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THE RELIGIOUS FORMATION OF JOHN WITHERSPOON

CALVINISM, EVANGELICALISM, AND
THE SCOTTISH ENLIGHTENMENT

Kevin DeYoung

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The Religious Formation of John Witherspoon

This book explores in unprecedented detail the theological thinking of John Witherspoon during his often-overlooked ministerial career in Scotland. In contrast to the arguments made by other historians, it shows that there was considerable continuity of thought between Witherspoon's Scottish ministry and the second half of his career as one of America's Founding Fathers.

The book argues that Witherspoon cannot be properly understood until he is seen as not only engaged with the Enlightenment but also firmly grounded in the Calvinist tradition of High to Late Orthodoxy, embedded in the transatlantic Evangelical Awakening of the eighteenth century, and frustrated by the state of religion in the Scottish Kirk. Alongside the titles of pastor, president, educator, and philosopher should be a new category: John Witherspoon as Reformed apologist.

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Abbreviations

<i>Annals 1739–1752</i>	<i>Annals of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland from the Final Secession in 1739 to the Origin of the Relief in 1752.</i> Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1838.
<i>Annals 1752–1766</i>	<i>Annals of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland from the Origin of the Relief in 1752 to the Rejection of the Overture on Schism in 1766.</i> Edinburgh: John Johnstone, 1840.
Beith Minutes	National Records of Scotland. Minutes of the Beith Kirk Session.
Butterfield	L.H. Butterfield. <i>John Witherspoon Comes to America: A Documentary Account Based Largely on New Materials.</i> Princeton: Princeton University Library, 1953.
CT	Benedict Pictet. <i>Christian Theology.</i> Frederick Reyroux (trans.). Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1834.
<i>Elenctic</i>	Francis Turretin. <i>Institutes of Elenctic Theology,</i> 3 vols. George Musgrave Giger (trans.). James T. Dennison, Jr. (ed.). Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1997.
Haddington Minutes	National Records of Scotland. Minutes of the Presbytery of Haddington.
<i>Inst.</i>	John Calvin. <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion,</i> 2 vols. Ford Lewis Battles (trans.). John T. McNeil (ed.). Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960.
Irvine Minutes	National Records of Scotland. Minutes of the Presbytery of Irvine.
<i>Life</i>	Ashbel Green. <i>Life of the Rev. John Witherspoon,</i> Henry Littleton Savage (ed.). Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973.
OHBS	Keith A. Francis and William Gibson (eds). <i>The Oxford Handbook of the British Sermon</i>

- 1689–1901. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Paisley Minutes National Records of Scotland. Minutes of the Presbytery of Paisley.
- Papers JW Library of Congress. The Papers of John Witherspoon.
- PRRD Richard A. Muller. *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, ca. 1520 to ca. 1725*, 4 vols. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003.
- PW Varnum Lansing Collins. *President Witherspoon*, 2 vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925.
- WCC J. Ligon Duncan, III (ed.). *The Westminster Confession into the 21st Century: Essays in Remembrance of the 350th Anniversary of the Westminster Assembly*, 3 vols. Fearn, Ross-Shire: Christian Focus, 2003–2009.
- WCF Westminster Confession of Faith
- WJE *Works of Jonathan Edwards*, 26 vols. Perry Miller, John E. Smith, Harry S. Stout (general eds). New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957–2008.
- Works *The Works of the Rev. John Witherspoon, D.D., L.L.D. Late President of the College, at Princeton New Jersey*, 4 vols. 2nd edn. Philadelphia: William W. Woodward, 1802.

Other notes on sources

In citing Witherspoon's published writings, I reference the title of the piece and where it can be found in the 1802 edition of his *Works* edited by Ashbel Green (e.g. "Lectures on Divinity," *Works*, 4:21). While some capitalization, italicization, and spacing between paragraphs may look different between the initial publication and Green's edited volumes, the content is the same. I have chosen to cite the 1802 *Works* because they are more easily available online and because the 1802 edition has become the definitive source cited in Witherspoon scholarship.

The Papers of John Witherspoon are in the Library of Congress (Washington, D.C.). The Papers contain two "Bundles" with numbered items. Most of the items listed are now lost.

All records noted with the CH2 prefix are from the *Records of Church of Scotland Synods, Presbyteries, and Kirk Sessions* in the National Records of Scotland (Edinburgh). Records with the prefix CS are Court of Session documents also from the NRS.

