



FOUNDING SINS

*How a Group of Antislavery Radicals Fought to
Put Christ into the Constitution*

JOSEPH S. MOORE



Founding Sins

Founding Sins

*How a Group of Antislavery
Radicals Fought to Put Christ
into the Constitution*



JOSEPH S. MOORE

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

OXFORD

UNIVERSITY PRESS

Oxford University Press is a department of the University of Oxford. It furthers the University's objective of excellence in research, scholarship, and education by publishing worldwide.

Oxford New York

Auckland Cape Town Dar es Salaam Hong Kong Karachi
Kuala Lumpur Madrid Melbourne Mexico City Nairobi
New Delhi Shanghai Taipei Toronto

With offices in

Argentina Austria Brazil Chile Czech Republic France Greece
Guatemala Hungary Italy Japan Poland Portugal Singapore
South Korea Switzerland Thailand Turkey Ukraine Vietnam

Oxford is a registered trademark of Oxford University Press
in the UK and certain other countries.

Published in the United States of America by
Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

© Oxford University Press 2016

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, without the prior permission in writing of Oxford University Press, or as expressly permitted by law, by license, or under terms agreed with the appropriate reproduction rights organization. Inquiries concerning reproduction outside the scope of the above should be sent to the Rights Department, Oxford University Press, at the address above.

You must not circulate this work in any other form
and you must impose this same condition on any acquirer.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Moore, Joseph S. (Joseph Solomon), 1977–

Founding sins : how a group of antislavery radicals fought to put Christ into the constitution / Joseph S. Moore.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-0-19-026924-1 (cloth : alk. paper)

1. Religious right—United States—History. 2. Church and state—United States—History. 3. Covenanters—United States. I. Title.

BR516.M6657 2016

322'.10973—dc23

2015009829

1 3 5 7 9 8 6 4 2

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free paper

To Mom, who taught me to love reading words

*And to Dad, who taught me to have words
of my own*

We the People of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, his revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government, and in order to form a more perfect union. . . .

—PROPOSED AMENDMENT TO THE CONSTITUTION,
introduced in memorial by
Senator Charles Sumner, 1864¹

Contents

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
<i>The Presbyterian Fringe: Abbreviations, Terms, and Language</i>	xiii
Introduction	1
1. Presbyterian Empire	8
2. The Failure to Found a Christian Nation	36
3. Confronting the Godless Government	63
4. Slavery and the Sin of Secular America	88
5. Rejecting a Christian Nation	119
Afterword	153
<i>Abbreviations of Archives and Special Collections</i>	159
<i>Notes</i>	161
<i>Index</i>	209

Acknowledgments

EVEN A SHORT book acquires a long list of people deserving thanks. This book is the product of many acts of kindness I received along the way. The following are inadequate acknowledgments of many debts long overdue and never fully paid.

I was generously supported in my research by Harvard University's International Seminar on the History of the Atlantic World, Duke University's John Hope Franklin Research Center, the Organization of American Historians–Immigration and Ethnic History Society John Higham Travel Grant, and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Allen W. Trelease Graduate Fellowship and Atlantic World Research Network. An invitation to speak at the University of Edinburgh's Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities helped hone my words. Courtesy appointments gave precious time to work on ideas surrounded by engaging scholars. The University of Notre Dame's History Department and the Keough-Naughton Institute for Irish Studies were generous with their time and encouragement. The Institute for Irish Studies at Queen's University Belfast, especially Dominic Bryan and Valerie Miller, gave me invaluable space to work.

On both sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the staffs and volunteers of many libraries and archives were unendingly helpful: the British Library, National Library of Scotland, New College Library at the University of Edinburgh, Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, the Hesburgh Libraries at the University of Notre Dame, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Duke University, Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, Clifford E. Barbour Library at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, Special Collections of McCain Library at Erskine College and Theological Seminary, John Bulow Campbell Library at Columbia Theological Seminary, Vermont State Archives and Records

Administration, Selma Public Library and Old Depot Museum, South Caroliniana Library at the University of South Carolina, and South Carolina Department of Archives and History. Special thanks go to Edith Brawley, Thomas Reid, and Mary Morrow.

