannot understand, nor respond to the Gospel as revealed to us by the Holy Spirit without employing reason. Potential problems arise in how this processing occurs because the gatekeeper can judge some information to be invalid, partially true, irrelevant, applicable in only certain cases, etc. Indeed, it must perform those functions for our mental survival. Witherspoon recognizes that the use of our rational faculties to process revelation and miracles poses a bit of a conundrum, but sees it “as a necessary consequence of the wisdom of divine government.” Furthermore, he says that we must trust God to provide proper guidance.⁹⁰ Exactly how Witherspoon understands this guidance is the subject of our inquiry.

Reason Alone is Not Sufficient

In Lecture III of his Divinity lectures, he sees the deistical controversy in the larger context of the contest between reason and revelation. He perceives that the Deists’ objectives were to show that having found reason, their religion had no need of revelation. For them revelation was akin to superstition. His response was that the need for revelation

⁹⁰ Works:4.48.

has been evident in all societies. If revelation is unnecessary, how does one explain the most advanced societies of the ancient world? Their lack of revelation is shown in their “absurd notions of God,” their evil religious practices, “particularly human sacrifices” and their “great immorality.”⁹¹

Even the deists themselves were inadvertently relying on revelation to argue that revelation is unnecessary. Had it not been for biblical revelation, they would not have such “sublime and noble conceptions of God” which they claim are so reasonable.⁹² In one sermon he charged that the deists were most ungrateful for failing to thank God for the light they have been given through revelation. “Oh! The ingratitude of those wretches who call themselves freethinkers, who have been taught by revelation only to form rational and consistent notions of the first cause and Creator of all things, and yet reject revelation entirely, and pretend to found them on human reason!”⁹³ In other words, the answers that they found to be so reasonable were not derived from reason, but supplied from revelation. No, for Witherspoon, reason alone is certainly not sufficient.

Not only is reason insufficient apart from revelation, it has more often led men away from God. In Lecture V, he describes how the Gospel was rejected by both Jews and Greeks due to the “prejudices of human nature” and cites Paul’s admonition in 1 Corinthians 1:23. Human reason would never have conceived of the many unlikely events in the story of redemption that we have in Jesus, such as his humble origin and death on a cross. Witherspoon concludes, “true religion has been, is, and always will be contrary to

⁹¹ Works:4.24.

⁹² Works:4.24.

⁹³ Works:1.413.

the spirit of the [world].”⁹⁴ In essence, those who despise revelation and depend on reason to find God are without hope.

Reason Relative to Revelation

Following his strong endorsement of miracles as an apologetic for the Christian faith in the introduction to Lecture VI and a discussion of the definition of miracles, Witherspoon considers the impact of miracles in confirming doctrine. He notes that Jesus himself used his miraculous works as a witness to his message (although he fails to note that most who saw these miracles did not believe). By contrast, Witherspoon explains what some of his contemporaries mean when they say that miracles confirm the truth of doctrine. They may say that “miracles are the only sanction that can be given to revelation,” but they qualify their reliance on that principle to cases only when the doctrine in question is reasonable. They say that some doctrines are “so shocking to reason” that no miracle could ever convince us of its veracity.⁹⁵

To this he responds that anyone who sets his reason “independent of revelation, above the testimony of God” is clearly in error. In reality, they have completely denied the role of miracles to confirm revelation because they regard reason as the real judge.

To begin by making the suggestion of our own reason the standard of what is to be heard or examined, as a matter of revelation, I look upon to be highly dangerous, manifestly unjust, and inconsistent with the foundation-stone of all revealed religion, viz. that reason, without it [revelation] is insufficient to bring us to the knowledge of God...⁹⁶

So although reason alone is wholly inadequate, neither can reason be placed above revelation. Yet Witherspoon suggests that revelation must somehow employ reason as a

⁹⁴ Works:4:37-38.

helper to process the revelation. The challenge is in the application of what he calls “prudence” to distinguish true doctrines from false.⁹⁷

Christianity is Rational

In Lectures III through VIII, Witherspoon looks at the evidence for the truth of Christianity. As he proceeds, an interesting question arises in his discourse: Is Christianity true because it is rational or rational because it is true? He begins in the first three of these lectures with a discussion of revelation, Christian doctrine, the nature and ministry of Christ, and the social and political context into which Christ came. Now, one might suppose that the Gospel as revealed in Scripture would form the core argument of the strongest case for the truth of Christianity and that it would be the central theme in the first two of these lectures. Neither is the situation, although he does make a brief existential case based on the general sense that people have of their own sin and the love and grace of God for salvation.

Lecture III is an attempt to refute the Deists by claiming that “revelation in general”, i.e., abstracted from its Christian context, is necessary. By this he means that nearly all religions recognize that people face the problem of their own guilt. These religions see their primary purpose as assuaging that guilt by appeasing their deities. But people do not know what is required of them unless they are so informed by their gods. He concludes by claiming that even heathen religions saw revelation as the means whereby people could learn of their religious duties. As evidence, he paraphrases Socrates

⁹⁵ Works:4.46.

⁹⁶ Works:4:47.

⁹⁷ Works:4.47.

statement to Alcibiades that “it was reasonable to expect [that] God would send one into the world to deliver men from ignorance and error, and bring them to the knowledge of himself”—quite a remarkable statement from Socrates.⁹⁸

Lecture IV’s case for the truth of Christianity is based on the sublimity, purity, efficacy, plainness and consistency of doctrine.⁹⁹ Here Witherspoon argues that these qualities set Christianity apart from all other religions. Brief references to the Gospel occur, but they are certainly not central to his argument.¹⁰⁰ He begins his fifth lecture by building his case on the “truly admirable”¹⁰¹ qualities of Christ’s human nature—that he was humble, above reproach and unjustly condemned. The way in which Christ transformed his band of unimpressive and apprehensive disciples into a force that changed the course of history is his second point. He elaborates on this theme in Lecture VII, emphasizing that their surprising success in the face of “the greatest and most violent opposition made to it from every quarter”¹⁰² was not the result of political strength, organized structure, or sophisticated planning—the sort of ingredients we might expect to be necessary for such a successful revolution. He concludes by describing how God providentially orchestrated the historical context and specific events surrounding Christ’s coming and the subsequent spread of the Gospel.

The arguments presented in Lectures III through V do not appear to be particularly strong, given the potential of the subject matter. Perhaps Witherspoon would not disagree because he begins the sixth lecture with the words, “We now come to the principal and

⁹⁸ Works:4.24, 26.

⁹⁹ Works:4.28.

¹⁰⁰ Works:4.32, 34, 37.

¹⁰¹ Works:4.35.

¹⁰² Works:4.51.

direct evidence for the truth of the christian religion. This is of such a nature, as to be in itself full and conclusive; so that if the facts alluded to, be true, the consequence is necessary and unavoidable... the proof of the Christian religion is the working of miracles.”¹⁰³ It must be admitted that the space of only six lectures (some 40 pages) limits what can be said. But neither in Lectures IV and V, which cover doctrine and Christ, nor in Lecture VI, which covers miracles are either of the two greatest miracles of the Christian faith, the incarnation and the resurrection even mentioned except in passing, such as when he notes that the apostles were witnesses of those events.¹⁰⁴ It is certainly not the case that Witherspoon did not hold firmly to these two central doctrines. One wonders why they are not exhibited as the most amazing of miracles, not to mention as central exhibits for the truth of Christianity. All that can be concluded is that at times he seems follow a two step thought process whereby he demonstrates Christian truth from natural reason as the first source and fills in with revelation where reason is inadequate or silent.

But aside from the particular content or structure of his arguments, the immediate question is, why does Witherspoon place such great emphasis on miracles? It is as though the evidence of miracles is inescapably convincing to any *rational* mind. Witherspoon certainly knew that the response of those who witnessed the many miracles recorded in the Bible was largely unbelief. How was he to suppose that those who simply read the accounts of those miracles many centuries later, or heard them in a sermon, would find

¹⁰³ Works:4.43.

¹⁰⁴ Works:4.32-33, 35.

them to be so much more convincing than they were to those who directly saw God work the actual wonders in their own time?¹⁰⁵

In Lecture VII he recounts the amazing first century spread of the Gospel. This was accompanied by the “great and valuable effects produced by the gospel,”¹⁰⁶ including the manifestation of virtues of personal piety and a great increase in knowledge in all disciplines and among people in all walks of life. On cosmology he says, “From revelation we learn the simple account of the creation of all things out of nothing by the omnipotence of God; and perhaps there are few things more delightful, than to observe, that the latest discoveries in philosophy, have never shewn us any thing but what is perfectly consistent with the scripture doctrine and history.”¹⁰⁷ This statement reflects his view that science and religion are in complete harmony. One wonders if he would make the same statement today following the last hundred years of endless controversy. He reaches the same conclusion at the end of his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*. “There is nothing certain or valuable in moral philosophy, but what is perfectly coincident with the scripture, where the glory of God is the first principle of action, arising from the subjection of the creature...”¹⁰⁸

Reason is Important

¹⁰⁵ Again, this appears to be another example of Witherspoon looking to SCSR for the light that only comes by the grace of God. See the section, “Calvin and the noetic effect of Sin,” in Chapter 6.

¹⁰⁶ Works:4.52.

¹⁰⁷ Works:4.53. A more complete discussion of the agreement between Scripture and “sound philosophy” is found at the beginning of his first lecture on Moral Philosophy, Works:3.269-271.

¹⁰⁸ Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed., 187.

Despite some statements on the priority of revelation over reason, other portions of his lectures cause us to wonder what he really means. For example, “Every doctrine that comes from God must be excellent; that therefore, if the doctrine did not appear of itself to be excellent, it would be rejected without further examination, because [it is] not worthy of God.”¹⁰⁹ Although this is true, one is left wondering how Witherspoon thinks we are to pass judgment on whether these doctrines are in fact “excellent.” This is the approach taken by biblical critics of all types—including those Witherspoon opposes—who reject all or part of the Bible for a variety of reasons. The problem lies in who is determining whether or not a given doctrine “appears of itself to be excellent” and what standard is being applied to make that determination. This appears to directly contradict other statements where he says that making our reason the standard of revelation is “highly dangerous.”¹¹⁰

In pursuing the question of what it means for doctrines to be excellent, he repeatedly describes them in rationalistic terms: “agreeable to the dictates of reason and conscience, and having a tendency to produce the happiest effects,”¹¹¹ having “the approbation of unprejudiced reason,”¹¹² “manifestly rational” and “exceedingly rational and satisfying.”¹¹³ It is as though there is no more compelling attribute for biblical teaching than that it be characterized as rational.

Taking for example the doctrine of the unity of God, Witherspoon says that this Christian doctrine is so superior to other religions that he is amazed that only the Jews

¹⁰⁹ Works:4.28.

¹¹⁰ p. 37. Here Witherspoon is wrestling with the problem of how our presuppositions determine and delimit our conclusions.

¹¹¹ Works:4.27.

¹¹² Works:4.28.

accepted it. He writes that the Jews, among all people “discovered and embraced it,”¹¹⁴ as if their act of discovery was somehow due to their superior rational assessment. Yet, he ignores two rather important, obvious and central facts regarding the Jews. First, God revealed himself to the Jews almost exclusively and led them through their geographical and spiritual wanderings with great signs and wonders, culminating in the appearance of the Messiah. The revelation to them was clear and unmistakable, taking place in real-time, through numerous prophets, during over 1000 years of their history as a nation. It reached its climax in the appearance of the Messiah who lived and ministered on earth for some 33 years. Second, despite this extensive history of Divine works and revelation culminating in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, the majority of the Jews rejected rather than embraced the true faith. If a majority of Jews rejected God’s revelation, clear and direct as it was, Witherspoon should be amazed that any Gentiles received it—especially if acceptance was due to their rational assessment of it.

Often, when he speaks of the appropriation of reason in a favorable light, that is, when it leads to agreement with Christian truth, it is called “sound reason.” He says that it is his objective to show that “the truths of the everlasting gospel are agreeable to sound reason, and founded upon the state of human nature.” This could be understood as meaning that he wants to show that the Bible conforms to the thought patterns of contemporary rationalism. But just a few lines earlier he says that “we act the most wise and truly rational part, if we take all our theological opinions immediately, and without challenge from the oracles of truth.” So assuming he does not intend to contradict himself,

¹¹³ Works:4.29.