Benedict Pictet's important work, *Theologia Christiana* (*Christian Theology*), was first published in 1696 by Cramer and Perachon of Geneva. The title page has M.DC.CXVI for the publication date, which has led some scholars, including Klauber, to mistakenly assert that *Theologia Christiana* was published in 1716. But 1716 would be written as M.DCC.XVI. Because the *Epistola Dedicatoria* has the date M.DC.XCVI (1696), it is best to assume the date on the title page inadvertently transposed the C and the X after the second period, making 96 appear as 116, and turning the proper 1696 into an awkwardly rendered 1716. In 1721, *Theologia Christiana* was expanded and published in three French volumes under the title, *La Théologie Chrétienne* (Genève: Gabriel de Tournes et fils, 1721). An earlier two-volume French edition was published in 1708. This is the edition recorded in Witherspoon's library. The only English edition (*Christian Theology*) appeared in 1834 and is based on the Latin *Theologia Christiana*. Unfortunately, the translator excised passages he felt were repetitive, consisted of long quotations, or were 'more curious than useful', though he claims these instances 'are altogether very rare' (p. iv). Reyroux omitted parts of the chapter on reprobation because he thought them 'too artificial

in statement to be scriptural' (p. 212). He also frequently combined smaller chapters under one heading (the original Latin text has 148 chapters in 14 books, while the English translation has 106 chapters in 11 books). For that reason, when referencing *Christian Theology*, the corresponding section in *Theologia Christiana*, given in Roman numerals, will be included in parentheses.

Wherever possible and practical, I have retained the original spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and typographical emphases (italics, bold, or underline) found in old sources. Occasionally, punctuation is removed (later editorial editions anyway, considering that Witherspoon himself used nothing but the period) in order to make sense of the quotation for contemporary readers. No other changes have been made unless explicitly stated.

Introduction

John Witherspoon as Reformed apologist

On January 2, 1758, John Witherspoon entered the High Kirk of Edinburgh ready to preach a sermon, equal parts evangelistic, apologetic, and polemical. Witherspoon, who was born in Yester Parish some 20 miles to the east, had been invited to speak at the annual meeting of the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge (SSPCK). Founded in 1701 as a benevolent society to promote the Protestant faith among the Scottish Highlanders, and later the indigenous peoples of North America, the SSPCK gathered every year, usually in early January, at St Giles' Cathedral—the beautiful old church known as High Kirk, whose crown steeple had been a point of reference on the Royal Mile since the fourteenth century.¹

Preaching before the SSPCK at the most important and most impressive church in all of Presbyterianism and in the pulpit John Knox once filled was an honor bestowed upon prominent ministers in the Church of Scotland. And that's what Witherspoon was: a well-known preacher and a well-regarded minister leading a growing congregation in the booming city of Paisley. It would be another decade before Witherspoon emigrated to America to assume the presidency at Princeton, and almost another decade after that before his fame would grow as a Founding Father of the new republic. In time, Witherspoon would sign the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation, help ratify the Constitution of the State of New Jersey, hold a seat in the legislature in New Jersey, and serve on 126 committees during six years in the Continental Congress. Just as critically, he would go on to personally instruct an entire generation of educators, legislators, and statesmen. A list of his Princeton graduates includes: 12 members of the Continental Congress, five delegates to the Constitutional Convention, one U.S. president (James Madison), one vice president (Aaron Burr), 49 representatives, 28 senators, three supreme court justices, eight district judges, one secretary of state, three attorneys general, and two foreign ministers.²

But in 1758 all of that lay in the future. What was present was Witherspoon's notoriety as an ecclesiastical agitator and defender of the evangelical faith. At 34 years old, Witherspoon's reputation as a writer and preacher had been growing. His satirical (and at that point anonymous—but rumors were flying) attack on the Moderates, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753), was a

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sensation, going through five editions in two years.³ His *Treatise on Justification* (1756) had been very well received, and after the performance of John Home's controversial play, *Douglas* (1756), Witherspoon showed himself to be the most effective anti-theater essayist with his *Serious Enquiry into the Nature and Effects of the Stage* (1757). Clearly, the young minister was not shy about entering into controversy. The summer before ascending into the pulpit at St Giles', Witherspoon was in the same city leading a group of eight ministers in protesting a General Assembly vote which allowed a commission of elders to be seated even though they failed to meet the spiritual qualifications mandated by church law.⁴

With so much swirling in the ecclesiastical air—from plays to patronage to Dissenting presbyteries—we can safely assume that when the bushy-browed, somewhat fleshy, newly installed parson at Laigh Kirk of Paisley came to his task in Edinburgh, he did so with great intentionality. It was only three years earlier that William Robertson, the leader of the burgeoning Moderate Party, had spoken at the same annual gathering⁵ and less than six months before the celebrated Moderate preacher Hugh Blair would assume the charge at the High Kirk.⁶ It would be too much to say that Witherspoon came to the SSPCK itching for a fight before a hostile crowd (after all, his friend and Popular Party colleague John Erskine was the invited preacher the year after Robertson, suggesting a deliberate attempt to balance their invitations between factions in the Kirk). But neither was Witherspoon speaking in a contextual vacuum. When he decided to preach from Acts 4:12 on 'The Absolute Necessity of Salvation Through Christ', Witherspoon knew what he was doing.