Gardner-Webb University provided the perfect place to inspire and be inspired by students, faculty, and friends. Ben and Sarah Gaskins housed me for late-night work sessions and encouraged me with daily conversations worth taking a break to have. Elizabeth Amato, Walter Dalton, Donna Spivey Ellington, Michael Kuchinsky, Robert Munoz, Donna Schronce, Dianne Sykes, Timothy Vanderburg, and David Yelton are wonderful colleagues. I received exceptional institutional support from Earl Leininger, Benjamin Leslie, and Frank Bonner. Dean Mary Roby's fantastic staff at the Gardner-Webb library made this work doable, especially Kevin Bridges. Jasmine Stevenson and Stephanie McKellop (a tremendous scholar in her own right) did great work tracking down references.

I have been the beneficiary of many historians who took the time to talk with me about extreme Presbyterians when they could have been attending to much more pressing matters. Mark A. Noll encouraged my work long before I was encouraged it would go anywhere. Vernon and Georganne Burton warmly opened their home to me while researching in South Carolina. Kaarin Michaelsen graciously hosted my research time in London. In emails and conversations, Eric Burin, John Fea, Lacy Ford, Charles Irons, Richard MacMaster, Thomas Kidd, and Paul Thompson turned me on to good sources and helpful concepts on American religious history and the history of antislavery. The late Eugene Genovese commented on an early draft on southern antislavery religion. Andrew Holmes, David Gleeson, Patrick Griffin, Kerby Miller, James Smyth, and David Wilson gave valuable insights on Irish religious and ethnic history. William Roulston introduced me to researching Irish history on the ground in Belfast. Donald Smith generously shared his remarkable database of information on Vermont and the early American backcountry. Mary Cayton, T. Michael Parrish, and Jewel Spangler provided helpful critiques. Led by Sarah Griffith, the Charlotte historians' monthly gathering gave comments on chapters that moved the argument forward. Faculty at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro helped birth this project from a vague idea to what it has become. Thanks go especially to Charles C. Bolton, Thomas Jackson, Lisa Levenstein, and Loren Schweninger for their suggestions on various stages of this research.

I have met some truly excellent historians of the Covenanters and Presbyterians whose work is both thought-provoking and groundbreaking. I am honored to be part of this cohort of thinkers: Craig Gallagher, Peter Gilmore, Michael Griggs, Daniel Ritchie, Emily Moberg Robinson, Rankin Sherling, and Valerie Wallace. I am doubly thankful to Emily, both for her profound scholarship and for her insightful editing suggestions. Tribute is due to the host of historians who came before us without whom today's efforts would be impossible: Ray A. King, Reid W. Stewart, Lowry Ware, William L. Fisk, Robert Lathan, and William M. Glasgow.

I have forged several important friendships along the path of researching, thinking, and rethinking this book, and each led to invaluable feedback, encouragement, and ideas I could not have found on my own. These compatriots of history will hold my affection long after the research is done and include Christopher Cameron, Christopher Graham, Luke Harlow, Allison Madar, Jane G. V. McGaughey, and Ben Wright. Will Duffy sparked new thoughts on old ideas. Steve Contianos was always there to keep me grounded in the real world.

Some mentors are that in more than name. Robert M. Calhoon, to whom I owe so very much, made my career possible. He is both a professional guide and personal friend.

My family is supportive in every way, even if they remain a bit quizzical as to why I traverse the globe ever in search of one more archive. Joseph S. Moore gave me far more than his name—he gave me the love of history. Louise Moore, who has been enjoying us for more than eighty years, lovingly supported many early trips. I am thankful for my beautiful wife, Mary Julia. She epitomizes the passionate pursuit of perfection and, in so doing, inspires me to seek the same. My daughter, Charlotte, distracted me endlessly to do things more fun with someone far more important. I wish I had indulged that impulse more often.

Finally, I am eternally grateful to Michael and Rachel Moore. This book is for my parents. They spent money they did not have to buy for a toddler they were not expecting books he could not yet read from the mail-order Children's Book of the Month Club. The rest is history.

The Presbyterian Fringe: Abbreviations, Terms, and Language

In order to treat Covenanters as a broad cultural phenomenon, every effort has been made to minimize or shorten organizational labels. A guide to these groups, their monikers, and their abbreviations is provided here.

Anti-political Engagement

These groups took official stances against participating in political elections, juries, and other governmental activity as a witness against non-Presbyterian states and secular governments.