¹¹⁴ Works:4.29.

it must be that it is simply his objective to show that revealed truth is for the most part, logical, coherent and intelligible.¹¹⁵

One might expect greater deference to the role of reason in six lectures of an apologetic nature than the three that follow on the Trinity. But his concern over providing “proofs” for the doctrine of the Trinity seems no less urgent.¹¹⁶ In his very first point on the unity and plurality of God, Witherspoon is careful to note that reason clearly supports the former (but not the latter), which judges the unity of God to be the “grand article of natural religion.”¹¹⁷ His confidence in natural religion is stated even more emphatically in his fourth lecture on *Moral Philosophy*. “From reason, contemplation, sentiment and tradition, the Being and infinite perfection and excellence of God may be deduced.”¹¹⁸ Such statements do not appear to be too far removed from the position he accuses the Deists of holding.

Revelation is Beyond Reason

Although the unity of God is perfectly rational, Witherspoon notes that reason has been incapable of understanding that God is three persons of one essence, and he surveys the major heresies of church history as evidence. He declines to press SCSR into service to demonstrate an orthodox explanation that “sound reason” would provide. Instead, he affirms a more traditional orthodox view, saying,

¹¹⁵ Works:4.47.

¹¹⁶ See, for example, explicit statements in Works:4.62, 68, 69, 72, 73.

¹¹⁷ Works:4.63.

¹¹⁸ Works:3.290. This point is reiterated in his sixth lecture on moral philosophy when he shows how the “natural perfections of God,” namely spirituality, immensity, wisdom and power” can be derived through reason. Continuing in Lecture VII, he notes that of the “moral perfections of God,” it is clear that “justice, truth and goodness” can be derived

but I see neither necessity nor propriety, in endeavoring to dip into the mode of it [i.e., the Trinity], and attempting to explain it. If it be a mystery and above our comprehension, every attempt to explain it must be, if not criminal, yet, unsuccessful... The wisest way for us with regard to all revealed truth, is to receive it as revealed, not presuming to be wise above what is written.¹¹⁹

As to why people refuse to believe in the Trinity, Witherspoon concludes that all objections essentially come down to “one—that it is contrary to reason, absurd, inconceivable, or impossible.”¹²⁰ Given the many times he has argued that a particular Christian truth be accepted because it is so reasonable, this appears to be an ironic turn in his path of logic. But after mocking those who say the Trinity is a contradiction, he answers that it is not at all surprising that revelation should impart to us what we would not otherwise conclude. Revelation, he says, is “above reason,” either “beyond the power of reason to discover” or “above the reach of reason to comprehend.”¹²¹

Having clearly made the point that man’s comprehension by reason alone is limited, we might expect him to proceed with a discussion of the mystery of three persons in one essence. But no, he spends the next page and a half trying to demonstrate that the position he has just taken is very reasonable. “Therefore though we say that the trinity in unity is incomprehensible, or above reason, we say nothing that is absurd or contrary to reason; so far from it...”¹²² It is as though he was forced to concede that the Trinity cannot be explained by reason alone, but was most concerned that his concession be understood as

through reason, but as to his “holiness and mercy” there is some debate, Works:3.298-302.

¹¹⁹ Works:4.65.

¹²⁰ Works:4.65.

¹²¹ Works:4.66.

¹²² Works:4.67.

reasonable. It seems difficult not to infer that reason really is his ultimate judge, but perhaps it is a reason informed by understanding of revelation.

Reason Absent from the Discussion

In Lectures X and XI, Witherspoon attests to the doctrines of the deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Interestingly, there is no discussion here on the reasonableness of these doctrines. He proceeds by citing a multitude of passages to demonstrate that the witness of Scripture is clear that, in the names used, attributes given, worship commanded and other direct statements, Jesus is truly divine. A similar discussion follows on the Holy Spirit. Even when he is discussing the Arian and Socinian heresies, nothing is said about natural religion or agreement with sound reason for either position. He simply states that both sides use the Scriptures to support their beliefs and notes where the heretics have gone astray.

Lectures XII and XIII on the decrees of God afford Witherspoon another opportunity to apply SCSR to his theological development. Following a relatively technical discussion of the scriptural basis for the term “decree,”¹²³ he concludes that the decrees or purposes of God apply to the entire created order. Further, he says that although some deny God’s foreknowledge, that view is “so repugnant to Scripture, and indeed to the common sense and reason of mankind, that few have strictly and sincerely defended it,”¹²⁴ except for a few hypocrites. Most likely those hypocrites were contending

¹²³ Works:4.76-77. From Prov. 8:9, Acts 13:48, he reasons that τεταγμένοι means “the plan of nature and grace, as well as the system of nature, [which] must be supposed to be fixed and determined, and not loose and uncertain, till the event, or till the one thing be ascertained or determined by another.

¹²⁴ Works:4.79.

that they were the ones with common sense while those who claimed to believe in the providence of God were the ones being hypocritical to common sense thinking.

He proceeds to discuss various subtopics under the decrees of God: their order, that God is free in his exercise of his decrees and how they reflect his nature as eternal, wise, sovereign, holy, just, absolute and unchangeable. Aside from an occasional reference to the Bible or Westminster Confession of Faith to illustrate or substantiate these doctrines, discussion reflects his view that the decrees of God are also beyond the powers of human reason to describe. Occasionally he mentions the failure of some to resolve various logical difficulties,¹²⁵ but the appeal to “sound reason” found earlier is absent. Even for the contentious issue of resolving how God’s purposes comport with human sin, his only answer is to believe that God is both absolutely sovereign and wise, yet not the author of sin, as the Westminster Confession of Faith says. Furthermore he claims that in no way does “my being unable to explain these doctrines form an objection against one or the other.”¹²⁶ As in the case of the Trinity, he seems to be saying that although a particular doctrine is “above reason, that in itself is a very reasonable view.

Summary

Witherspoon did not forget his pastoral calling when he came to Princeton. His divinity lectures indicate that he was no less concerned about the spiritual welfare and sound doctrine of his students than their intellectual growth. In many of his lectures and sermons the influence of SCSR is evident in how he handles reason and revelation. In his Divinity series, he describes not only the dangers of holding reason in too high a regard,

¹²⁵ Works:4.80, 84-85, 89, 91.

but also that it is insufficient apart from revelation to lead us to God. His stated position is that viewed correctly, reason and revelation are perfectly consistent and mutually beneficial. However in his enthusiasm for the harmony between reason and revelation, he sometimes gives the impression that reason is no less important than revelation, despite disclaimers to the contrary. At times he argues that reason shows Christianity to be true; at other times the fact that Christianity is “contrary to reason” is not unreasonable at all. By the end of the lectures, one is left to wonder how consistent Witherspoon is in his claim that reason and revelation are of one accord. More importantly, how will he reconcile traditional orthodoxy’s largely pessimistic view of the nature of man with the enlightened optimism resulting from high confidence in human reason?

¹²⁶ Works:4.91.

Chapter 5

Witherspoon on The Fall

The fall of man constitutes one of the central doctrines of Christianity since, were it not for the Fall, there would be no need for a Redeemer. According to Genesis 3, the disobedience of Adam and Eve introduced sin into the world and few would deny the pervasive influence of sin in their own experience. However, a wide variety of theological interpretations have been inferred from the Fall, causing great division and dissension throughout church history. This doctrine is especially relevant to enlightenment thought because of its implications for the nature of man.¹²⁷ The orthodox doctrine of original sin, for example, is in conflict with the enlightenment view that man is essentially good. By probing into his understanding of the Fall, we will seek to determine how SCSR affected his thinking. To what extent did he perceive a tension between SCSR and reformed theology and how did he respond? What evidence do we find that his views changed after he came to America?

The Fall and its implications is a common theme throughout Witherspoon's sermons, essays and lectures. Summarizing Romans 3:19-28 and 5:20-21, in his "Essay on Justification," he asserts "that all men proceeding from Adam by ordinary generation, are children of polluted parents, alienated in heart from God, transgressors of his holy law, inexcusable in the transgression, and therefore exposed to the dreadful consequences of his displeasure..."¹²⁸ Other references to the Fall can be found throughout his works,

¹²⁷ This doctrine not loomed large in American theological debates of 19th century, but is obviously central to explaining the universal predicament of mankind and our redemption in Christ.

¹²⁸ Works:1.42.

particularly in his “Treatise on Regeneration,” many of his sermons and his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*. But we will begin with his *Lectures on Divinity* because they contain his most systematic approach to the subject. It is instructive to examine both post-America sources (primarily lectures) and pre-America sources (most sermons and essays) in order to discover any revision in his theological views on the Fall.

Lecture XIV on Divinity covers the covenant of works and the fall of man.

Beginning with a brief discussion of the former, he sets the context for the Fall, which is introduced as Adam’s breaking of that covenant. Witherspoon then raises the philosophical question of why God permitted sin. Rejecting the standard answers of his day such that the Fall was a “necessary consequence of creating free moral agents” or that the system God had created required evil to balance the good, he concludes that this is one question that we cannot answer. God is holy and he hates sin. He will work out all things for his own glory and since it is not possible for us to understand his ways, we are wise to accept the Bible for what it says. As for other questions, he says that we do not know when the angels fell, how long Adam lived in the Garden before the Fall, nor the appearance of the serpent before the Fall, and such questions are really incidental. Here again, Witherspoon does not appeal to reason to explain what revelation does not appear to have fully answered.¹²⁹

Witherspoon lists seven consequences of the Fall: the loss of a “great part of the image of God,” falling under God’s judgment, the loss of innocence, a corrupted conscience, dismissal from the Garden, suffering and death, and a life of unpleasant

¹²⁹ Works:4.93-94.

labor.¹³⁰ Of these, his recurring themes are God’s necessary judgment and punishment, our universal corruption and that all human sin is a direct consequence of Adam. “As to the effect of Adam’s sin upon his posterity, it seems very plain that the state of corruption and wickedness which men are now in, is stated in scripture as being the effect and punishment of Adam’s first sin...”¹³¹ He does not suggest that the imputation of Adam’s sin to his posterity was the result of his descendents being present in his loins (the realist theory), nor does he subscribe to the mediate imputation view held by Jonathan Edwards and others.¹³² Rather, consistent with the covenant of works doctrine, he recognizes Adam as our federal head and says that we sinned “in him” and fell “with him.”¹³³ As a consequence, human nature is corrupt and morally defiled from birth.

Pollution of Sin

As to the consequences of original sin, moral pollution appears foremost in his thinking. He continues the lecture, “the first and chief of these effects is the corruption of our nature—that man now comes into the world in a state of impurity or moral defilement.”¹³⁴ He supports his position by citing a number of biblical passages, chief of which are Jesus words to Nicodemus that he must be born again.¹³⁵ The new birth represents a radical transformation that would not be necessary apart from the irreparable damage caused by sin. Then to insure that the initial point has not been lost, he says,

¹³⁰ Works:4.95.

¹³¹ Works:4.96

¹³² For a discussion of these views, see Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 4 vols., vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003-), Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996)., 241-243.

¹³³ Works:4.96.

¹³⁴ Works:4.96.

“What is the history of the world but the history of human guilt?”¹³⁶ The reality of this corruption is clear to each of us from personal experience. Even our children, he reminds us, provide strong evidence of their depravity beginning with their earliest thoughts and behavior.

In his sermon, “All Mankind by Nature Under Sin,” he says that human depravity is central to the “state of the moral world” and God’s plan of redemption.¹³⁷ His emphasis on depravity also pervades his other writings in ethics and politics as a foundational principle. Throughout these discourses, he provides numerous examples of the effects of the corruption of sin that people can easily relate to because they are common knowledge within human experience.

Witherspoon understands that the discipline of moral philosophy consists of two main topics: ethics and moral philosophy. In both, the evidence of original sin is clear to him. As he begins his Lecture I on *Moral Philosophy*, his primary focus is the nature of man. Before discussing how mankind is different from the rest of creation he states that the key point is “the depravity and corruption of our human nature,” as taught in the Bible. He notes that some have great difficulty reconciling a good Creator with human nature that is fundamentally evil, but in denying man’s depravity, we are led into great error.¹³⁸

In addition to lecturing on social ethics, Witherspoon was also very involved politically and expressed similar views in the context of establishing the new nation. In his introduction to his *Annotated Edition of the Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott points

¹³⁵ John 3:3.