The sermon begins with Witherspoon's contention that, 'It is not easy to conceive any subject, at once more important in itself, more seasonable in this age, and more suited to the design of the present meeting, than the absolute necessity of salvation through CHRIST.'⁷ Then after briefly mentioning the threat from 'infidel writers', Witherspoon argued that the 'much greater reason to apprehend danger' came from 'that class of men who, being nominal Christians, disguise or alter the gospel in order to defend it'.⁸ Witherspoon was concerned that the 'fundamental doctrines of the gospel'—doctrines like inherited depravity, everlasting damnation, and the necessity of redemption—were being 'softened', that 'modern philosophy' was polluting 'ancient Christianity', and that Christ was being put forward as a teacher and moral reformer rather than as a 'Saviour' and 'our blessed Redeemer'.⁹ As we will see, Witherspoon was conversant with contemporary philosophy and had no hesitation in showing how ancient Christianity squared with sound reason, but he opposed any dissimulation of the gospel in general (or the theology of the Westminster Confession specifically), which purported to render the faith more palatable. In his mind, 'The nearer Christianity is brought to the principles of infidels to solicit their esteem, the less occasion will they see for it at all'.¹⁰

Witherspoon's sermon before the SSPCK is significant, not only because of where and when it was preached, but also because it provides a useful window into Witherspoon's thought—what he wanted to safeguard, what he wanted to clarify, where he was uncompromising, where he was cautious, how he saw the lay of the land in the Kirk, and how he understood the Christian faith. We see here Witherspoon's penchant for piling up Scripture verses to make his point—more than 40 biblical references can be found in the first section alone.¹¹ We see his eagerness to prove the sinfulness of man and the need for a substitutionary payment for sin.¹² We see his concern that laying great stress upon believing the right thing is not a deterrent to doing the right thing but actually is the only way to produce the virtue so desired by polite society in Enlightenment Scotland.¹³ We see his caution in dealing with certain disputed questions that are not explicitly answered in Scripture.¹⁴ We see his conviction that the best way to work for the moral and social improvement among the downcast is by offering them the gospel.¹⁵ We see his objection to the idea that Christian charity means forbearing with error instead of being zealous to lead people to the truth.¹⁶ We see his willingness to use philosophical categories as he employs the popular distinction between natural and moral inability.¹⁷ We see his strong presumption that the Catholic faith is not true Christianity but instead a pernicious 'Romish superstition'.¹⁸ We see his desire to promote 'true religion' not only among 'the highlands of Scotland' but also among the 'unenlightened Heathen nations' (i.e. the indigenous peoples of North America).¹⁹ And perhaps most clearly and most centrally, we see his theological commitment to the task of an evangelical minister as he concludes his sermon with an 'earnest' appeal 'to believe in Jesus Christ', for even in his 'audience of professing Christians' he reckoned there could be many who 'boast of the dignity of their nature, and the perfection of their virtue' but are, in fact, 'strangers to real faith in Christ'.²⁰

Method and aims

In his magisterial biography of Jonathan Edwards, George Marsden explains that Enlightenment era thinkers and practitioners must be viewed in their eighteenth-century context and taken seriously on their own terms. We must 'enter sympathetically into an earlier world and [try] to understand people'.²¹ In 'seeing things their way', the historian tries to avoid the ideological reductionism that can mar a Marxist reading of texts, the intellectual isolation that besets the 'great thinkers' approach to ideas, and the anachronistic self-congratulation that marks the Whig interpretation of history.²² In dealing with people from the past, historians 'need to do the hard work of learning their language, grasping their concepts, and describing their world-view'.²³ Such objectivity is not the same as neutrality. Rather, it is meant to ensure that historical figures are presented, first of all, in a way they

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themselves would recognize and only after that in a way that intersects with our contemporary concerns.

More specifically, my methodological approach is what Bradley and Muller call the synchronic or organic model.²⁴ In this model the historian does more than interpret texts; a whole matrix of concerns must be kept in view. This means Witherspoon must be examined as one who interacts with church tradition, political concerns, ecclesiastical controversy, social changes, and a web of personal relationships and experiences. As Skinner puts it, 'I attempt to interpret specific beliefs by placing them in the context of other beliefs, to interpret systems of belief by placing them in wider intellectual frameworks, and to understand those broader frameworks by viewing them in light of the *longue durée*'.²⁵

My aim is to explore the theology of John Witherspoon in his historical context, with special attention given to the Scottish half of his career. In order to succeed in this focus, and in an effort to handle his theology with historical sensitivity, most of Witherspoon's American career will be set aside until the last chapter. There the question will be, by necessity, a narrow one: did Witherspoon undergo an intellectual sea change in leaving Scotland for America? I hope to show that there was considerable continuity of thought between the two halves of his career. The differences in emphasis that emerge were not because of capitulation to the Enlightenment but owing to two other factors: he was now a college president (with new ministry objectives), and he was now in America (which gave birth to a new optimism). In the chapters leading up to this conclusion, we will look at Witherspoon's theology as shaped by four historical realities: the Reformed tradition, the evangelical awakenings, the Scottish Kirk, and the Scottish Enlightenment. To be more precise, I will argue that Witherspoon's theology—and indeed Witherspoon himself—cannot be properly understood until we see him not only *engaged* with the Scottish Enlightenment, but also *firmly grounded* in the Reformed tradition of High to Late Orthodoxy, *embedded* in the transatlantic evangelical awakenings of the eighteenth century, and *frustrated* by the state of religion in the Scottish Kirk.