<i>RPs</i>	—Reformed Presbyterians
	—Cameronians
	—Society People
	—Hard-liners
	—Old Light (occasionally also as Old School)
	—Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church
<i>Anti-Burghers</i>	—Seceders who found the Burgher Oath of Scotland unacceptable

Pro-political Engagement

These groups took official stances allowing for various levels of political participation with non-Presbyterian states and secular governments.

- Engagers* —Not always an organization but a recurring title given to those in favor of slight modifications to strict Covenant obligations
 - New Light (occasionally also as New School)
 - Reformed Presbyterian General Synod
- Seceders* —Associate Presbytery of Scotland
- Burghers* —Seceders who found the Burgher Oath of Scotland acceptable
- ARs* —Associate Reformed Presbyterians
 - An American union of Reformed and Burgher Seceders, sometimes referred to in the South simply as Seceders
- UPs* —United Presbyterians
 - An American union of some ARs and remaining Seceders

Original spelling, italics, and capitalization have been retained where it is not overly confusing, although some words have been modernized for clarity. This is especially true of passages from seventeenth-century Scotland as well as personal letters. Editorial clarifications within quotes are bracketed.

Founding Sins

Introduction

THE UNITED STATES was not founded as a Christian nation, because slavery was in the Constitution and Jesus was not. The people who said this, rather loudly and for quite a long time, were called the Covenanters. Whereas today most religious conservatives insist that America's Founders created a Christian nation, Covenanters were the most conservative Christians in early America, and they vehemently disagreed. Christian America advocates such as David Barton and Glenn Beck are anxious to blame the mythology of a secular founding on liberals who distort the past from the left. Yet, in the actual past, the most strident critique of America's failure to be a Christian nation came from the right.

Conservative Christians today do not have history *wrong* so much as they have it *backward*. The United States was not founded as a Christian nation only to later lose its way. In fact, the United States is a more Christian nation today than it was when the Founders wrote the Constitution. We trust God on our coins (1864) and paper money (1955). The Post Office no longer opens on Sunday (1912). Students pledge allegiance to a nation "under God" (1954) and spend government loans and grants to study theology at religious schools (1944, 1965). An entire government office focuses on helping religious charities use tax money (2001). Presidents Bush and Obama both called for national days of prayer each year they were in office, something President Jefferson refused to do and President Madison did once but later regretted. All of this represents the creation of something new, not the continuation of something old.¹

When the Founders failed to found a Christian nation it was not by accident. They were intentionally dismissing those who sought to mix God and government in the new nation in old, European ways. That failure

was loudly protested. In the thick of America's first culture wars were the Covenanters, an assortment of radical Scotch-Irish Presbyterian sects sharing the conviction that all nations must be in an explicit covenant with God. For more than 200 years, these fringe Presbyterians loudly demanded that the United States repent of the founding sins embedded in its Constitution. Although almost entirely forgotten today, Covenanters' efforts to Christianize America after the fact came shockingly close to succeeding then. In the process Covenanters fought the English in multiple revolutions, confronted the Founders and their godless Constitution, took up arms against the federal government in the Whiskey Rebellion, offended both George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, served as conductors on the Underground Railroad, aided in the founding of the American Colonization Society, fought in the Civil War, mounted a star-studded national campaign to amend the Constitution to include the authority of Jesus, inspired secular Americans to label themselves "liberals," and ultimately displayed to the modern fundamentalist movement the acceptable limits of reform. Along the way they met with, and in some cases persuaded, evangelists such as George Whitefield, Founding Fathers such as Benjamin Franklin, abolitionists such as John Brown, presidents such as Abraham Lincoln, and Supreme Court justices such as William Strong. Prompted by the Covenanters, Lincoln considered asking Congress to amend the Constitution to acknowledge God; he deleted the paragraph from his State of the Union only after his shocked Cabinet told him it was a horrible idea. By the time they were done, Covenanters had inserted their cause into almost every prominent event in American history—and very nearly into the Constitution itself.²

Unlike today, in the original Christian America debate the most conservative Christians argued that the Founding Fathers failed. Covenanter critiques centered on two interrelated themes. The first was the absence of Jesus Christ in the Constitution: an affront to God's name and an open statement of rebellion against his reign over the people. The second was human slavery and its long wake of American racism: a desecration of God's image. Even as America changed and as life in America changed the Covenanters, these arguments maintained a remarkable continuity among their religious adherents in both the North and the South, spanning the years from the Early Republic to the Civil War era and Reconstruction and into the twentieth century. The Covenanters' insistence on God in the law and humanity's equality before it gave purpose and energy to their fight against America's twin founding sins.