¹³⁶ Works:4.97.

¹³⁷ Works:1.419.

¹³⁸ Works:3.271-272.

out that many Americans justified the Revolution because of British taxes and other political wrongs, but not Witherspoon. Although he was very involved as a congressman and attuned to the rhetoric of his contemporaries, he saw King George as only a secondary cause.

It has been my opinion from the beginning, that we did not carry our reasoning fully home, when we complained of an arbitrary prince, or of the insolence, cruelty, and obstinacy of Lord North, Lord Bute, or Lord Mansfield. What we have to fear, and what we have to grapple with, is the ignorance, prejudice, and partiality of human nature.”¹³⁹

While others were justifying their revolutionary actions as simply a matter of individual rights or a violated social contract, Witherspoon recognized that because fallen man was prone to sin, he was unable to provide for a just and fair society, the apparent cause of the break with Great Britain.

For Witherspoon, evidence of the pollution of sin is not simply in the commission of sins against our neighbor. More significantly, man’s depravity is evidenced by his total rebellion against God. He tells his congregants,

Are your hearts then naturally, and have they been habitually and supremely set upon God? Has it been your first and leading care, to know him, and to serve him, to inquire into his will, that you might do what was acceptable to him? Do you believe, that in his favor only is life, and therefore do you seek you happiness and your comfort in him? Many are apt greatly to mistake upon this subject; nay, it seems to be the leading deception of sinners, to think nothing evil or punishable, but such gross crimes as are disorderly in human society, and obnoxious to human laws. It is scarce possible to make them sensible, how much guilt is in a total forgetfulness of God; and yet this is the very source of human depravity. The chief thing blameable in our attachment to other things, is their filling the room that is due to God, their being employed in a manner that is dishonorable to God, or, in other words, their being instruments of rebellion against the will of God.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed., 49.

¹⁴⁰ Works:1.418.

To Witherspoon it should be clear to all that man desires to be independent of God—to go his own way. His behavior and the thinking that reflects this moral pollution is reflected in his relentless rebellion against a holy God. “Examine, therefore, my brethren, what reason you have to be satisfied, that you yourselves, unless your natures have been renewed by the Holy Ghost, are under the dominion of sin; nay, that even such as have been ‘brought again from the dead’ do still feel ‘a law in their members warring against the law ‘of God in their minds.’”¹⁴¹

This fundamental association of sin with rebellion against God is also present in his divinity lectures. He notes that although there has been considerable speculation regarding the circumstances of the angels’ “rebellion,” it was most likely “pride or self-sufficiency.” As each of us regularly demonstrates, this “seems to be the essence or ruling part of all our sin.”¹⁴²

Guilt

Witherspoon is also clear that original sin has left every individual guilty before God. The problem, warns Witherspoon in one sermon, is not that people do not know they are sinners, but that they have a “light sense of sin.” For that reason, they continue to live their lives in complacency, continuing to sin and failing to heeding God’s warnings. For those who continue on this path, he paints a harsh picture. He urges them to repent and confess “that you are sinners by nature; that your hearts are estranged and alienated from the love of God; and that, if you die in that condition, you shall not see his face in

¹⁴¹ Works:1.416.

¹⁴² Works:4.94-95.

mercy.”¹⁴³ In his divinity lectures, he cites the latter half of Romans 5 as proof that Adam’s sin brought guilt upon everyone. And as though concluding with evidence from human experience will seal his argument, he says, “What is the history of the world, but the history of human guilt?”¹⁴⁴

In another sermon, he cites numerous passages primarily from Romans as evidence of man’s guilty state. Not only does the Bible say that we are dead in our sins, but all are called to repentance for salvation. Why would all be called if all were not guilty? Following his usual sermon pattern, he provides scriptural support followed by evidence from human experience. The evidence from Scripture is fairly convincing. God was merciful and gracious, despite bringing severe judgment such as the Flood. An elaborate system of sacrifices was provided to show his people of their guilt and his forgiveness. “But the strongest testimony of all, that God hath given to the guilt and corruption of mankind, is his sending his own Son into the world, to redeem them, by the sacrifice of himself... Why so costly an expiation, if our lives had not been forfeited to divine justice?”¹⁴⁵

He follows his biblical reasoning with an argument from experience. But the evidence he provides from human experience really only addresses the polluted effects of sin, not the great offense before a holy God. The closest he can come to provide evidence for the guilt of man is in the statement, “I have often thought, that the *natural terror and fear, with which men are possest of the presence of God, or any remarkable token of his power, is nothing else, but an indication of guilt, or an apprehension of wrath.*”

¹⁴³ Works:1.411.

¹⁴⁴ Works:4.97.

Nevertheless, he then concludes that reason agrees with Scripture, when he quotes Romans 3:23 that “all ... have come short of the glory of God.”¹⁴⁶

Universality of Sin

Witherspoon has no doubt that the effects of original sin are evident in the entire human race. In his “Essay on Justification,” after citing a number of passages in support of the imputation of Christ’s righteousness, he says that “all men proceeding from Adam by ordinary generation, are the children of polluted parents...”¹⁴⁷ Three years before his death, a collection of nine of his sermons was published, including one titled, “Man in His Natural State.”¹⁴⁸ Citing a number of passages beginning with Genesis 6:5, he refers to Paul’s message that all have sinned when he rhetorically asked the church in Rome whether “we Jews” are any better than the pagan Greeks.¹⁴⁹ Witherspoon concludes,

besides the particular passages of Scripture positively declaring this truth, the whole frame and contexture of the Scriptures, and all the dispensations of Divine Providence recorded in them, are a proof of the same thing. Man is everywhere considered as in a fallen and sinful state. Every thing that is prescribed to him, and every thing that is done for him, goes upon that supposition. It is not one man, or a few men... but all without exception. Now repentance is the only duty of a sinner. An innocent person cannot repent...”

And why, asks Witherspoon, would God repeatedly be referred to as merciful, gracious and forgiving unless we sinners were not guilty, subject to his holy wrath and in need of pardon. An innocent person needs no forgiveness.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Works:2.303.

¹⁴⁶ Works:2.308.

¹⁴⁷ Works:1.42.

¹⁴⁸ Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon*, 2 vols., vol. 2 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925)., 259.

¹⁴⁹ Rom. 3:6.

¹⁵⁰ Works:2.302-303.

This is also the central thrust of one of his sermons is based on Romans 3:23 and titled, “All Mankind by Nature Under Sin.” In it he earnestly attempts to get the attention of those who do not think they are so bad compared to other folks. Here his basic argument is not appeal to reason or experience, but “what the Scripture teaches us on the sinfulness of our nature, including all the posterity of Adam, without exception.”¹⁵¹ David’s confession after his adultery and murder in Psalm 51 “plainly and clearly teaches the original and universal corruption of our nature.” He dismisses as a “subterfuge” those who attempt to interpret this passage as simply implying that the circumstances between David’s mother and father leading to his conception were somehow sinful.¹⁵²

He then cites the greatest authority, namely Jesus, whose penetrating words to Nicodemus were, “That which is born of the flesh is flesh.”¹⁵³ Continuing to demonstrate his exegetical skill, Witherspoon explains why Jesus is speaking of our sinful nature in this context, linking this passage to Romans 8:8: “Those who are in the flesh cannot please God.”

Furthermore, the “tenor of the gospel message” implies sin’s universality by calling all to repent and sending believers to preach to “every creature.”¹⁵⁴ Echoing the biblical calls to repentance, he asks why the message of the Gospel would be universal in scope if the guilt were not universal? Still some may doubt that “though the sinfulness of human nature is too general, yet it is not universal.” Such folks need only look at their own lives. Witherspoon suggests that anyone of this mind listen to his own conscience, check the

¹⁵¹Works:1.411. Natural reason, of course, objects to the imputation of Adam’s sin as unjust and unreasonable. Witherspoon holds fast to scriptural teaching.

¹⁵² Works:1.408.

¹⁵³ John 3:6.

¹⁵⁴ Works:1.410.

most fundamental disposition of his heart and honestly assess if he truly conforms to the law of God as given by Jesus in Matthew 22:37.¹⁵⁵

Evidence indicates that Witherspoon did not waver on the doctrine of universal sin after he came to America. In his *Lectures on Divinity*, he teaches that the foremost effect of original sin is “the corruption of our nature.” He says that necessarily applies to the entire human race. Furthermore, the only way to account for “the universality of the effects of the fall” is by the fact that Adam sinned on our behalf.¹⁵⁶ Preaching from Psalm 76:10 to mark the general fast called by the continental congress on May 17, 1776, Witherspoon cannot avoid refuting Thomas Paine at some length for Paine’s mocking attack on the doctrine of original and universal sin in his pamphlet *Common Sense*. Again Witherspoon reaffirms his endorsement of this doctrine found in the historic creeds and confessions and returns the taunt by asking if Mr. Paine is “ignorant of human nature, as well as an enemy of the Christian faith?”¹⁵⁷

Transmission of Original Sin

For those like Witherspoon who believe that the doctrine of original sin is clearly taught in Scripture, the means by which each person “inherits” their sin is not so clear. That is because sin relates fundamentally to the soul rather than the body and the origin of the soul is not clearly taught in the Bible. Throughout church history two views that are compatible with original sin have dominated the discussion. Creationism says that God supernaturally creates a new soul at the same time each body is created through

¹⁵⁵ Works:1.416-417.

¹⁵⁶ Works:4.96.

¹⁵⁷ Works:2.413-414.

procreation. Traducianism says each new life, in some mysterious way, receives its soul along with its body from its parents at conception. Although both positions claim biblical support, neither has been sufficiently convincing to eliminate the debate throughout church history.¹⁵⁸

When Witherspoon approaches the question of how original sin is transmitted, he begins by stating that the perplexing nature of the issue should restrain our speculation. He cites Augustine who advised that it is more important to understand how we are delivered from sin than how original sin is transmitted to us. Nevertheless, Witherspoon proceeds to speculate and offers no biblical rationale for the position he takes. He begins by agreeing with the prevailing view that the soul does not come from “natural generation” but sees a problem with the alternative view that it is created by God because, “It seems not reasonable to suppose that the soul is created impure.” He infers that since the soul and body are united so closely, it must be that the soul, created pure by God, contracts its sin nature from direct contact with the “bodily organs.”

Although not stated explicitly, he seems to be following the body-soul dichotomy of Greek dualism because it is through this association that the soul is brought into contact with “things earthly and sensible.” But he denies the Greek idea that the body is a prison for the soul because he recognizes that we are the design of God who is the sovereign Creator.¹⁵⁹ He concludes with a somewhat tacit endorsement of the idea that all souls were

¹⁵⁸ For a discussion of original sin and the origin of the soul, see Bavinck, vol. 3, chapter 2; Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1984)., 1036-1037.

¹⁵⁹ Works:4.98.

created at the beginning and must simply wait for the body to which they have been assigned to be born.

Reason and Deceit

When it comes to the noetic affect of the Fall, Witherspoon's position is not so straightforward. That sin has blinded our natural eyes to the truth he would agree.¹⁶⁰ But in exactly what ways and to what effect is not so forthcoming. Admittedly, the biblical record on this issue is not that explicit, which has led to considerable variation in interpretation throughout the history of the church. Scholastics believed that the effect of the Fall on human nature was in losing the original righteousness that Adam had before he disobeyed, and gaining concupiscence, the tendency to satisfy one's sensual desires. In other respects, such as his will and reason, man's abilities were unaffected and so he is no different than Adam before the Fall. Those of a Reformed persuasion on the other hand, see total depravity as affecting the whole person, so that each person's will and ability to reason are also damaged.¹⁶¹

Witherspoon clearly believes that since we are dead in sin, we cannot come to Christ of our own accord, so that original sin certainly gave us a damaged will. In his *Lectures on Divinity*, he states that sin has caused irreparable (relative to human ability) damage: "Nothing is more plain from scripture or better supported by daily experience,

¹⁶⁰ Works:1.433-434.