The forgotten Witherspoon

John Witherspoon is known for many things—a thorn in the side of the Moderate Party in the Scottish Kirk, a successful president at the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), an influential moral philosopher, the conduit of Scottish Common Sense Realism into the civic and ecclesiastical life of the American colonies, an ardent supporter of the American Revolution, and, most famously, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence.

What the Presbyterian minister is not known for is being a particularly insightful, significant, or even consistent Reformed thinker. Witherspoon's fame, especially in America, is owing to the second half of his life, where he increasingly turned his attention to political matters and to the formation of

a new nation in the New World. As Jeffry Morrison has argued, 'By any fair measure [Witherspoon] deserves to be classed among the founders of this republic'.²⁶ The fiery Scotsman is right to be remembered as a key figure in America in the years surrounding the Revolution.

With all that has been written about Witherspoon the 'animated son of liberty'²⁷ in the colonial cause or Witherspoon as the one who should be credited with 'the introduction of Scottish Realism to America',²⁸ comparatively little has been written about what Witherspoon did for a living in Scotland, that is, preach sermons and lead a local congregation. Commenting on Morrison's fine monograph, Daniel Walker Howe observes that the book nevertheless 'ignores [Witherspoon's] Scottish career, and its treatment of Witherspoon's philosophical and religious ideas are derivative and somewhat dated.' Howe argues that Witherspoon cannot be understood except by looking at his Scottish and American situations together.²⁹ If we are to make sense of Witherspoon the Founding Father and Princeton president, we must first understand Witherspoon the Reformed theologian and ecclesiastical provocateur. It is telling of Witherspoon's legacy that in the standard biography by Varnum Lansing Collins, fewer than 70 pages out of 500 deal with the Scottish portion of his life. Witherspoon has been dismissed as eclectic, unoriginal, and confused—for historians of the Scottish Enlightenment too beholden to an antiquated Calvinism and for Reformed theologians too enamored with Francis Hutcheson and Thomas Reid. What is known about Witherspoon as a thinker has been seen largely through the lens of three works: *Ecclesiastical Characteristics* (1753) for those interested in his controversies with the Kirk's Moderate Party; his sermon *The Dominion of Providence Over the Affairs of Men* (1776) for those interested in his political career; and his posthumously published, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (1800), for those wanting to dissect Witherspoon as an amateur philosopher and conflicted theologian. Most scholars, in assessing Witherspoon's ideas, have largely overlooked his parish sermons, his treatises on justification and regeneration, his *Lectures on Divinity*, his student addresses at Princeton, his lifelong commitment to the Westminster Standards, and his work as a Presbyterian churchman in the United States.

Alongside the titles of minister, president, educator, philosopher, and Founding Father should be a new category: John Witherspoon as Reformed apologist. Like his theological mentor, the Genevan theologian Benedict Pictet (1655–1724), Witherspoon held firmly to the tenets of confessional Calvinism. And like Pictet, Witherspoon was eager to show that the truths of supernatural revelation (i.e. historic, orthodox, Reformed theology) could be squared with reason. While Witherspoon professed to 'care very little what men of vain and carnal minds say of my sentiments' and was happy in his own mind to form his theological opinions 'immediately and without challenge from the oracles of truth', he also confessed a keen interest in showing 'that the truths of the everlasting gospel are agreeable to sound reason', and made it his 'business' through his 'whole life' to demonstrate that

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these truths were ‘founded upon the state of human nature’.³⁰ Witherspoon lived in an age of transition where the tenets of orthodox Christianity, to say nothing of the sharp edges of Reformed theology, were under assault. His aim as a minister was to defend and rearticulate the gospel, without ever altering or disguising it. This is Witherspoon the Reformed apologist (on both sides of the Atlantic) and the Witherspoon largely unknown today.

