REGULAR PREACHING IN THE
METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH, SOUTH:
NORTH CAROLINA, 1870-1900

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Protestantism has long been regarded a key ingredient in late nineteenth-century southern culture. Although the movement reached its fullest expression in communal worship, few have studied the content of such worship. Even the sermon, a central element in that worship, has been neglected. Granted, some interpreters such as E. Brooks Holifield have looked at elite, urban ministers.¹ Charles Reagan Wilson and others have studied the sermon on civil and ceremonial occasions.² Still others, such as Frederick Bode, Rufus Spain, and Hunter Farish, have sought to understand Protestantism by looking at denominational hierarchies, pronouncements, and publications.³ But historians have uncovered little of what the average church-goer heard on a typical Sunday.

This study proposes to shed additional light on a small segment of typical southern preaching by looking at a select group of manuscript sermons. These thirty-three sermons were written by seven ministers in North Carolina between 1867 and 1900 within the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. They were delivered in locations ranging from the Piedmont in central Carolina to cities along the Atlantic coast. One sermon was preached in 1867, fourteen in the 1870s, two in the 1880s, and sixteen in the 1890s. These sermons exhausted the resources of the Special Collections Department and the Divinity School library at Duke University and the Southern Historical and North Carolina Collections at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Except for three collections which were used selectively, every sermon in these sources was analyzed. These sermons did not enable this study to make sweeping

generalizations about the south or even North Carolina. However, they did reveal a part of southern religion never fully seen previously.

The analysis of these sermons followed lines established by Harry S. Stout in *The New England Soul*. The present analysis concentrates on manuscript sermons because it shares Professor Stout's belief that published sermons "provide an inexact and even misleading guide to what was being said publicly in most churches on most Sundays." It adopts Professor Stout's concentration on the theology, the structure, and the communal implications of the sermon... While it cannot claim with Professor Stout that the sermon was the only form of mass media or that listeners heard the sermon as was intended, this study asserts that an analysis of these thirty-three sermons provides additional insight into the religious communities in which they were preached.

Stout, like many interpreters of American religion, assigned primacy to theological concepts expressed in systematic form. However, the most striking theological feature of the thirty-three studied sermons was the lack of such concepts. Certainly the sermons related explanatory myths and reflected over-arching world views, but this discourse contained little analytical or speculative theology. In an intellectual environment supposedly dominated by the threats of Darwinism, modernism, German liberalism, and the new social sciences, these sermons did not even reflect an awareness of such issues. Unlike A. A. Hodge and Benjamin Warfield, the writers of these sermons felt no need to debate scriptural authority. The arrival of John Nelson Darby and his dispensational premillennialism went unnoticed. Even the emerging personalism of the Methodist theologian Borden P. Bowne was ignored. Discussion of the Trinity, Virgin Birth, or the deity of Christ was noticeably absent.

The one systematic issue which seemed important was the role of human and divine initiative in personal salvation. The studied sermons never posed the question in an analytical or systematic manner nor did they identify with the polarities of Calvinist versus Arminian or predestination versus free will. Nevertheless, they devoted a good deal of attention to issues of divine grace, individual choice, and human sin.

Some of the studied sermons dismissed human sin and held an optimistic view of humanity. One preacher wrote "Young men yield to temptation not because their hearts are bad—not because they want to do wrong—but simply because sin is attractive..." Another minister claimed that the human intellect had been spared corruption and that the mind

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6Sermon on Zechariah 2:4, in Bumpass Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Round Library, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina.
offered an approach to the divine. Other sermons, in contrast, expressed an almost Augustinian view of human nature. For example, William Eborn said that “the original condition of man was such that he enjoyed fellowship with his bountiful Creator.” But “he lost this blessedness by sin; and his fall has effected his prosperity, that we are born in sinful alienation from God . . . .” Eborn’s emphasis on human depravity led him to insist upon divine grace for regeneration. “There is Guilt; and from this they can only be saved by an extension of pardoning mercy. There is the polluting power of sin; from which they can only be saved by the sanctifying grace of God.” This theme reverberated throughout his sermons.