¹⁶¹ Bavinck, vol. 3, 119-125; Stephen K. Moroney, *The Noetic Effects of Sin* (Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 1999). This work contains an extensive discussion on the understanding of the noetic effects of sin by several key theologians, including Calvin and Abraham Kuyper.

than that man by nature is in fact incapable of recovering without the power of God specially interposed... [it is] an impossibility such that the sinner never does overcome.”¹⁶²

This is not, he says, what we might expect. It would be supposed that whenever the Gospel is clearly presented and the consequences of unbelief understood, “no person of common understanding shall be able to resist.”¹⁶³ But, as he notes in another sermon, even if the Gospel is presented in the most articulate, flawless and penetrating manner, no conversions will result without the “immediate supernatural operation of his Spirit and grace.”¹⁶⁴ Human logic is unable to explain how each sinner will respond. It depends entirely on the sovereign working of God.¹⁶⁵ The fact that the sinner is completely unworthy before God and unable to help himself is most offensive to the unregenerate. There is no other doctrine “which the natural man hears with greater aversion, or opposes with greater violence.” Clearly Witherspoon is not an Arminian.¹⁶⁶

He does not address the noetic affect on reason directly, but instead considers how man is deceived by sin in a rather lengthy sermon from Hebrews 3:13.¹⁶⁷ He equates the deceitfulness of sin with “the corruption and treachery of our own hearts.” By this phrase he is not referring to the entrapments of the devil leading us into sin, but rather the desire of each person within himself to go astray. It is not “merely a propensity to sin,” but an overwhelming corruption that skews our view of reality. But in this sermon, Witherspoon views this deceitfulness as causing immoral behavior and evil thoughts only. The deceit

¹⁶² Works:4.103.

¹⁶³ Works:1.86.

¹⁶⁴ Works:2.538.

¹⁶⁵ Works:2.542-544.

¹⁶⁶ Works:1.127 In chapter 1, section IV of his “Treatise on Regeneration,” he elaborates at length on man’s inability.

¹⁶⁷ Works:2.105-147, “The Deceitfulness of Sin”.

consists in thinking that particular sinful behavior or attitudes are acceptable or at least excusable, resulting in a downward slide into moral complacency.¹⁶⁸

As to the cause of this immoral behavior, his view is that our reason has been deceived. Occasionally he refers to the deceived reason as “the corrupt mind,” “the carnal mind,” or inclinations.” But reason seems to be regarded as fundamentally sound. He somehow separates human nature and reason, which are viewed in a positive light, from the corruption within “ourselves.”

Let us always remember, that *the whole frame of nature*, although it be the scene of temptation, and even the fuel of concupiscence, *is faultless in itself*... The mistake here arises wholly from ourselves... How sweet and palatable to the corrupt mind is every thing that removes restraints, and suffers the sinner to walk in the ways of his own heart, and the sight of his own eyes? *It is not reason, but inclination*, that makes proselytes to these destructive doctrines. *The truth is, [you would] reason impartially*, you would conclude that the principles must be false which tend to set men at ease in their crimes.¹⁶⁹ [italics added]

So it appears that in his view, the problem is not human nature, nor reason. He implies that our reason is tricked in much the same way that Eve’s was. In addition, sin not only deceives us about the nature of sin itself, it also deceives us regarding our need of a Savior and our ability to see the truth of the Gospel. In this regard, Witherspoon says that “sin hath blinded the understanding, and perverted the judgment”¹⁷⁰ So except as it relates to our knowledge of personal guilt and salvation only by the grace of God, Witherspoon does not seem to address the noetic effects of sin upon human reason.

The foregoing discussion on reason and revelation raises a specific issue regarding his view of human nature, specifically the extent to which the Fall impaired man’s ability

¹⁶⁸ Works:2.106.

¹⁶⁹ Works:2.106, 108.

¹⁷⁰ Works:1.417.

to arrive at spiritual truth. Although he does not address this question directly, the subject arises throughout his discourses. For example, Witherspoon considers the unity of God so clearly rational that it is “Strange indeed that the whole world should have been in a mistake on this subject...”¹⁷¹ When he analyzes why people refuse to believe the doctrine of the Trinity, he does not say that it is because they are blind in their sin, but that it is contrary to their reason. Given his allegiance to Calvinism, one might expect him to argue that they cannot reason correctly because of sin, but he does not. He does not say that the reason of fallen man is flawed and he has not been given the faith to believe what he cannot fully understand. Instead, Witherspoon proceeds to argue that although this doctrine (the Trinity) is “incomprehensible,” it is perfectly rational to hold it because “there are many things in the divine nature that we cannot fully comprehend.”¹⁷² He seems unwilling to dethrone reason from its position of supremacy. Nowhere in the discussion does he suggest that because of sin, man lost his ability to understand spiritual truths.

Summary

Unlike most of Witherspoon’s contemporaries who found SCSR useful for accommodating traditional biblical teaching on the nature of man with enlightened culture, Witherspoon did not waver from most points of traditional Calvinism. Sermons and essays delivered in Scotland along with lectures at Princeton evidence a consistent subscription to the universality of corruption and guilt for all people as a result of Adam’s sin in the garden. Interestingly, although he states his awareness of the danger of speculating more specifically into doctrines where Scripture is largely silent, he does just that in offering an

¹⁷¹ Works:4.29.

explanation of how original sin is transmitted. More seriously, however, is the way in which his confidence in human reason causes him to sidestep the issue of whether the mind like the will was corrupted by the Fall. Despite this failure, Witherspoon needs to be recognized for his significant contribution and legacy for the American Church.

¹⁷² Works:4.67.

Chapter 6

Assessment of Witherspoon

Most everyone agrees that Witherspoon was not a scholar who made original contributions to philosophy or theology. His primary contribution was more of a doer than a thinker; a leader rather than a creator. In Scotland he led the Popular Party in their fight for orthodoxy. He led and strengthened Princeton in the training of America's future leaders. He served in the Continental Congress helping to birth a new nation. And although he borrowed ideas from others such as Hutcheson, he also formulated his own ideas. More importantly, he was able to adapt and effectively communicate his ideas very shortly after arriving in a new country. One measure of his effectiveness is in the respect he earned among his new countrymen in every walk of life. His key roles to help establish American government, strengthen and innovate higher education and influence the direction of Presbyterian theology gave him a rich legacy, which has been reviewed by many. Noted intellectual historian Moses Coit Tyler wrote,

Although John Witherspoon did not come to America until the year 1768,—after he had himself passed the middle of human life,—yet so quickly did he then enter into the spirit of American society, so perfectly did he identify himself with its nobler moods of discontent and aspiration, so powerfully, did he contribute by speech and act to the right development of this new nation out of the old cluster of dispersed and dependent communities, that it would be altogether futile to attempt to frame a just account of the great intellectual movements of our Revolution without taking some note of the part played in it by this eloquent, wise, and efficient Scotsman—at once teacher, preacher, politician, law-maker, and philosopher, upon the whole not undeserving of the praise which has bestowed upon him as ‘one of the great men of the age and of the world.’¹⁷³

¹⁷³ Butterfield, ix. Quoted from *Literary History of the American Revolution 1763-1783*, Facsimile Library reprint, NY, 1941, I, 319-20.

There is no doubt that Witherspoon had a significant impact on the course of events, particularly political and theological, in American history.

Although historians who have studied his life concur that his public record is one of remarkable success and lasting influence, there is no consensus on his legacy for orthodox theology. The primary question is how did Witherspoon appropriate SCSR in his theology. Did SCSR lead him to alter his views? Did SCSR cause him to deviate from Scripture? If the answer to either of these is yes, to what extent was Witherspoon conscious of this influence? What did he perceive to be the benefits of SCSR? Since as an enlightenment-based philosophy, SCSR draws our attention to the role of reason, also of interest is how Witherspoon understood reason and revelation. Finally, did his views change after coming to America?

Before proceeding, it should be noted that there is no doubt that many of the other adherents of SCSR, including its recognized architects, found rather unorthodox views of original sin to be consistent with their philosophy. Thomas Reid believed that we learn to sin by example and have the capacity to do good.¹⁷⁴ As noted above,¹⁷⁵ the primary source for his course on *Moral Philosophy*, Hutchinson, became the representative target for a twenty-year campaign against the Moderates because he was seen as the father of their unorthodox views. Additional evidence for the continuing influence of SCSR in support of doctrinal compromise is readily available.¹⁷⁶ Given this record, it is natural to wonder if

¹⁷⁴ DeLashmutt., 60-61.

¹⁷⁵ p. 24.

¹⁷⁶ For example, Ibid. DeLashmutt link's Taylor's thinking closely with Reid and calls Scottish common-sense philosophy Taylor's "primary tool for adapting Reformed theology to the American situation.", 72. Noting that Taylor denied original sin, he concludes with, "Taylor echoed Reid's positive optimism regarding the human condition.", 81.

and how Witherspoon retained his orthodoxy while subscribing to a philosophical view that provided comfort to so many who denied essential doctrines of the Christian faith.

The position of the Moderates in rejecting supernatural revelation and original sin is quite clear, but in examining Witherspoon's theology and in particular his understanding of original sin, we find that the picture is not so clear. No doubt this ambiguity or at times equivocation has contributed to disparate interpretations and conclusions among those who have studied him. At issue is how SCSR impinges on his understanding of the balance between the light received through common grace and the darkness we find ourselves in without supernatural enlightenment. Stated in other terms, it is the task of trying to harmonize Scriptures such as, "although they knew God..."¹⁷⁷ with "the world did not know God through wisdom."¹⁷⁸

Witherspoon's Inconsistency

One reason why interpreters of Witherspoon seem to arrive at opposing views is that he is not entirely consistent, especially in how certain passages or matters are interpreted where Scripture is ambiguous or silent. For example, the questions of why God permitted sin and similar issues¹⁷⁹ provide a somewhat enticing opportunity for philosophical speculation. Witherspoon refuses to speculate. He does not even respond to common theological answers of his day. Instead, he says that God has chosen not to reveal answers to questions such as these and we are best to leave it at that. However in a similar situation regarding the transmission of original sin, his response is quite the opposite—

¹⁷⁷ Rom. 1:21.

¹⁷⁸ 1 Cor. 1:21.

¹⁷⁹ p. 50.

even though he seems quite aware of the perils. Here he does not state, as he has done on other occasions, that God in his providence has chosen not to reveal these details to us. Instead he constructs a purely rational argument—an approach analogous to those folks caught up in the same enlightenment thinking that he was quick to criticize. He makes no attempt to enlist Scripture, which might support his position even indirectly, and instead relies on a series of conjectures and inferences, which sound no different than the “speculative reasoning” of the infidels he has condemned.

When it comes to most implications of the Fall such as human guilt before God, the pollution of sin and its universal effects upon all of humanity, it is difficult to detect that SCSR has led to any compromise in his doctrine. But he appears to be unduly influenced by SCSR in his attempt to strengthen his argument from experience and reason, when they do not really apply. Furthermore, this often occurs even though the evidence from revelation is conclusive. For example, in his *Lectures on Divinity*, he explains that God has judged all to be guilty.¹⁸⁰ According to the Bible, our guilt follows because Adam sinned as our federal head. But how do we conclude that we are guilty before God from human experience? One could certainly say that based on human experience of continual and universal sin that we are all guilty before God. But such a belief in human guilt could be held while denying that it was due to original sin. Similarly, in his sermon, “Man in His Natural State,” after clearly articulating the biblical basis for universal guilt from Adam, he claims that human experience also points to our guilt before God. Again, human experience may convince us of our sinfulness, but it is a stretch to conclude that this guilt was a direct consequence of Adam’s sin.

Witherspoon seems to harbor no doubts on the doctrine of original sin and the depravity of mankind. In his preaching and lecturing he feels compelled not only to defend this doctrine, but to oppose all those who wish to compromise it or deny it altogether. But why does he at times seem to ignore the defense from Scripture, which is clear enough? In his first lecture on *Moral Philosophy* he says, “Those who deny this depravity, will be apt to plead for every thing, or for many things... It is by the remaining power of natural conscience that we must endeavor to detect and oppose these errors.”¹⁸¹ His reference to “the remaining power of natural conscience” is no doubt a recognition that the Fall damaged man’s faculties. But even in their pre-fallen state would they not still be inferior to direct revelation from God? How much more then should we not rely on the “sword of the Spirit”¹⁸² for our first line of defense?