A story worth telling

The earliest reflection on Witherspoon’s ministry and influence—the funeral sermon by Witherspoon’s friend, Rev. Dr. John Rodgers—was delivered on May 6, 1795, and subsequently put into print by request of the Board of Trustees of the College of New Jersey.³¹ The discourse, titled, *The Faithful Servant Rewarded* (1795), contains a biographical section provided by Witherspoon’s successor and son-in-law Samuel Stanhope Smith.³² In the short sketch, Witherspoon is hailed as ‘a profound theologian, perspicuous and simple in his manner’.³³ A few years later, in a book describing the topography of Scotland, we read in a section on Beith: ‘Here the great Dr Witherspoon, who united the Christian, the Scholar, the Divine, and the Politician in *one*, spent the first of his years in the work of ministry, was removed from this place to Paisley, and from hence crossed the Atlantic, and spent the remainder of his days in high utility and respect, on the western Continent’.³⁴ Similarly, Samuel Miller in his *Brief Retrospect of the Eighteenth Century* (1803), lauded Witherspoon as a vigorous, enlightened, active, practical man who excelled as a divine, a statesman, and as the head of a literary institution.³⁵ Writing for *The Edinburgh Christian Instructor* in October 1829, Thomas Crichton of Paisley, who grew up at Laigh Kirk and knew ‘of the Doctor’s ministry in Scotland’ firsthand, still maintained that too little had been written about his former minister, even though ‘his writings have been much read, and generally admired by the religious world’.³⁶ The entry for John Witherspoon in *A Biographical Dictionary of Eminent Scotsmen* (1841) is a distillation of the *Instructor* article from 1829 and John Rodgers’s funeral sermon.³⁷

In the two centuries since his death, Witherspoon has only had two significant biographers. The first was Ashbel Green (1762–1848), Witherspoon’s former student and later president of Princeton (1812–22). Green provided the material for the Witherspoon chapter in the *Biography of the Signers to the Declaration of Independence* (1824),³⁸ and, after his death, William Sprague included Green’s biographical sketch in his *Annals of the American Pulpit* (1857–69).³⁹ Both of these smaller works have been superseded by Green’s *Life of the Rev. John Witherspoon*—the first full-length biography, which was prepared for a never-to-be-completed third edition of Witherspoon’s *Works*.⁴⁰ Green’s unpublished biography made its way to Scotland for a period of time before the Rev. Nicholas Murray accidentally discovered the manuscript and delivered it to the New Jersey Historical Society in

1861.⁴¹ The manuscript then lay in archival slumber for more than a century, accessible only to researchers interested in reading 400 pages of handwritten scrawl, until it was edited by Henry Lyttleton Savage and finally published by Princeton University Press in 1973.

Although Green's biography has been considered almost hagiographic by some,⁴² Savage makes a compelling argument that Green did not write a 'eulogy of his master' and was in some instances even too severe and too quick to find fault.⁴³ To be sure, Green is largely appreciative of his mentor, but his assessment is frank and disagreements are candid. The concluding chapter on 'the character and talents of Dr. Witherspoon' is particularly helpful in beginning to understand Witherspoon's legacy as a theologian and how those closest to him understood his doctrinal commitments.

The other indispensable biographer is Varnum Lansing Collins, whose two-volume biography is the most thorough and most respected scholarship to date on the life and significance of John Witherspoon. Although not yet published at the time, Collins made judicious use of Green's manuscript, along with the best available primary and secondary sources. If there is a weakness in Collins's *President Witherspoon* (1925), it is the relatively quick work he makes of the Scottish portion of Witherspoon's life.⁴⁴ In the closing chapter on 'The Man and His Ideas', which runs to more than 50 pages, Collins devotes only one paragraph to Witherspoon as a theologian.⁴⁵ Collins's overarching assessment of his subject—like the assessment of many after him—is that Witherspoon wed together the 'older power of the Calvinistic religion' with 'the newer political spirit'.⁴⁶ While this is a plausible thesis, more work needs to be done to explore from where the older power of Witherspoon's Calvinistic religion came and what it looked like.

Other biographies of Witherspoon have proven either too short or too derivative. The published address *John Witherspoon and His Times* (1890) by James McCosh is intriguing, though (due to the constraints of the genre) underdeveloped. McCosh argues that Witherspoon's political views can be traced to the Solemn League and Covenant, an often overlooked argument which suggests that Witherspoon's thought even in the political realm was shaped more by the Reformed tradition than by Enlightenment thought.⁴⁷ David Walker Woods's biography (1906) is much more substantial, but his best material is appropriated by Collins two decades later.⁴⁸ Martha Lou Lemmon Stohlman's admiring biography *John Witherspoon: Parson, Politician, Patriot* (1976) was prepared for the American bicentennial and focuses, understandably, on Witherspoon's American career.⁴⁹ The recent work 'An Animated Son of Liberty': *A Life of John Witherspoon* (2012) by Church of Scotland Minister J. Walter McGinty is wide in its scope but too idiosyncratic to be used reliably.⁵⁰ Much more useful is *John Witherspoon Comes to America* (1953) by L. H. Butterfield.⁵¹ The book consists almost entirely of correspondence to and from Witherspoon in 1766–1768 as he made the transition from Scotland to America. As the title suggests, most of the letters were not published as a part of the 1802 edition of Witherspoon's *Works*.