Like most extremist arguments, Covenanter political logic was deceptively simple. A nation was its laws, and law was rooted in the authority of God. The English Magna Carta's preamble issued laws "at the prompting of God." In America's great charter, however, God was neither prompting nor prompted. He was not there at all. Therefore, the Constitution had a "We the People" problem. Taking the law out of God's hands was "an assumption of unlawful authority," one Covenanter wrote, on par with leadership by a wanton, raging horde. According to the Covenanters, the US Constitution's preamble displayed the true nature of America's religious rebellion: the public, which lacked the rightfully constituted authority to institute power, had replaced a lawful judge (God) with itself. Any nation founded by casting off a Christian British government in favor of a rebellious "We the People" was bound to present problems for anyone hoping for a Christian America.³

Covenanters insisted that while "the People" were of broadly Christian heritage, this did not make the United States a Christian nation. Their fellow citizens often disagreed. Especially after the religious revivals of the Second Great Awakening, many Americans became convinced that since they lived in a country of Christians, they therefore lived in a Christian country. The widespread popularity of this argument from population drove nineteenth-century Covenanters into frenzied denial. A Christian culture, even a Christian majority, did *not* equate to a Christian nation, they insisted. Moreover, these "People" were, in fact, deeply divided or apathetic about religion. As one evangelical minister complained just after the founding, the three most common denominations in post-Revolutionary America were "Deists, Nothingarians, and anythingarians." Defining the nation by its people and cultures, rather than its stated laws, obscured more than it clarified because "the People" were not religiously whole. To say that the Covenanters attacked the idea of Christian America is not to undermine the very real ways that early Americans intertwined their faith with their citizenship. Yet the Covenanters' critical distinction—that by the standards of its own time the newly born United States was simultaneously a Christian civilization and a secular nation—has been lost on our contemporary debates.⁴

Covenanters saw the church and state as brothers of the same father who possessed different talents. The one instituted the father's spiritual will; the other, his physical will. Since both sprang from God's will, both sat beneath the authority of Christ and should reflect the same moral standard. State laws should reflect biblical morality. The state could not

force religious belief; that was a matter of the heart and the church. It could, however, coerce religious obedience, suppress immorality, and keep people from offending God's name and commands because these were issues of the body, not the mind. This distinction was largely lost on their detractors—another reason Covenanter political theology was a hard sell in America. It also caused at least one historian to refer to them as a Presbyterian Taliban.⁵

To square the circle on national religious identity, Covenanters argued, "the People" should look backward rather than forward. The secular American state was a new and dangerous departure from traditional Christian Europe. Thus, the Covenanters did not hold up 1787 nearly as highly as they did 1643, when Scotland and England pledged themselves to become explicitly Protestant nations with clear enforcement of Presbyterian morality. These Christian realms, if only briefly a reality, dominated Covenanters' political sensibility. They were not so much interested in creating a Christian America as in recreating a Christian Scotland in America. This accounts for much of what made Covenanter logic and tactics different from those of Christian conservatives today.

Another difference was their position on race. Covenanters rejected slavery and racism in the very era both emerged as common sense to most Americans. In this, they represent another peculiar historical anomaly. America's first Christian nationalists were also some of its most radical racial egalitarians. Their antislavery views predated even those of the Quakers. Unlike the Quakers, these were Christian militants, protecting their Underground Railroad stations with both prayer and gunfire. Perhaps most interesting, the pained Covenanter attempts to maintain an antislavery witness in the South stumbled through stages of radicalism and moderation into the Civil War before finally being absorbed into the white southern mainstream. Such views were difficult to maintain in North and South. Their long staying power in Covenanter circles, predating and outlasting most other forms of racial egalitarianism, indicates the ferocity with which they were held even where they eventually gave way. Covenanter racial views eventually experienced widespread acceptance in American life, while their political perspective did not. This was an outcome they would never have predicted. To the Covenanter mind, the one must necessarily flow from the other. American racism sprang out of its lack of Christian law.