Judging from his repeated statements in both sermons and lectures on the reality of original sin, its universality, its corrupting effect, and man’s absolute guiltiness before God for which human ability and will are completely ineffectual, Witherspoon appears generally consistent with traditional reformed understanding of Scripture. His strong statements on original sin and unwavering opposition to Deists provides sufficient evidence for some to claim that he does believe in total depravity.¹⁸³ But he fails to define what he means by losing a “great part of the image of God”¹⁸⁴ and he makes other statements implying that natural reason leads us to the true doctrines, such as when he

¹⁸⁰ pp. 54-55.

¹⁸¹ Works:3.272.

¹⁸² Eph. 6:17.

¹⁸³ Berkhof., 246-248. According to Berkhof, total depravity means that a) “inherent corruption extends to every part of man’s nature, to all the faculties and powers of both soul and body” and b) “there is no spiritual good, that is, good in relation to God, in the sinner at all, but only perversion.”

explains some of the attributes of God.¹⁸⁵ Presuming the reliability of reason, he says, “That our senses are to be trusted in the information they give us, seems to me a first principle, because they are the foundation of all our after reasonings. The few exceptions of accidental irregularity in the senses, can sound no just objection to this, as there are so many plain and obvious ways of discovering and correcting it.”¹⁸⁶ Statements such as this are a fairly strong indictment that Witherspoon did not subscribe to the noetic effects of sin that we find in traditional Calvinism. Neither does he clearly reveal his views on natural theology. Not everyone understood natural theology in the same way, but some who subscribed such as Deists certainly believed that human reason was undamaged in the Fall.

Calvin on the Noetic Effect of Sin

What is the effect of the Fall on man’s ability to reason? The traditional Reformed view expressed by Calvin is that man is dead in his sins and unable to discern any *spiritual truth* by means of his own rational powers. Apart from the supernatural illumination by the Holy Spirit, man is unable to understand the saving truth of God, nor does he so desire. Regarding the message of the Gospel, Calvin says that “the greatest geniuses are blinder than moles!”¹⁸⁷ Witherspoon clearly agrees with Calvin with respect to ability and will, and also the spiritual illumination necessary for salvation.

But sin’s damage to our reason does not simply blind the unbeliever to the Gospel. Calvin also stated that it is quite evident for followers of Christ. “For wherever the Spirit does not cast his light, all is darkness... the apostles were properly and fully taught by the

¹⁸⁴ Works:4.94.

¹⁸⁵ p. 42, 77.

¹⁸⁶ Works:3.278.

best of teachers. Yet if they had not needed the Spirit of truth to instruct their minds in this very doctrine which they had heard before [John 14:26], he would not have bidden them to wait for him.”¹⁸⁸ Clearly the very Word of God is not clear to us without the illumination of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, we need this illumination continually in our lives; otherwise our reason, which has come to be referred to in a pejorative sense as “rationalization,” will lead us astray. After citing several Pauline passages, Calvin refers to Augustine’s observation that “the grace of illumination [is] no less necessary for our minds than the light of the sun for our eyes.” Calvin’s comment on David’s confession in Psalm 119:10 is that “he needs continual direction at every moment, lest he decline from the knowledge with which he has been endowed.” Yet reason is so fundamental to our very existence as human beings that it is nearly impossible for us to fully grasp this truth. Calvin asks, “Is our diligence, insight, understanding, and carefulness so completely corrupted that we can devise or prepare nothing right in God’s eyes? No wonder that it seems too hard for us who grudgingly suffer ourselves to be deprived of keenness of reason, which we count the most precious gift of all”¹⁸⁹

Even in the “natural” realm, we see evidence of common grace actively mitigating the effects of the Fall. The human mind is a great gift from God and everyone has been blessed differentially in the various disciplines.

Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it

¹⁸⁷ Calvin., 2.2.18.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid., 2.2.21.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 2.2.25.

wherever it shall appear... he fills, moves, and quickens all things by the power of the same Spirit, and does so according to the character that he bestowed upon each kind by the law of creation. But if the Lord has willed that we be helped in physics, dialectic, mathematics, and other disciplines, by the work and ministry of the ungodly, let us use this assistance.¹⁹⁰

To summarize Calvin, “supernatural gifts are destroyed; natural gifts are corrupted; but enough of reason remains to distinguish man from brute beasts.”¹⁹¹ Man knows enough of God to be without excuse for failing to seek him, but will never seek God without supernatural illumination. Yet despite the damage inflicted by the Fall, even those who deny God have individually been blessed by him with unique and wonderful mental capabilities, which are evidence of his grace, not of man’s unlimited potential for human thought.

Witherspoon and the Noetic Effect of SCSR

Witherspoon does not speak of reason in this damaged, but not destroyed sense. Neither does he consistently speak of revelation in the more general sense (i.e., natural and supernatural) as coming only from God. Supernatural revelation is from God, but instead of attributing natural or general revelation to God, he says it arises from “our own powers” as human beings. While at times he does acknowledge God as the source of all truth, on other occasions, he sounds more like Calvin’s “secular writers.” “We must distinguish between the light of nature and the law of nature: by the first is to be understood what we can or do discover by our own powers, without revelation or tradition: by the second, that which, when discovered, can be made appear to be agreeable to reason and nature.”¹⁹² In Witherspoon’s view, our two sources for truth and knowledge are supernatural revelation

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 2.2.15, 16.

and human reason. He does not seem to recognize that God's common grace sheds light upon all humanity. Natural man credits himself with every insight or advance in his labors and endeavors. Calvin says that the Fall seriously corrupted our natural gifts, but God has selectively restored us to some extent through natural revelation.

Certainly one question that must be raised is, why was Witherspoon so concerned to demonstrate the reasonableness of Christianity and its various doctrines and why did he give so much credit to the natural ability of human reason? One answer is that he was simply trying to speak to a culture in which the influence of the Enlightenment on public thinking and institutions could not be ignored. There were many engaging issues of the day regarding political and economic freedom, individual rights, the nature of Christianity and international relations. Public discourse on all of these issues was being framed for the most part by those who found enlightenment thinking quite attractive. It could be argued that Witherspoon recognized that in order to be heard, he had to speak to people in terms that they would understand. Do we not clearly see in the ministries of Jesus and Paul the approach of meeting people where they were? In his day, many had become Deists or were attracted to Deism. Certainly among his students were many future pastors who would confront Deism in their ministries. As a responsible professor and concerned pastor, it was imperative that he communicate the Gospel to the people of his day and teach his students to follow suit. From this perspective, Witherspoon believed that pragmatically, SCSR was the best philosophical framework in which to operate because it enabled him to effectively

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 2.2.12.

¹⁹² Works:3.270.

communicate Christian truth as the most reasonable of all belief systems to contemporary culture. And his culture was most open to receive what was deemed reasonable.

A second answer is that in adopting SCSR, he believed that SCSR truly was the best way to look at reality regardless of its advantages for the Gospel. Put another way, if all truth is God's truth, SCSR was part of that truth; failing to subscribe to it was failing to follow what God had revealed.¹⁹³ As a consequence, SCSR afforded the best way to reduce or eliminate the tension between an unbelieving outlook and orthodox Christianity. In claiming that revelation is in complete harmony with "sound reason,"¹⁹⁴ Witherspoon was also combating those whose enlightenment indoctrination made revelation irrelevant. For the most part they believed that any Christian doctrine that was not clearly rational was irrational. With a framework of SCSR, Witherspoon was confident that he could persuade them that Christian revelation was *not* irrational.

It appears from what Witherspoon wrote that he would agree with both answers, which raises other questions. Was his enamoration with SCSR a fundamental error? Was his belief that it was fully compatible with biblical truth an illusion in danger of leading himself and others astray? Had he been more consistent in his application of SCSR, would he have wandered down the same path as Hutcheson, Reid and Taylor? We see that even as he attempts to address the Enlightenment mindset, he seems to be inadvertently oscillating between a natural and supernatural frame of thinking. He recognizes that sin

¹⁹³ Reid also believed that the philosophy of common sense had divine origins. See fn 53 (Grave, 151-161)

¹⁹⁴ Works:4.47.

has blinded our understanding, yet he asks why the doctrine of the unity of God has not been clear to people when it is so “manifestly rational.”¹⁹⁵

It can be seen in his *Lectures on Divinity* that Witherspoon is struggling with the relationship between reason and revelation. At times he appears to let reason be the judge of revelation; at other time he denies as much. Reid also attempts to state that reason and revelation are both necessary and equally important, but revelation does not fare too well in his system.

It is no doubt true that Revelation exhibits all the truths of Natural Religion, but it is no less true that reason must be employed to judge of that revelation; whether it comes from God. Both are great lights and we ought not to put out the one in order to use the other...Tis by reason that we must judge whether that Revelation be really so; Tis by reason that we must judge of the meaning of what is revealed; and it is by Reason that we must guard against any impious, inconsistent or absurd interpretation of that reason.¹⁹⁶

Unlike Reid, Witherspoon is caught between the logical conclusion of SCSR and his desire and commitment to follow traditional orthodoxy.

In the questions raised by his use of reason, a related question arises regarding his understanding of revelation. Is revelation simply reading the Bible? What is the role of the Holy Spirit? In some of his statements, the role of the Holy Spirit to reveal the Bible as God’s Word seems to be lacking. He both knows and believes in the supernatural work of the Holy Spirit in conversion. In “All Mankind by Nature under Sin,” he says, “I am sensible, that nothing but an inward and personal conviction of guilt and misery wrought by the Spirit of the living God will bring the sinner to embrace the gospel; yet the necessity of salvation may be evidenced in the clearest and most satisfactory manner by reason and

¹⁹⁵ Works:1.417, 4.29.

observation.”¹⁹⁷ Near the end of his “Essay on Righteousness,” he clearly notes that Christ’s imputed righteousness is obviously different from all other systems of morality because anyone can subscribe to a moral code, but to receive Christ’s righteousness, one must be “sanctified by it, ‘dead to sin, and alive to God’ (Romans 6:11).”¹⁹⁸

Yet if he truly believed that supernatural revelation completely depends on the Holy Spirit, how could it be left out of the following sermon?

Unbelievers are apt to hear with indifference and neglect, what they are told from scripture testimony, unless otherwise confirmed to them; and it is with the unbeliever we have now to do. Besides, the establishment of this truth, upon other evidence than that of scripture, ought to have a powerful influence, in inducing men to believe the other truths in scripture, that are connected with and founded upon it. I think it therefore, highly proper, to lay before you what evidence we have of our lost state, from the observation of the world, *though the Scriptures had been silent.*¹⁹⁹ [italics added]

From here, he proceeds to argue from the history of human experience that man is unmistakably lost. So, although we are convinced that man is lost in his natural state, the sermon concludes with no more hope than relying on “other evidence than that of Scripture” to do the convincing. While evidentialist arguments are helpful and often appear pivotal for the unbeliever, Witherspoon does not recognize that it is the Holy Spirit that brings us to Christ, regardless of whether our thoughts were prompted by the vastness of the stars or directly from a passage in Scripture.

What we might expect from traditional Calvinism is that unbelievers would hear with neglect unless God’s spirit speaks to them, parenthetically noting that God may use

¹⁹⁶ McConnel., 654. Cited from Thomas Reid, *Lectures on Natural Theology (1780)* (ed. Elmer H. Duncan, Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981) xiv-xix.

¹⁹⁷ Works:1.419.

¹⁹⁸ Works:1.77.

¹⁹⁹ Works:2.304-305.

other evidence. And why would Witherspoon raise the possibility of the Scriptures being silent? The Scriptures are silent only if the Holy Spirit is silent. And if the Holy Spirit is silent, “other evidence” is of no consequence. From the view of traditional Calvinism, this sermon is missing a key element. But in view is the blind spot of SCSR in Witherspoon’s approach, which elevates the role of reason and experience whenever possible.