A more common emphasis in the studied sermons was the human role in regeneration. Preachers routinely presented human initiative alongside divine grace without an attempt to reconcile the two. They implied human choice in the wide-open invitations which characterized these sermons. Entire discourses were built on the texts like Isaiah 55:1, which says “Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat: yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.” The discourse emphasized that grace, like water, is abundant, refreshing, and free for the taking. Other passages, ranging from an 1872 invitation, to “every man Prince & Peasant, General & private, Captain & Sailor, Rich & Poor . . .” to the sermon “The Free Invitation” twenty years later implied that every person was capable of unaided response. Some made the implicit human role explicit.

“You are a free moral agent that heart of yours is yours to do with as you please god asks you for it what are you going to do with it give it to god or let the Devil take it with you to perdition This is a matter god means for you to decide for yourself he’ll not decide it for you”

The human role in salvation exceeded merely receiving God’s free gift. Several passages suggested that human effort necessarily anteceded divine grace. One pastor even suggested that election was determined by human

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8 William K. Eborn, “Pentitent Sinners returning to God,” Volume 2, 60, 63, in William K. Eborn Papers, Special Collections Department, Duke University Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina.
11 Sidney W. Wilkinson, Sermon on II Corinthians 2:16c, Sermon Book, in Sidney W. Wilkinson Papers, Special Collections Department, Duke University Library.
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effort. Perhaps the boldest claim was made by Washington Chaffin, who extolled the cooperation of the human and the divine in regeneration in a passage which theologians might describe as synergistic. But neither his sermons nor any others reflected critically on this or other theological issues.

The preachers who wrote these sermons seemed unaware of or uninterested in critical theology. Perhaps these ministers lacked sufficient training to formulate a coherent soteriology, or even to recognize the components involved. Vanderbilt, the nearest denominational seminary, was hundreds of miles away and not many North Carolinians attended it. The few Methodist colleges in North Carolina, seriously weakened by the Civil War and subsequent agricultural depressions, offered little theological education. However, many Methodists received ministerial education through other methods. As early as 1816, American Methodists prescribed a reading list to educate their ministers. From 1878 this list in the Methodist Episcopal Church, South included theological treatises by men like Richard Watson, Thomas Summers, and William Pope. And if the habits of Charles Dodson are typical, ministers supplemented their required studies with additional reading. Dodson, for example, read seven to thirteen thousand pages annually between 1869 and 1883. His reading included theological volumes such as Paley's Natural Theology, and Butler's Analogy.

Theological reading may have provided an established, if unarticulated, theological system for the sermons. Such a system might have made it unnecessary to deal with theology in sermons. John Wesley's theology seemed an obvious candidate for such a system; it explained the contradiction between human initiative and divine grace by means of a universal, prevenient grace which overcame human depravity and allowed a choice. The fragmentary nature of the theology in the studied sermons might have resulted from ad hoc references to various parts of the Wesleyan synthesis or an unwillingness to duplicate Wesley's work.

This explanation relied on the historian to supply a systematic theology. However, the studied sermons gave no indication of having

12Sidney Wilkinson, Sermon on II Peter 1:14, Sermon Book, Wilkinson Papers.
15Charles Carroll Dodson, Notebook, 83–108, in Charles Carroll Dodson Papers, Special Collections Department, Duke University Library.
adopted Wesley's systematic theology or any other. They never mentioned prevenient grace or its equivalent. In fact, they cited Wesley only twice. Further, this explanation built on the assumption that these preachers and their hearers understood Wesley's theological constructs. Yet at least one studied minister accused his hearers of ignorance regarding the distinctive doctrines of the faith. "Do you know why you are a Methodist? Do you know the doctrines of your church? How many here have read your discipline and articles of religion? . . . . The children of Methodist parents too often grow up without being indoctrinated."\(^{17}\)

Both scenarios assumed the studied sermons should have expressed a coherent theology. However, to force cohesion upon these sermons violated their very nature. They were preached by seven different men in various locales over three decades. These preachers were struggling to bring their hearers into a divine encounter. Beyond that encounter, little evidence suggested that the ministers or their hearers were interested in theological formulation. The preachers in this study may or may not have privately adhered to a single systematic theology. However, their sermons did not express such a theology.

But theology has never been the totality of a sermon. As Professor Stout and others have shown, sermonic style also contributed to meaning. The most noticeable stylistic feature of these sermons was their appeal to authority. Despite a number of available options, these ministers returned over and over again to the same source, the Bible, to validate their positions. At least one minister, Sidney Wilkinson, used no other source. His sermons never cited John Wesley or any other author, never drew upon scientific knowledge, and never appealed to natural revelation. They were instead filled with biblical citations, references, phraseology, and allusions, often many times per sentence.