8 Introduction

Most of the recent scholarly literature looks at Witherspoon in his American context, focusing either on Witherspoon the American patriot and Founding Father or Witherspoon the Princeton educator and bridge to the Scottish Enlightenment. Highlighting the presence of resistance theory in the Reformed tradition, the Calvinist accent on human sinfulness that James Madison inherited from his college president while at Princeton, and the similarities between the Presbyterian constitution of 1787 and the federal Constitution of the same year, Jeffry Morrison argues convincingly that Witherspoon is one of the ‘forgotten founders’ and the best representative among them of joining together religion and politics.⁵² Several recent books have linked Witherspoon to the development of religious liberty in America.⁵³ Barry Shain sees in Witherspoon an example of an educated, highly respected president and founder who explicitly rejected the Enlightenment faith in human goodness and helped to root American political sensibilities in the soil of original sin.⁵⁴

Several dissertations explore Witherspoon’s political thought and influence in revolutionary America. Gary Steward’s dissertation on clerical support for the Revolution argues against the received scholarship of Noll and Marsden (see next) that Witherspoon ‘rejected secular ideas of human ability, human autonomy, and human virtue in general and called for American independence in accordance with his own tradition and with his long-standing positions.’⁵⁵ Ronald Crawford emphasizes Witherspoon as a Paisley emigrant who brought to America a Scottish philosophy of liberty.⁵⁶ The older dissertations by Marvin Bergman and David Bartley cover many of the same themes.⁵⁷

Less common are dissertations concerned with Witherspoon the rhetorician. Miles Bradbury’s dissertation ‘Adventure in Persuasion: John Witherspoon, Samuel Stanhope Smith, and Ashbel Green’ presents the successive presidents of Princeton as all attempting, in different ways, to wed together piety and reason.⁵⁸ Bradbury’s thesis, while certainly true as a general point, does not adequately explore the antecedents to Witherspoon’s thought in the Reformed tradition. Thomas Miller’s introduction to *The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon* (1990) is an excellent short synopsis of Witherspoon’s career, focusing primarily on his rhetoric and political influence.⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, Witherspoon is a common character in the telling of American Presbyterian history. The standard textbook, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (1996) by James Smylie has been surpassed by two recent volumes: *Seeking a Better Country* (2007) by D. G. Hart and John R. Meuther, and *Presbyterians and American Culture* (2013) by Bradley J. Longstreet.⁶⁰ In both volumes Witherspoon is considered something of a religious-civic-educational amalgamation, especially so by Longstreet, who emphasizes Witherspoon’s transmission of Hutcheson’s moral sense and Reid’s Common Sense Realism.⁶¹ Concerning Witherspoon and Princeton in particular, *Princeton 1756–1896* (1946) by Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker is an older work but still contains a useful section on Witherspoon, as do the newer histories on Princeton Seminary by David B. Calhoun and James H. Moorhead.⁶²

No one has written more deeply (and often critically) about Witherspoon's influence on the theological development at Princeton, and in American Christianity more broadly, than Mark Noll. In *The Search for Christian America* (1989), Noll's chapter on the American Revolution faults Witherspoon for being a 'spokesman for the Enlightenment' and forming his 'deficient' political philosophy on a 'frankly naturalistic basis'.⁶³ Writing in the chapter as an evangelical Christian to other evangelicals, Noll cautions modern-day Christians from ever using Witherspoon—whose moral philosophy he considered bereft of the Bible and utterly humanistic in approach—as a model for Christian political thought. This early essay anticipates the themes found in Noll's subsequent work. He sees Witherspoon as trading in a robust Reformed epistemology for Scottish Common Sense Realism and an increasingly optimistic anthropology which, according to Noll, compares unfavorably to the more theocentric and Augustinian approach found in Jonathan Edwards. This negative assessment comes through most forcefully in *Princeton and the Republic, 1768–1822* (1989) where Noll maintains that Witherspoon—who, he grants, never formally deviated from traditional Presbyterian dogma—experienced 'a sea change' in coming to America, eventually bringing together under his imposing personality a series of theological and philosophical commitments which, in the end, did not cohere and could not hold.⁶⁴

The connection between Witherspoon and Reid's Common Sense Realism is not a new one. According to Ashbel Green, Witherspoon not only drove the Berkeleyan idealists out of Princeton, but he also espoused the same principles as Thomas Reid and James Beattie before they had published their writings on Common Sense.⁶⁵ Samuel Miller mentions Green's anecdote (about Witherspoon's Common Sense ideas predating Reid) in a footnote in his *Retrospect on the Eighteenth Century* (1803),⁶⁶ which was in turn relayed by Crichton (1829).⁶⁷ The Witherspoon-Reid connection was then further expounded in McCosh's *Scottish Philosophy* (1875)⁶⁸ and later expanded by Woodbridge Riley, whose analysis in *American Thought* (1915)⁶⁹ informed Collins's two-volume biography (1925).⁷⁰ Witherspoon continues to receive attention as an American philosopher.⁷¹