For purposes of analysis, revelation is often separated into supernatural and natural or special and general. Witherspoon does not speak in these terms and whenever he refers to revelation, it seems that he has supernatural revelation in mind. His analogous categories are revelation and reason or “sound philosophy.” However from that point of reference, he seems to have lost the idea that all revelation is from God. This epistemological dichotomy is reflected in his lectures. For example, he says that from reason we can discover some of the moral perfections of God, namely justice, truth and goodness. Yet others, such as mercy require revelation to be known. In these distinctions, he follows logic similar to what he uses in his discussion of the unity and plurality of God.²⁰⁰ In fact he explicitly rejects the idea that “all natural revelation comes from revelation.”²⁰¹

Jonathan Edwards on Reason

In evaluating Witherspoon, it is helpful to consider the position of Jonathan Edwards who gave considerable thought to the use of reason. Edwards’ focus was more broadly on the Enlightenment rather than SCSR, but on the relationship of reason to revelation, similar issues are raised. Like Witherspoon, Edwards was also concerned to

²⁰⁰ pp. 42-44.

make Christian truth appear rational to his contemporaries who were being drawn away by rationalism and Deism.²⁰² Like Witherspoon, he produced sermons and essays with a clear, logical structure. Edwards commonly used phrases similar to Witherspoon: that he would show that the spiritual truth of which he was speaking was “both scriptural and rational” or agreed with “reason and experience.”²⁰³ Like Witherspoon, he believed that reason properly construed agreed with revealed truth.

Edwards recognized that the Fall adversely affected man’s reason and characterizes its ramifications consistently and incisively. Preaching from Matthew 16:17²⁰⁴ Edwards speaks of “a divine and supernatural light” that

not only removes the hindrances of reason, but positively helps reason... It engages the attention of the mind, with the more fixedness and intensesness to that kind of objects; which causes it to have a clearer view of them, and enables it more clearly to see their mutual relations, and occasions it to take more notice of them. The ideas themselves that otherwise are dim and obscure, are by this means impressed with the greater strength, and have a light cast upon them; so that the mind can better judge of them.²⁰⁵

What sets Edwards apart from Witherspoon in this regard, as Marsden points out, that he clearly recognizes two distinct uses of reason—one of which requires us to exercise great care in order to avoid serious pitfalls with revelation.

Multitudes of free thinkers,” he argued in his ‘Controversies’ notebook, ‘deceive themselves through the ambiguous or equivocal use of the word REASON.’ Their “blunder” was in not making a proper distinction between two uses of ‘reason.’ ‘Sometimes by the word *reason*,’ he

²⁰¹ Works:3.271.

²⁰² These general statements are not meant to overlook the fact that in his perception of the various deviations from orthodoxy, Edwards’ showed considerably more insight. See, for example, Holifield, 106-110; Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards a Life.*, 282-283, 434-437.

²⁰³ Harold P. Simonson, *Selected Writings of Jonathan Edwards* (Porspect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press, 1992)., 77, 127.

²⁰⁴ where Jesus said, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

²⁰⁵ Simonson. 74. From his sermon, “A Divine and Supernatural Light.”

observed, 'is intended the same as *argument* or evidence... as when we say we should believe nothing without reason or contrary to reason... or against evidence.' That legitimated use of reason as an essential tool should be distinguished from making the unjustified claim that reason should be the 'highest rule' in judging Scripture. The latter would be to speak as though "evidence and divine revelation [were] entirely distinct, implying that divine revelation is not of the nature of evidence or argument."²⁰⁶

Edwards clearly understands the difference between making Christianity appear reasonable and using reason as a counterpoint to revelation for arriving at Christian doctrine.

Witherspoon may not have disagreed with Edwards' distinction and he argues that reason should not be the judge of revelation. But because of the confidence he places in SCSR, it is difficult not to conclude either that Edwards' distinction was not clear to him and that Witherspoon did not hold to the traditional reformed view of the noetic affect of sin.

Witherspoon's presumption of the reliability of reason is no clearer than when he begins his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*. He states,

If Scripture is true, the discoveries of reason cannot be contrary to it; and therefore, it has nothing to fear from that quarter. And as we are certain it can do no evil, so there is a probability that it may do much good. There may be an illustration and confirmation of the inspired writings, from reason and observation, which will greatly add to their beauty and force.²⁰⁷

This almost sounds like it came from Hutcheson. It stands in contrast to his last lecture from that course. "There is nothing certain or valuable in moral philosophy, but what is perfectly coincident with the scripture, where the glory of God is the first principle of action arising from the subjection of the creature—where the good of other is the great object of duty, and our own interest the necessary consequence."²⁰⁸ Witherspoon appears

²⁰⁶ Marsden, *Jonathan Edwards a Life.*, 476.

²⁰⁷ Works:3.269.

²⁰⁸ Works:3.373.

to view revelation and reason within the trappings of SCSR as two forms of truth that unavoidably conform to one another.

Were it not for the fact that human reason was affected by the Fall, he would be correct, because God is the author of both general and special revelation. God's message from creation agrees with his supernatural revelation. We could say that reason *sometimes* leads us toward Christian truth. But sometimes it leads us away from Christian truth. Hence one cannot depend on reason. But to say that unregenerate reason confirms biblical truth is simply backwards. Biblical truth stands apart from whatever reason may say.

In summary then, there is considerable evidence of the influence of SCSR in Witherspoon's attempt to provide balance between revelation and reason. He appeals to reason epistemologically by claiming that reason leads one to a given conclusion, such as the unity of God. While at times revelation is superior to human reason, there are other times when it seems to provide as much weight as revelation in arriving at a particular view as when he concludes that if a particular doctrine is not deemed excellent, it cannot be from God.²⁰⁹ He appeals to reason as a criterion for determining the truth of biblical doctrine when he wonders why no one except the Jews followed it. And even when his understanding is based solely on revelation, he sometimes seems to find it necessary to convince his audience that this is a reasonable approach, as in his defense of the Trinity. On the other hand, there are numerous examples where the development of his argument appeals solely to revelation, such as defending the deity of Christ. And he recognizes that just as orthodox can employ reason and revelation to achieve their ends, so also can the heretics, as in the case of the Arians denying the deity of Christ.

Did Witherspoon Change After Coming to America?

Finally, what evidence is there for a change in his views after he came to America? This question is certainly too broad to allow for more than a brief comment here, even if we restrict our scope to original sin. It is difficult to answer precisely because we lack complete information. He left no diary from which we might better trace the development of his thought and many of his works have been lost. In addition everything that we do have is not dated. But there seems to be sufficient evidence from what he said after arriving in America to conclude that his view of original sin did not change significantly. The fundamental indication of the pollution of sin is man's rebellion against God, of which he appears to be as convinced in his Divinity series as in his sermon, "All Mankind by Nature under Sin," published in Edinburgh, 1868.²¹⁰ One source claims that "lectures on politics and his public statements at the Congress nowhere expressed the conviction that all humans, even those fighting against the British tyranny, were crippled by sin and needed redemption."²¹¹ While his enthusiasm for the American Revolution was obvious and may have led him to make statements that appear to overlook the fallen nature, it has been noted above that he attributed the conflict with Great Britain to sin (see fn 131). After quoting Witherspoon, Scott says, "Throughout the *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Witherspoon's pessimistic view of man is evident."²¹²

²⁰⁹ Works:4.28.

²¹⁰ L. Gordon Tait, *The Piety of John Witherspoon* (Louisville, Kentucky: Geneva Press, 2001), 193.

²¹¹ Noll, *The Search for Christian America*, 90.

²¹² Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed., 49

There may have been some change in his views because of different emphases owing to the change in context from Scotland to America, mentioned above.²¹³ In Scotland he was involved in a struggle for control of the denomination and concerned to defend the conservative orthodoxy of the Popular Party against the Moderates. In America, as president of prominent Princeton College, his mission was to present Christ to the world. In Scotland, he was a pastor and leader within the Church of Scotland, which was being challenged from within by liberalism. In America, one important objective was to strengthen the outreach of the Presbyterian Church by training pastors who could communicate the Gospel to their culture and combat the threats of Deism.

On the matter of SCSR, he has been recognized as its primary proponent in early America and certainly contributed to its lasting influence from Princeton's classrooms. That he did not promote it more actively in Scotland can be ascribed to the fact that he did not have the opportunity to lecture in a college. However, as a young pastor of 30, he did publish an article defending SCSR in the Scots Magazine. Later he was to call attention to the fact that this essay appeared before any of Thomas Reid's works.²¹⁴ Although Witherspoon found favor with SCSR in general and found many of the ideas particularly of Hutcheson to be quite useful in moral philosophy, his theology remained quite opposed to Hutcheson. However by promoting SCSR as the ideal framework to see reality and biblical truth, he may have led his followers to adopt a less guarded approach toward enlightenment rationalism.

Summary

²¹³ p. 32.

Witherspoon made notable contributions in America as an educator, minister and congressman. Despite his great enthusiasm for SCSR, he was quite careful in how it affected his theology. But there were occasional lapses—sometimes violating his own warnings on the danger of letting reason judge revelation. He veers into rational speculation when revelation is not clear. He attempts to derive some doctrines through reason. But perhaps most fundamental and most serious is that his confidence in the human mind seems to blind him to the noetic effect of sin.

Calvin recognizes that it is only by the grace of God that man's mind appears so brilliant, in both the natural and spiritual realms. On occasion, Witherspoon seems intent to establish spiritual truths, not only apart from Scripture, but apart from the Holy Spirit. Edwards understood the pitfalls of the Enlightenment and noted that providing rational arguments is necessary and good, but regarding reason as an alternative to revelation is dangerous.

As to the issue of whether Witherspoon changed his beliefs after he came to America, there is little evidence to suggest that he did so with regard to the doctrine of original sin. His appreciation for SCSR began when he was young, despite the fact that he had no appreciation for the theology of Hutcheson, one of its prime architects. It has been noted that more broadly speaking others have concluded that he did change. But others have also concluded that Witherspoon was weak in his view of human depravity, a view we shall oppose in the next chapter.

²¹⁴ fn55.

VII. Other Views

It is not possible to address all scholarship apposite to the foregoing discussion on original sin. Two significant, representative works have been selected in which some relevant conclusions do not appear to be supported by available evidence. Despite these shortcomings, both scholars provide interesting and helpful observations on Witherspoon.

L. Gordon Tait

L. Gordon Tait, editor of a recent edition of Witherspoon's Works,²¹⁵ has clearly invested a considerable part of his long career with Witherspoon and has certainly acquired considerable insight into Witherspoon's beliefs and patterns of thought. However, his contention that Witherspoon is weak on the doctrine of total depravity and thus not consistent as a Calvinist seems to lack support. Speaking of Witherspoon's on human nature, he says,

Immediately declaring that we can do nothing, he qualifies his statement by informing us that our sinful state is not so severe that our obligation to duty and the guilt arising from our sin can be easily dismissed. He never introduces the word "cooperation" in holding together divine intervention with human participation, but he does assert a measure of human responsibility. Is there a contradiction here? He does not acknowledge one, and perhaps in his own mind he saw none. His dilemma was that he strove to preserve the integrity of divine grace, but he also wanted to make room within human sinfulness for the possibility of an active responsibility. In sum, we are not totally depraved or completely corrupted.²¹⁶

The paragraph to which Tait is referring comes from Witherspoon's "Treatise on Regeneration," which says,

Let us therefore settle it in our minds, that, though we are of ourselves utterly unable to produce a change in our hearts, "nothing is impossible

²¹⁵ John Witherspoon, Tait, L. Gordon, ed., *Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 4 vols. (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2004).

²¹⁶ Tait., 54.

with God.” He first made them, and he is able to reform them. On a conviction of our own inability, one would think we should but the more humbly and the more earnestly apply to him who is all-sufficient in power and grace. The deplorable, and naturally helpless state of sinners, doth not hinder exhortations to them in scripture; and therefore, takes not away their obligation to duty. See an address, where the strongest metaphors are retained, the exhortation is given in these very terms, and the foundation of the duty plainly pointed out. “Wherefore he saith, awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead and Christ shall give thee light.” From which it is very plain, that the moral inability, under which sinners now lie, as a consequence of the fall, is not of such a nature, as to take away the guilt of sin, the propriety of exhortations to duty, or the necessity of endeavors after recovery.