Wilkinson's style was not unusual. Thomas Smoot believed that scripture "offers the most unanswerable argument in favor of God and religion."\(^{18}\) He shaped his sermons accordingly. For example, his "The Free Invitation" consisted almost entirely of description of the biblical material on marriage feasts. Charles Dodson followed the same pattern, meditating for an entire sermon on various biblical images associated with Hebrews 12:1-2.\(^{19}\) In fact, some of these manuscripts cited so much scripture they must have been hard to preach. For example, this passage must have been awkward:

"by Fidelity to his employers; by his upright conduct adorning the doctrine of God his savior Titus 2.10 exhibiting in his life all the fruits of the spirit Gal 5.22 to commend to others, to silence objectors 1 Pet 2.15 1 Tim 2.12 Titus 1.11 & to glorify his God."\(^{20}\)

\(^{18}\)Smoot, 132.
\(^{19}\)Charles Carroll Dodson, "A Sermon by Rev. C. C. Dodson," Dodson Papers.
The studied sermons drew on virtually every part of scripture. They selected primary texts from Old Testament passages in the Pentateuch, the range of Poetry and Wisdom literature from Proverbs to Ecclesiastes, the Prophetic literature such as Isaiah, and Apocalyptic literature like Daniel. New Testament sermons built on the Gospels, the Pauline, Petrine, and Johannine Epistles, and Revelation. In addition to the main text, each sermon incorporated a variety of supporting texts. One sermon alone cited Genesis and Revelation and most books in between, including obscure ones like Lamentations and Nehemiah.

None of the studied sermons commented directly on the use of scriptural text, but a pattern of interpretation did emerge. These ministers were not primarily interested in scripture for its propositions, although they did cite proof texts. The preachers in this study concentrated on biblical narratives, often using specific stories in isolation. These narratives typically explained other scripture in the same way that today's preachers have used front page events or allusions to classical literature. For example, one minister explained the concept of military messenger by retelling the story of the Cushite messenger who notified David of Absalom's defeat. Similarly, a preaching justice of the peace used the trials of Peter, Paul, and Jesus to explain the concept of judgement.

Ministers often incorporated individual stories into longer narratives to prove a particular point. These narratives typically concentrated on the history of Israel but also included antecedent or subsequent acts of God. Perhaps the best example of this was Thomas Smoot's portrayal of God's revelation to humans. His story began with Jehovah's self-disclosure in the call of Abram. When Abraham's descendants wandered away, Yahweh sent them into Egyptian exile to get their attention. He then freed them in the Exodus and led them to Mount Sinai. Even as Yahweh was giving the law, the people created a golden calf to worship. Smoot then related the cycle of Israel's blessing and punishment during the wilderness wandering, the period of the Judges, the reigns of various Jewish kings, the Babylonian exile, and even Roman rule. Smoot used Israel's narrative to show the necessity of the coming of Christ.

Preoccupation with the biblical past has been studied by religious historians previously. Professors Bozeman, Hughes, and Allen have studied the phenomenon and constructed an explanation known as

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primitivism. As explained by Bozeman, primitivism created a mythic past in the biblical era. The time between that past and the present was ignored because it was considered corrupt. Religious people then emphasized the difference between the present situation and that ideal past. Preaching centered on recreating the mythic past in the present. However, primitivism did not account for the studied sermons. They never called for the recreation of the past or a return to a better time. Instead, they portrayed North Carolina Methodists as the next step in God's ongoing story; hearers needed to accept their place in that story. Sidney Wilkinson's use of the term "place of refuge" was typical. God provided Eden for Adam and Eve and the ark for Noah. He gave Abraham refuge in a foreign land and wrote cities of refuge into the Mosaic law. God supplied the ultimate refuge in his son and had recently given refuge to Civil War soldiers. Even as Wilkinson spoke, God provided a present haven for his hearers and promised future refuge in heaven. Wilkinson did not want his hearers to recreate the past; he wanted them to take their rightful place in God's unfolding narrative.