For most of the nineteenth century Witherspoon's ties to Common Sense were viewed positively, but once the Reidian tradition started losing its luster toward the end of the century, Witherspoon's intellectual contribution became more suspect. In 1955, Sydney Ahlstrom set the tone for the next two generations when he argued in his seminal article 'The Scottish Philosophy and American Theology' that Witherspoon introduced into American Christianity (and into Old Princeton in particular) a Baconian and Common Sense strain of thinking which, in time, undercut authentic Calvinism, hurtled American theology toward rationalism, and produced such a lifeless and static faith that dogmatic departures to liberal romanticism, evolutionary idealism, and social gospel activism were inevitable.⁷² This basic argument has been followed by a host of historians over the last 60 years, including

George Marsden,⁷³ Henry May,⁷⁴ Andrew Hook,⁷⁵ Theodore Dwight Bozeman,⁷⁶ Fred Hood,⁷⁷ and E. Brooks Holifield.⁷⁸ Many newer works continue to argue (or simply assume) that Witherspoon's chief contribution in America was establishing a beachhead for an enlightened moral sense philosophy that could undergird republican political convictions.⁷⁹

Several dissertations explore Witherspoon's relationship to and transmission of the philosophy of Common Sense. Scott Segrest argues that Witherspoon's epistemology was 'inductive, realist, pragmatic, and balanced, and anchored in the moral sense.'⁸⁰ He considers Witherspoon's fully developed conscience-based theory of ethics and politics to be his great contribution to American thought.⁸¹ More negatively, John Nelson Oliver in his 1935 Yale thesis paints a picture of Witherspoon so dedicated to Reidian epistemology that he deviated from Calvinist orthodoxy, could not withstand the spirit of the age, and veered closer to rationalism than any of his predecessors at Princeton.⁸² The older dissertations by George Rich and Roger Fechner cover similar territory, working methodologically (and without a great deal of interaction with primary sources from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) through Witherspoon's writings in an attempt to elucidate the philosophical and theological underpinnings for his political thought.⁸³

More recently, scholars have begun to question the grip of Common Sense Realism on Witherspoon and his theological descendants. Paul Kjosvold has been working backward from Princeton Seminary into the history of the College of New Jersey, arguing that the theologians at Old Princeton, and their intellectual forefathers, were more intellectually sophisticated than to jettison their Calvinist convictions and evangelical piety for new Scottish philosophy.⁸⁴ Gordon Graham does not present any definitive conclusions but is right to suggest that Ahlstrom's thesis deserves more careful scrutiny.⁸⁵ Similarly, Daniel Robinson concludes that there is only one Witherspoon (but a Witherspoon who is pulled in different directions in different contexts).⁸⁶

Two recent works deserve special mention. The first is Stephen Wolfe's chapter 'Reformed Natural Law Theory and the American Founding: A Critique of Recent Scholarship' in which he argues that Witherspoon did not have to build upon Hutcheson and Reid for his ideas about reason, the right use of philosophy, and natural law; Witherspoon had all of these at his disposal from Calvin, Turretin, and the broader Reformed tradition.⁸⁷ What Wolfe does in a few pages, I intend to develop more thoroughly in this dissertation. The second, Gideon Mailer's book *John Witherspoon's American Revolution* (2017), is a superbly researched work and may be the most important piece of intellectual history on Witherspoon in decades.⁸⁸ While Mailer recognizes 'theological ambiguity' and 'remaining tensions in Witherspoon's moral and political philosophy', he questions 'Witherspoon's role as a simple conduit for enlightened sensibility in America'.⁸⁹ As impressive as Mailer's project is (and complementary to my own), it focuses largely on Witherspoon's American career and suffers at times

from conceptual imprecision and confusion over the technical aspects of Reformed theology.⁹⁰