But what shall we say? Alas! The very subject we are now speaking of, affords a new proof of the blindness, prejudice, and obstinacy of sinners. They are self-condemned; for they do not act the same part in similar cases. The affairs of the present life are not managed in so preposterous a manner. He that ploughs his ground, and throws in his seed, cannot so much as unite one grain to the clod; nay, he is not able to conceive how it is done. He cannot carry on, nay, he cannot so much as begin one single step of this wonderful process toward the subsequent crop; the mortification of the seed, the resurrection of the blade, and gradual increase, till it come to perfect maturity. Is it, therefore, reasonable that he should say, I for my part can do nothing. It is, first and last, an effect of divine power and energy.²¹⁷

When Witherspoon says that “moral inability” does not remove our guilt, he is not suggesting that man’s regeneration depends on human cooperation, but simply declaring that man is both without excuse and cannot help himself, which to the natural mind appears to be unfair and a contradiction. Tait either misunderstands that Witherspoon is simply affirming what we read in Romans, or fails to recognize the distinction between the enlightening call of the Holy Spirit for the sinner to repent and the inability of the sinner to effect his own salvation. When the sinner responds to the Gospel, he thinks he is taking the initiative, but does not realize that had the Spirit not opened his eyes and quickened him to new life, he would not have responded to the Gospel at all. Witherspoon preaches

²¹⁷ Works:1.134-135.

this truth in his sermon, “All Mankind by Nature under Sin.”²¹⁸ Tait is interpreting Witherspoon’s reformed understanding of the process of regeneration through Arminian eyes.

In another passage, Tait says that Witherspoon “never described humans as being in a state of ‘total depravity’ as some Calvinists have done nor did he describe that state in the sometimes extreme colorful language found in Calvin’s *Institutes*.”²¹⁹ Calvin never used the term “total depravity” and since when is one required to use Calvin’s “extreme colorful language” to certify his belief in total depravity? Tait apparently thinks that the way one distinguishes a belief in “total depravity” from belief in ordinary depravity, which he apparently thinks Witherspoon holds, is by severity of language.

Let us hear how Witherspoon characterizes man’s depravity in three different sermons. In a sermon titled, “All Mankind by Nature under Sin,” he says that the Gospel is so powerful that it reaches “that depravity of our nature, which it is impossible to conceal, and which nothing but the greatest obstinacy and perversion of mind can have the courage to deny.”²²⁰ From his text of Ps. 130:3, “If thou, Lord, shouldst mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand?”, he responds, “These words evidently carry in them the deepest sense of sin, a strong and inward conviction of the impossibility of justifying himself before a pure and holy God.”²²¹ Not only are we unable to help ourselves, we do not realize the predicament we are in. Witherspoon concludes his lengthy discourse on the deceitfulness

²¹⁸ Works:1.405-422.

²¹⁹ Tait., 44. It should be noted that all sources cited by Tait in this section were written in Scotland. This is not a case of an increased allegiance of Witherspoon to SCSR after coming to America, causing him to moderate his doctrine. What Tait implies is that that Witherspoon never believed in total depravity. Although Tait talks about total depravity, he does not actually define it, at least in this study.

²²⁰ Works:1.419.

of sin, “From what has been said, you may see the great corruption and depravity of our nature. I look upon it as of great moment to have a deep and growing conviction of this truth.”²²²

The belief in human depravity is consistently affirmed throughout his *Lectures on Morality*. In the first lecture he notes that human depravity is especially difficult to explain when we consider that a holy God is our creator, yet “I take [it] to indeed be the case with the greatest part of our moral and theological knowledge.”²²³ He describes it as a key doctrine and enjoins his students to oppose all who would deny it.

And when he describes different forms of government, it is again human depravity that is the rationale for the checks-and-balances concept that Witherspoon believed was necessary for good government in a fallen world. His student James Madison would later describe why a system of checks and balances was necessary.

It may be a reflection on human nature, that such devices should be necessary to control the abuses of government. But what is government itself, but the greatest of all reflections on human nature? If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.²²⁴

So, not only did Witherspoon understand that human depravity was necessary to explain the nature of man on an individual basis, but neither could it be ignored when speaking of social structures. Furthermore, his most prominent student learned his lessons well.

²²¹ Works:1.424 from “Sinner Without Excuse before God.”

²²² Works:2.144.

²²³ Works:3.272.

²²⁴ Alexander; Jay Hamilton, John; Madison, John, *The Federalist* (Washington: Robert B. Luce, 1976)., 337. Noll also notes this influence in the 10th Federalist and points out that Madison studied with Witherspoon for several years after graduating from Princeton and concludes that Madison’s political views are more consistent with Witherspoon than with Hume who made similar statements. Noll, *The Search for Christian America.*, 86-88.

It would seem to follow that if either severity of language or seriousness of the implications for human depravity is the issue, it would be difficult to claim that Witherspoon does not believe in total depravity. But total depravity is not a matter of terminology or language as Tait would have us believe. According to Berkhof, total depravity means that man's entire nature, including "all the faculties and powers of both soul and body" have been damaged and that spiritually he in no way merits salvation.²²⁵ As we have observed above,²²⁶ Witherspoon certainly affirms the latter and on the first point is fairly convincing except for man's ability to reason. Tait inadvertently makes his point by noting that Witherspoon had said "original sin has infected our judgments, thoughts, desires, passions, and carnal inclinations, even our consciences." But Tait's purposes in providing this list is not to show that Witherspoon believed in total depravity, but to illustrate that Witherspoon was able to use colorful language to describe "the many kinds of reprehensible sinners."²²⁷

On the contrary, by examining the various contexts where Witherspoon does speak of human depravity, the case can be made that he did subscribe to total depravity—as he understood it. But it is difficult to conclude that he understood that human reason was also a casualty of that depravity in the way that Calvin and others described it. So it might be correct to conclude that Tait is correct in stating that Witherspoon does not believe in total depravity, but not for the reasons that Tait suggests. Tait's reasons are without foundation and provide no evidence that he understands total depravity in the traditional reformed sense.

²²⁵ Berkhof., 247.

²²⁶ p. 69-72.

John Oliver Nelson

In his book, *Philosophy and Scripture*, John Vander Stelt says, “By grounding his orthodoxy in an ‘irrefutable epistemology’ that is soundly ballasted ‘with strict induction and common sense realism,’ however, Witherspoon forced himself into certain unscriptural positions on man’s depravity...”²²⁸ Vander Stelt’s work is too broad for him to elaborate on specific doctrines. On the matter of human depravity, he cites John Oliver Nelson’s PhD dissertation.

Nelson makes three statements which diminish Witherspoon’s view of sin and call for a response. First,

He is not impressed with essential, radical depravity in man to the degree asserted by Tennent or Dickinson. What was to them a thorough “sense of sin” is to him, in his usual phrase, “a sense of the evil of sin.” Archibald Alexander was later to mention the difference between conviction of the evil of sin and danger of sin: here we have almost exclusively an appreciation of the former.²²⁹

Second,

While the preceding generation had felt the power of original sin, under conviction, no such evidence is produced here: [quoting from Witherspoon]

It is plain that the state of corruption and wickedness which men are now in, is stated in Scripture as being the effect and punishment of Adam’s first

²²⁷ Tait., 44.

²²⁸ John C. Vander Stelt, *Philosophy and Scripture* (Marlton, New Jersey: Mack Publishing Company, 1978)., 71 Vander Stelt represents a reformed perspective that has been quite critical of the legacy as reflected at Princeton Theological Seminary and Westminster Theological Seminary. It is argued that SCSR was adopted by Presbyterian theology “in order to be theologically scriptural and philosophically respectable, to be confessionally orthodox and culturally relevant.” The result was “a dualistic view of reality, a semi-autonomous understanding of man, and a reductionist theory of knowledge and truth” that has led continuing tension and doctrinal compromise., 305.

²²⁹ John Oliver Nelson, “The Rise of the Princeton Theology: A Genetic Study of American Presbyterianism until 1850.” (Yale University, 1935)., 192.

sin upon which it will be sufficient to read the Epistle to the Romans, chapter 5, from the 12th verse and onward.

Scripture proof is the only kind offered.²³⁰

Third,

The same impulse makes him see human inability as not necessarily the result of any ‘metaphysical system of necessity,’ nor from irresistible laws of nature. Rather, we judge that inability is a true doctrine, only from Scripture, and from the daily experience that God’s power apparently is needed to effect regeneration. There is here no clear, basic conviction or confession of man’s radical inadequacy; ‘total depravity’ in the Old Calvinist or Augustinian sense purely, is too severe a doctrine, actually for this American moralist and activist.²³¹

The first of Nelson’s three quotes referring to “the sense of the evil of sin” is taken from the latter part of Lecture XV of the *Lectures on Divinity*, which is here quoted more fully:

every error or departure from the truth might be traced back to a want of conviction, and not having a due sense, of the evil of sin... had such persons a proper sense of the extent and spirituality of the law of God, they would never think of trusting in themselves that they are righteous: and did they feel the obligation upon every intelligent creature, supremely to honor the living and true God, they would see the evil of refusing it; but would never think of pleading any merit from an imperfect performance of that which is so perfectly due.²³²

Nelson’s critique of Witherspoon seems to exhibit more confusion than enlightenment. In the first paragraph above, he says that Witherspoon is deficient in his understanding of depravity because it is not as “radical” as Tennent. According to Nelson, Witherspoon describes depravity as the “sense of the evil of sin” instead of Tennant’s “sense of sin.” Then in the second, he says that Witherspoon is concerned only with the “conviction” rather than the “danger” of sin.

²³⁰ *Ibid.*, 192-193.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 193-194.

The phrase “sense of the evil of sin” also occurs with some frequency in Witherspoon’s sermon, “An Inducement to Come to Christ,” the object of which is to demonstrate “that being brought to a lively sense, and genuine conviction of this [that all mankind are by nature, in a state of sin and misery, under the bondage of corruption, and liable to the wrath of God], is the first, and a necessary step to the saving knowledge of God, in Christ.”²³³ Witherspoon’s point is that unless we see ourselves as sinners, we see no need of salvation. Someone can hear of the evil of sin, but unless he perceives (senses) it, it is of little consequence to him regarding his personal standing before God. Witherspoon cites Peter’s sermon at Pentecost and the imprisonment of Paul and Silas at Philippi to indicate how conviction leads to repentance.²³⁴ So to suggest of Witherspoon that “he is not impressed with the essential, radical depravity in man” because he does not speak of the “sense of sin” seems to indicate either a tendency toward eisegesis or Nelson’s limited reading of Witherspoon.

Furthermore, Nelson treats his distinction between the “conviction of the evil of sin” and “danger of sin” as though it a recognized barometer of orthodoxy. Yet in the passage of Alexander’s to which Nelson refers, Alexander says the following:

As far as the testimony of pious people can be depended on, there are many whose first convictions are of the evil of sin, rather than of its danger... this question, however, is not of any great practical importance; but there are some truly pious people who are distressed and perplexed, because they never experienced that kind of conviction which they hear others speak of, and the necessity of which is insisted on by some preachers.²³⁵

²³² Works:4.102.

²³³ Works:2.309.

²³⁴ Works:2.311, Acts 2:37, 16:29-30.

²³⁵ Archibald Alexander, *Thoughts on Religious Experience*, reprint ed. (Carlisle, Pennsylvania: Banner of Truth Trust, 1998)., 17.

Alexander goes on to say that neither a great sense of conviction nor one of danger bring about salvation. What is necessary is that the individual realize that since he cannot depend on himself, he must depend on God.²³⁶

Witherspoon's view of the conviction and danger of sin is not so much of an either/or matter, but rather he suggests that an awareness of the danger of sin is evidence of the conviction of sin. "It is a good sign that conviction is genuine, when there is a clear and deep apprehension of the evil of sin, as well as the danger of it."²³⁷ It may be that he spends more time on the conviction of the evil of sin than the danger of sin, but it is when man is convicted that he begins to respond in faith. In this particular sermon, his text is Revelation 3:17. He is speaking to those who particularly need to be convicted because they "take encouragement, from seeing others worse than themselves" and see "all the threatenings in Scripture, as leveled against the chief and capital offenders." Danger for them has become academic. Individual sins are not personal; God's wrath has become for them distant and abstract. "Oh! how easy is it, to lay asleep a natural conscience, and to keep a deceitful corrupt heart, in a state of ease and security?"²³⁸ It is the true conviction of sin which leads to a spiritual response, not merely an intellectual acknowledgment of the sin's consequences. In his words, "when the sense of the evil of sin abides and grows, even though the fear of wrath may in a great measure have abated"²³⁹ we have another indication of genuine conviction.

²³⁶ Ibid., 19.

²³⁷ Works:2.314.

²³⁸ Works:2.312.