Biblical narrative dominated the sermons in this study. There were less than a dozen citations of other authorities, only two of John Wesley. The ministers certainly had other options. However, their stories, language, and even imagination seemed to have been captured by scripture. The key to this obsession lay in the reading lists of Charles Dodson. Dodson read the entire Bible most years; some years he completed it more than once. By 1883 he had read the Old Testament thirty-two times and the New Testament thirty-three times. This total immersion in scripture accounted for the dominance of biblical language in Dodson's sermons, and those of his associates.

Dodson and the other ministers in this study manipulated stylistic elements such as biblical narrative to express their message. They also communicated their message through the images they employed. These images revealed the ministers' actual and ideal perception of the community. If vocational images were representative, the groups who heard these sermons were hierarchically structured and emphasized accountability. This picture emerged from the business preoccupation of the sermons. Over and over again, preachers called for religion to meet business standards. Washington Chaffin's query was typical. "I ask, if religion is of greater importance than

26 Bozeman, 15-19.
28 Charles Carroll Dodson, Notebook, 83-107, Dodson Papers.
this world, if we should not at least engage in it with as much earnestness as we do in business matters?" 29 The sermons spoke of middle class clerks, tradesmen, merchants, and teachers, and threw in a sprinkling of physicians and politicians. In the business world, each of these people accounted to someone else for their work. Similarly, every Christian ultimately answered to God for each act. 30

The commercial images in these sermons were complemented by the image of agricultural master. This master reasonably expected service from the land he owned, the mules he raised, and the family for which he was responsible. One minister applied this vestige of slavery to the family patriarch who was "the master of a family," to God who assigned work as "the heavenly master", and to "the devil" who was "a master whose wages is death." 31 Even earthly masters were responsible to someone and for someone else in the communal hierarchy.

The structured communities consisted of regenerate persons. The studied sermons frequently referred to being "born again," which may have seemed to support the characterization of southern religion as hopelessly individualistic. However, these sermons fused the individual and the corporate. They claimed that "the Church is . . . a society of faithful men; and its tranquility is the result of that inward state of Mind, which is enjoyed by each." This tranquility resulted from the fact that the individual members of the group were "under restraint. They are placed under the holy government of their Lord; and each of them is possessed of a new nature, the fruit of regenerating grace. By this government & this new nature, their passions, tempers, tongues & actions, are all laid under restraint." 32 New individual and corporate obligations came with regeneration.

These responsibilities were an integral part of the hierarchical system. To God, the regenerate owed spiritual self-examination, private devotion, public worship, and attendance to the means of grace. All other responsibilities were part of one's divine obligation. The leader of the family had to lead family devotions and to inculcate "the knowledge and fear of God" in the family. Business people were required to transact their business and relate to employees and employers with the honesty and fidelity which God demanded, not according to the common practices of the day. Every member of the community had a responsibility to care for the less fortunate.

31William K. Eborn, Sermon on Romans 12:1, Volume 1, 11-15, Eborn Papers. The quotes are taken from 11 and 15.
like the poor and widowed. The result was a community of interdependent persons. These regulations promoted hierarchy and domination; at the same time, they perpetuated the community's existence by promulgating its ideology and providing every member's basic needs. They also provided important business regulations to protect community members in a laissez faire environment.

The regenerate community also proscribed certain activities. It labelled these sins; these sermons listed twenty-eight specific sins a total of fifty-three times. The sermons were not primarily topical but comments about various sins emerged in the rhetoric. Eighteen sins, ranging from murder to neglecting one's school work, were mentioned only once and received little attention here. The most frequently mentioned sin was alcohol consumption which accounted for twenty percent of the references. When specified, the beverage was wine or liquor; perhaps the consumption of beer or ale was not considered "drinking." The sermons gave no indication why alcohol was such an important issue. They did make it clear that alcohol was a concession to the "lusts of the flesh" and that hell contained "the wine-bibber" and "the drunkard."

Alcohol was becoming an increasingly important issue in North Carolina politics and religion. However, without further contextual clues it is impossible to tell how this rhetoric functioned in the community. Was the minister trying to dissuade his hearers from a practice in which they were heavily engaged? Perhaps the preacher felt that this practice threatened the stability of the regenerate community. Or was he using these denunciations as a badge of identification for his people?