When it comes to the Scottish half of his career, there are many good resources for understanding the general cultural, ecclesiastical, and intellectual context, but with the exception of Witherspoon's relationship to the Scottish Enlightenment, there are few works which connect Witherspoon to the wider constellation of ideas, figures, and movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. We are overdue a reevaluation of Witherspoon's relationship to the Enlightenment, especially in light of the renewed appreciation many now have for the role of religion in the Enlightenment itself. Peter Gay's understanding of the Enlightenment as 'the rise of modern paganism' and the heroic enemy of religion has not gone unchallenged.⁹¹ The collection of essays in *The Enlightenment in National Context* (edited by Porter and Teich) argues for a more diverse intellectual movement which no longer gave primacy to French expressions of the Enlightenment.⁹² While readily admitting that the French-dominated model should be discarded, Jonathan Israel, in his massive trilogy, disagrees with those who stress plurality and diversity in the Enlightenment, especially those who adopt an essentially national approach to the topic (e.g. an American Enlightenment, British Enlightenment, French Enlightenment). Instead, Israel has argued for two Enlightenments, a Moderate mainstream Enlightenment which often reinforced conservative traditions and institutions but which revised traditional theology—the Enlightenment of Locke, Leibnitz, and the Scottish Moderates—and a Radical Enlightenment which found clearest expression in Baruch Spinoza and led to the emergence of liberal modernity and the rejection of religious authority.⁹³ Caroline Winterer, likely with Israel in her sights, insists that words like 'radical', 'conservative', 'moderate', 'democratic', and 'revolutionary' are too often used by scholars in anachronistic ways and that we should understand what Enlightenment meant to those in the middle of the eighteenth century; namely, that their ideas were a break from the dark past and filled with light for the up-to-date present.⁹⁴

Although there is still considerable debate on the 'Which Enlightenment?' question—Dale Van Kley, for example, discounts the 'revenge of the metanarratives' from Israel and others and insists on seven Enlightenments—there is a growing consensus that the relationship between religion and the Enlightenment needs to be reexamined.⁹⁵ Several recent books highlight Christian engagement with the Enlightenment. David Sorkin analyzes six religious figures from different cities in Europe and argues that they often found a middle way between traditional religion and the intellectual challenges to faith which arose during the Enlightenment.⁹⁶ *Religion and Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century England* (1998) by B. W. Young is an impressive study of the century's ecclesiastical and philosophical debates, arguing that the most pervasive intellectual controversies took place within clerical culture as opposed to between clergy and freethinkers.⁹⁷ Ruth Savage's volume, *Philosophy and Religion in Enlightenment Britain* (2012), contains a

number of useful chapters for understanding Witherspoon's context, in particular Isabel Rivers's chapter on Henry Scougal and Aaron Garrett's essay on moral reasoning.⁹⁸ More recently, Simon Grote has produced an outstanding review of the historiographical literature dealing with religion and the Enlightenment, making a strong case for recognizing the contributions theologians made to the Enlightenment and understanding the ecclesiastical context in which many of the Enlightenment discussions took place.⁹⁹ Not surprisingly, Israel's new book on the American Revolution sees the rebellions in North America as overturning established religious norms.¹⁰⁰ By contrast, Kloppenberg 'explores underappreciated aspects of North Atlantic democracy, its religious origins and its ethical dimensions'.¹⁰¹

Outside of Mark Noll's scholarship on Princeton and American Christianity, the most significant scholarship on Witherspoon's thought has come from those working on the intellectual and sociological history of the Scottish Enlightenment.¹⁰² Chief among these scholars has been Richard Sher, whose two volumes *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1985) and *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (1990) edited by Sher and Jeffrey R. Smitten, provide a careful multidimensional analysis of the Scottish Enlightenment in general and the Moderate Party in particular.¹⁰³ Ned Landsman's chapter in the latter volume is especially helpful in articulating 'das Witherspoon problem', that is, how the man who made a name for himself in Scotland satirizing his Moderate opponents could become famous in America for incorporating the rhetoric, literature, and moral philosophy from these same Moderates.¹⁰⁴ Douglas Sloan answers the question by arguing that Witherspoon was an inconsistent, exceedingly eclectic thinker who developed new priorities as a college president and baptized Enlightenment ideas in evangelical language.¹⁰⁵

Not all scholars agree with the typical assessment of Witherspoon and the Scottish Enlightenment. Thomas Ahnert offers a revisionist account of the Scottish Enlightenment, arguing that it was the orthodox party who gave a large role to reason (for apologetic purposes) while the enlightened clergy were less interested in natural theology.¹⁰⁶ Daniel Walker Howe argues in an important essay that modern assessments of Witherspoon have focused too narrowly on his relationship to Common Sense Realism and paid too little attention to his theological roots in the Calvinism of Benedict Pictet.¹⁰⁷ Howe raises issues with many elements of the received assessment in Witherspoon scholarship. He criticizes Morrison's monograph for ignoring Witherspoon's Scottish career and relying on derivative and dated scholarship.¹⁰⁸ He chides Garry Wills (and he may also have had Jack Scott in mind) for jumping to the conclusion that the American Witherspoon shared Hutcheson's opinions just because he borrowed his sequence of topics (which was itself borrowed from Samuel Pufendorf).¹⁰⁹ Howe also maintains that Witherspoon did not modify the Calvinist doctrine of human depravity and that his apparent sea change is best understood in light of the different ecclesiastical situations in Scotland and America.¹¹⁰ Many of the points Howe quickly raises in his brief chapter I intend to develop and substantiate in this dissertation.