²³⁹ Works:2.314.

But, “the best and surest mark of real conviction of sin, is, if it leaves you possessed of a deep hatred, and abhorrence of it, and a daily solicitude to fly from it.” What Witherspoon seeks is nothing less than a changed life. He recognizes that even the “sense of the evil of sin” may not be genuine. “Some may counterfeit a sense of the evil of sin, to their own hearts; may have a real fear of its bitter consequences; and even a presumptuous reliance on Christ for pardon; and yet may in some instances, adhere to the practice of it.” There may be “floods of tears.”²⁴⁰ Clearly such fruit does not represent true conviction of sin. How Nelson can conclude in the second quote above, “While the preceding generation had felt the power of original sin, under conviction, no such evidence is produced here;,” after reading Witherspoon’s comment on Romans 5:12ff is not clear. It becomes an even greater mystery after reading the sermon, “An Inducement to Come to Christ,” in its entirety. The final statement in Nelson’s second quote above that, “Scripture proof is the only kind offered,” implies that Witherspoon’s reliance on Scripture is somehow inadequate. Here is another interesting twist from a critic who claims that Witherspoon has infused too much SCSR into his theology.

In the third quote from Nelson, Witherspoon is accused of being weak on human inability. Again Nelson does not seem to have read Witherspoon too thoroughly. Excerpts from his sermons and lectures above²⁴¹ nowhere suggest that Witherspoon has any hope for man apart from supernatural intervention. Nelson does, however recognize the influence

²⁴⁰ Works:2.315.

²⁴¹ pp. 60-61.

of SCSR on Witherspoon's understanding of the means by which sin is transmitted from body to soul, namely through physical contact.²⁴²

In the third passage, Nelson does not offer a definition of total depravity, nor does he elaborate on inability. As noted above, total depravity is a term not used by Calvin and neither did Augustine use it. It originated during the early 17th century Arminian controversy and is succinctly defined by Louis Berkhof.²⁴³ Berkhof defines total inability to mean

(1) that the unrenewed sinner cannot do any act, however insignificant, which *fundamentally* meets with God's approval and answers to the demands of God's holy law; and (2) that he cannot change his fundamental preference for sin and self to love for God, nor even make an approach to such a change. In a word, he is unable to do any spiritual good.²⁴⁴

As has been noted earlier, Witherspoon has much to say on both depravity and inability. And except for his weakness on the noetic effect, appears to be quite consistent with the traditional reformed position.

Summary

Despite their many insights, both Tait and Nelson have been too quick in their critique of Witherspoon on the doctrine of total depravity. In the first place neither scholar provides a clear definition of how he understands the doctrine, nor how reformed thinkers have understood it traditionally. Second, both seem to have ignored much of what Witherspoon has said on the subject.

²⁴² Nelson.,193.

²⁴³ fn183.

²⁴⁴ Berkhof., 247.

By contrast, Scott is one scholar whose reading of Witherspoon is more correct on this issue. Although he does not seem to recognize the noetic effect of sin as part of total depravity, he correctly observes that Witherspoon's confidence in human reason does not follow the traditional reformed view. Scott also recognizes that Witherspoon clearly adheres to the other components of the doctrine. "Witherspoon's view of man differs from that of high Calvinism—not on the matter of human depravity, but in the confidence he places in the reason of man."²⁴⁵ This indeed is where Witherspoon appears to have compromised his theology as the result of SCSR.

²⁴⁵ Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed., 39.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This investigation into the theology of Witherspoon was limited primarily to the affect of SCSR on his understanding of original sin. In that regard the following has been learned.

1) Despite the clear evidence of major doctrinal compromise on the part of many of his contemporaries in both Scotland and America under the influence of SCSR, for the most part, Witherspoon maintained allegiance to the conservative orthodoxy with which he was raised. Nevertheless, his theology was also jeopardized, although he seemed unaware of any ill effects. Neither did he speak to the difficulty of subscribing to SCSR while maintaining his orthodox theology. It appears, rather that he perceived very little conflict.

The influence of SCSR on his view of original sin can be seen in the following respects:

a) He often attempted to defend or derive a particular belief through reason and experience, even when it was clear enough from revelation. He followed this approach both in the classroom and the pulpit. It seemed that his practice was to employ reason whenever possible and desist only when he could not formulate any natural argument, such as in explaining the doctrine of the Trinity.

b) Because of the centrality of reason for SCSR, Witherspoon appeared to ignore the noetic effect of sin.

2) During his adult life, Witherspoon may have changed his views in many respects. Had he kept a personal diary, it would have been much easier to arrive at definitive conclusions. When moving from Scotland to America, his context, associates

and responsibilities completely changed. From available data, with respect to the issues raised here, it is difficult to detect an especially significant change after he arrived in America. At least with respect to original sin, it seems that Scott is correct. "At the conclusion of his studies in 1743, Witherspoon's theological views were formed; they remained essentially the same throughout his life."²⁴⁶

3) By adopting SCSR along with his Calvinism, Witherspoon was using the same weapon of his foes. This led him to rely on revelation on some occasions and reason on others. He saw the advantage to use this double-edged sword to slay Enlightenment dragons such as Deism, but he failed to see how easily it might corrupt the orthodox, which is exactly what happened to the American church. Ahlstrom says the success of SCSR was due to its "epistemological, ontological and cosmological dualism."²⁴⁷ Provided revelation never infringes on the domain of reason, peaceful coexistence is possible. Unitarianism and Deism were the logically consistent religious outlooks for SCSR. That is the reason why, to varying degrees, the heritage of SCSR in America was doctrinal compromise, especially in higher education. Witherspoon did not seem to speak to the issue of how both he and the Deists could apply the reason of SCSR and arrive at such vastly different theological understandings. Yet unlike Reid and others, the tension between reason and revelation is ever present as Witherspoon attempts to serve both masters. Only his strong faith and commitment to biblical truth kept him from more serious error.

4) Witherspoon was not an original thinker in theology or philosophy, but he was an innovative leader in education, ecclesiology and government. In education, he

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 4.

²⁴⁷ Ahlstrom, "The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology.", 267-269.

incorporated views from several sources into his influential course on moral philosophy, which was used by his own students and others who adopted his notes for their own use. SCSR was quite influential beyond Princeton College, including the Seminary and other institutions. Witherspoon worked to unify the Presbyterian Church and served as the first moderator of General Assembly. His influence in government extended beyond his service in Congress in the scores of students who assumed critical leadership roles in the young American government.

5) Witherspoon's desire was to glorify God in all his endeavors. These included strengthening the Church, reaching the lost with the Gospel, offering an effective apologetic against Deism and other infidels, and serving God in whatever capacity that was offered to him.

Application

Few American Christians know who John Witherspoon was. Fewer still have any knowledge of Scottish Common Sense Realism and its implications for man-in-the-pew theology. As evidence of these statements, the reaction of nearly everyone who has asked me the subject of my thesis has essentially been a rolling of the eyes. Most are too polite to say what they are thinking, which is some variation on the rhetorical question: why is theology so useless?

So with each brief conversation initiated with a friendly inquiry, I have perpetuated two problems if the conversation does not continue. First, such thinking represented by the last question fails to recognize that theology is not an esoteric discipline reserved for bearded sages in seminaries. Theology is what every Christian does when he applies the

Bible to his life, and it is not always a deliberate, purposeful activity. Whether we call it theology is immaterial. But, if we are serious about our Christian faith, we should exercise great care in how we do it.²⁴⁸

The second problem is a bit less obvious. It is not surprising and quite unfortunate that Witherspoon and the philosophy of common sense are so little known. The basic problem which he clearly illustrates is the tension between reason and revelation, and it necessarily affects us all. Reid's sophisticated development of the philosophy of common sense is virtually unknown, but the use of reason to judge revelation is a subtle plague that is more common today than it was in the 18th century. The reason it is more common today is that people today are less likely to follow authority and tradition in what they believe. And it is not just common among liberal Protestants who would still find much to appreciate in William Ellery Channing.

Evangelicals no longer concern themselves with the question of how original sin is transmitted. They are more likely to ignore or deny more fundamental doctrines. What often matters is not that certain biblical teaching is clear, but whether or not it seems fair or reasonable. This mindset is hardly different from that of the people to which Ezekiel was sent. "Yet the house of Israel says, 'The way of the Lord is not just.' O house of Israel, are my ways not just? Is it not your ways that are not just?" If we assume that God's definition of justice is no different than our own, are we not forming God in our own image, much like the idolatrous neighbors of Israel? If we truly believe that his ways and thoughts are higher than our thoughts, should we not repent with Job and humbly bow in worship.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁸ James 1:22-25

²⁴⁹ Ezek. 18:30 and allusions to Job 42:6 and Is. 55:9.

We may say that Witherspoon was better than Hutcheson, Taylor or Channing in this regard and judging by his adherence to orthodoxy, so he was. But Witherspoon's dualism does not provide us with a good example to follow. Witherspoon shows us the great danger that we can get into with our own reason. He can help us be wary of how our own human reason can confuse God's revelation.

Appendix

The Editions of Witherspoon's Works

Over his lifetime, Witherspoon published quite a number of sermons, essays and other articles, beginning with his M.A. thesis in 1739 at the age of 17. Collectively they increased his influence and enhanced his reputation. Shortly after he died, Ashbel Green, his student and later president of Princeton, 1812-1822, took the initiative to have published most of the works that he could locate with the help of Samuel Stanhope Smith, Witherspoon's son-in-law and immediate successor at Princeton.²⁵⁰ These works included 47 sermons, *Lectures on Divinity* (17 lectures), outlines for his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (16 lectures), which Witherspoon insisted not be published, and assorted addresses, essays and letters. But unfortunately, much of what he wrote was lost by his two successors at Princeton, Samuel Stanhope Smith and Ashbel Green or destroyed during the Revolutionary War when the conflict moved to Princeton or when troops occupied the Princeton campus. In addition, some documents were destroyed by his surviving wife as she honored his requests.²⁵¹ Had his complete Divinity lectures, for example, survived, we would no doubt have a clearer picture of his views.

Two American editions of Witherspoon's works consisting of four volumes each were published in 1800 and 1802 respectively by William W. Woodward in Philadelphia. The second of these is quite a minor revision with some spelling corrections, but page numbers do not correspond because the material was arranged differently. In 1804 and

²⁵⁰ Green claims he published *all* of the Works that could be located. Collins disagrees. Collins also says Smith was less enthusiastic about the project. Collins has a fairly extensive list of all of the material that was published from 1839 to 1912, Collins, *President Witherspoon.*, vol. 2, 235-266.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 235; Tait., xvii.

1815 two more editions were published, each as nine volumes in Edinburgh by Ogle & Aikman. The Scotland editions were based on the second American edition. By 1832, Green had collected a number of manuscripts and letters not previously published, which he intended to include in a more complete edition of his Works, but for unknown reasons, they were never published. More tragically, the unpublished documents were apparently lost.²⁵²

Then beginning in 2001, a new edition was produced under the editorship of H. Rundel Rumburg.²⁵³ It is projected to contain eight or nine volumes (as of June 2006, six have been published). It is based on the 1802 edition. Rumburg has revised archaic words and expressions. For each volume he has provided an introductory remarks and added a useful index of scriptural passages used in the texts. In 2003, a four-volume edition edited by L. Gordon Tait was published by the Thoemmes Publishing Company.²⁵⁴ Both of these new editions are certainly welcomed, especially for making Witherspoon's Works once again available. However a practical problem remains that that pages between the various editions do not correspond, making it difficult to follow scholarly work that references a particular edition not at hand.

²⁵² Green., 19

²⁵³ John Witherspoon, *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon: Late President of the College at Princeton, New Jersey* 8 vols., (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2001-).

²⁵⁴ John Witherspoon, Tait, L. Gordon, ed., *Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon*, 4 vols. (London: Thoemmes Continuum, 2003).

A fully annotated edition of the *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* was done by Jack Scott in 1982²⁵⁵ and has been widely used. Similar scholarly analysis directed to the rest of Witherspoon's writings would be of great benefit.

For this thesis, the first American edition has served as the primary reference, although occasional use was made of the editions edited by Scott and Rumburg. It should be noted that whenever the American edition is quoted, the original spelling and grammar has been retained.

²⁵⁵ Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Scott, Jack, Ed.

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