These same questions emerged about other sins. The list included various forms of stealing and expressions of non-marital, heterosexual activity, dancing and lying, and "backbiting", cursing, swindling, and worshipping idols. Except for idolatry, it could be reasonably assumed that members of the various congregations were engaging in these practices. Of course, the regenerate were probably also engaging in any number of other, unlisted sins including covetousness, dishonoring their parents, etc. For some reason, the preachers of these sermons chose to concentrate on the sins listed. But the sermons did not indicate if the sins posed actual threats to the community, or if the denunciations served primarily as group mottos.

In addition to the images discussed to this point, secondary literature has led scholars to expect two themes in late nineteenth-century southern


34See Appendix A.


preaching—the afterlife and the Lost Cause. However, sermon references to these issues were fewer than expected and quite surprising. The first surprises related to the afterlife. The few relevant references indicated that the afterlife began at death; there was no discussion of a Second Advent or any form of millennialism. The eschaton was not an historical event, but a personal one. "Meeting God" warned its hearers that "no man knoweth the day nor the hour when the Son of man cometh" but rooted Jesus' coming in individual death. One prepared, not for the rapture, but for the deathbed.

These sermons rarely used heaven as a motivator and promised few rewards. Even the one sermon about heaven described it as little more than "a large & very blessed society". Heaven was a good place because it freed residents from sin, sorrow, disunity, and separation. There were no promises of future rewards such as heavenly palaces or places of honor. Heaven represented little more than a rest from earthly troubles.

Hell appeared even less frequently than heaven. The sermons contained only a couple of exhortations to avoid the place and a single description of it. The minister who made that description declared "I don't believe in trying to frighten men in to heaven . . . and so I dislike hearing the minister of the gospel . . . preaching about hell. He should preach heaven, not hell..." The sermon explicitly denied that hell involved fire, brimstone, or any other physical punishment; its torture was psychological. "The man who has been actuated in this life, will be influenced by the same motives there, multiplied and thousand-fold so they will drive him to desperation because the drives cannot be realized." For example, the gambler's torture was an increased desire to gamble with no opportunity to do so. This view may or may not have been typical, but the only picture of hell in these sermons did not match scholarly expectations.

The same conclusion was reached about the Lost Cause. After reading Charles Reagan Wilson, one may have expected to find justifications of the Civil War, a beatification of Confederate soldiers and generals, and a pervasive sense of southern uniqueness. However, none of these themes appeared in the sermons studied. In fact, the Civil War was mentioned less than ten times; only two of these were more than passing references. Both of these portrayed the war as something other than a "Lost Cause." One preacher believed Confederate veterans would describe the war as "rain & mud and ice and cold and heat and snow," sleeping outdoors, and existing on insufficient and sub-standard food. Another minister even presented a less-than-favorable picture of the motives of Confederate soldiers. During the late war some men, not knowing what they did, went for the fun of it, as I have heard some say since; some went to drown

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37Smoot, 136-138.
their sorrow on the field of carnage, some went because they were driven to it at bayonet's point, but some, thank God, went because they loved home and country. Such comments did not fit Wilson's paradigm.

These sermons do not seem to fit scholarly expectations at a number of points. They do not reflect theological concerns typically cited in historical analyses nor do they evidence the millennial or Lost Cause themes one might expect. In other respects, particularly in their hierarchical images of community and preoccupation with alcohol, the studied sermons meet scholarly expectations. Finally, the sermons reveal issues which have to this point been overlooked. The most significant new issue appears to be the extensive use of scriptural narrative. This paper cannot claim that the characteristics of the studied sermons overturn broader generalizations about nineteenth-century religion, southern Methodism, or even North Carolina. It can only describe thirty-three sermons by seven ministers. However, these sermons reveal a new picture of a portion of southern Protestantism. That picture deserves a place in the mural of American religious history.

APPENDIX A

**Sin Chart**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sin</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Drinking</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>20.75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms of Stealing</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heterosexual, Non-marital Sex</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7.55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancing</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lying</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5.66%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Backbiting” or “evil speaking”</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idolatry</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Compassion</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swearing</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swindling Or Cheating</td>
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<td>3.77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious Clergy</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Association With Drinkers</td>
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<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attending “shows”</td>
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<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blasphemy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Censoriousness</td>
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<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complaining Against Preacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Deals hard with poor”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defaulting on Debts</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fame Seeking</td>
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<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gambling</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indolence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Lives to gratify passions”</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Mean temper”</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Murder</td>
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<tr>
<td>Self Interest</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vengeance</td>
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</table>

Total Sins 28 Total References 53