A study of the Covenanters is an entrée into understanding what role religion could and could not play in early American government. This is

not a book about the Founders and Christian America advocates per se but, rather, about one particular group of their detractors. It places forgotten Covenanter voices back into the debate over America's founding. In the past, they were dismissed but not ignored. That dismissal tells a story about what early Americans believed when they wrote, debated, ratified, and modified the US Constitution. We can also learn much by observing how far Americans were willing to entertain the twin ideas of abolishing slavery and secularism from the Constitution.

Founding Sins traces this history across three centuries and the multiple countries and states Covenanters tried to redeem for God. Chapter 1 reveals the roots of Covenanters' attempts to create a Presbyterian empire in Britain, lingering resentment over that failure, and origins of their early abolitionism. Chapter 2 traces their migration to colonial America and subsequent confrontations with both the British Empire and Founding Fathers. Chapter 3 locates Covenanters in the Early Republic and their in utero formulation as a distinctly American political movement protesting issues such as Sunday mail delivery and memorialization of the Founders. Chapter 4 examines their attacks, both headlong and oblique, on slavery in the North and South through the Civil War era. Chapter 5 charts the high and low tides of Covenanter influence in America, as their surprisingly fruitful efforts to amend the Constitution and maintain racial radicalism in the South both failed dramatically and dwindled to sideshows on the twentieth-century political stage. The afterword briefly traces the Covenanters' lingering influence on the rise of Christian nationalist thought in the twentieth century. To date, no work has brought this story together.⁶

Who was, and who was not, a Covenanter? *Founding Sins* takes a broadly inclusive view of the term, explained over the course of the book. All Presbyterians of whatever denomination professing the 1638 National Covenant and the 1643 Solemn League and Covenant as models for Christian statehood are included. Many Covenanter groups held those documents in various stages of high regard. Reformed Presbyterians (RPs), Associate Presbyterians, and their American hybrids such as Associate Reformed Presbyterians (ARs) and United Presbyterians (UPs) all valued the legacy of such historic statements to give insight into their own peculiar political circumstances. Many Covenanters were in fact embedded within mainline Presbyterianism itself. In effect, such peoples believed that every nation (especially Scotland, Britain, and the United States) *should* be in covenant with God. They disagreed among themselves

on *how* this should be accomplished and how much one could participate in a godless political system in order to reform it. In many ways and times, each of these small groups explicitly claimed that their Covenanter heritage applied to their current circumstances even as they diverged sharply from one another as to how. To keep up with the various group names as they appear and change, a glossary is provided.⁷

Over the course of the book, several interrelated insights emerge. First, the Christian America debate is much older than is often remembered. The United States rebelled *against* a Christian kingdom and established a secular republic. From that moment forward, Americans disagreed vehemently about what such actions meant. Second, Covenanters served as the shock troops of Christian America's assault on the national government. Whereas other Christian conservatives belatedly arrived at the idea of a national solution to moral waywardness, Covenanters always made federal power the object of their efforts. Third, the Christianization of the state and questioning of racial slavery were once deeply intertwined. Dividing these two issues obscures the way certain reformers saw them as parts of a whole. Finally, the Christian Amendment movement was more than the product of nineteenth-century angst about immigration and Reconstruction. Rather, it hailed from a long and deep Atlantic history too often left submerged beneath the surface. The Covenanters sustained decidedly Old World logic in a new nation for a remarkably long time. Their religion was itself constrained, changed, and sometimes abandoned. This was to be expected. They met the inevitable resistance that came from flying in the face of the American consensus that God and government should not mix. Why and how they did so is a story worth remembering.⁸

Covenanters discovered, pressed, and exceeded the limits of Christian nationalism from the Early Republic through the turn of the twentieth century. True, despite the great cacophony of religious vantage points among Americans in the Revolutionary generation and beyond, a general Christian consensus could be found in the country. But that consensus could be taken too far. The Covenanters pushed up to and beyond that boundary, thus setting the limits of Christian nationalism in America. Those who, like this Presbyterian fringe, stood outside that consensus held visions of an explicitly Christian nation other Americans sought to avoid. What is missing in historical narratives is any sense that these actors were part of a distinct voice that contemporaries heard, understood, and rejected. It is a voice largely forgotten today. Once we hear it again,

we can give those who ask about America's Christian founding an older answer. The United States clearly was not founded as a Christian nation; had it been, Jesus Christ would be found in the Constitution and slavery would be absent. There were those in the historical moment, however, who desperately wished it were otherwise. Their message, and its rejection, speaks loudly about how much religion early Americans were willing to allow in their politics.