

## AN EDWARDSEAN EVOLUTION: THE RISE AND DECLINE OF MORAL GOVERNMENTAL THEORY IN THE SOUTHERN BAPTIST CONVENTION

OBBIE TYLER TODD\*

**Abstract:** *Two ideas shaped early Southern Baptist theology more than any others: (1) God the Moral Governor works all things for his glory, and (2) in doing so, he also works for the highest good of his moral universe. While the ideas themselves did not change, God's moral government was an evolving concept. It is the aim of this article to demonstrate that moral governmental theory underwent a significant transition in the incipient years of the Southern Baptist Convention, from a robust doctrine of atonement drawn from the Edwardsean tradition to a doctrine of providence that still emphasized the glorious display of God's attributes and the Creator's benevolence toward his creatures. In these early years, the question was not necessarily which "theory" of atonement Southern Baptists affirmed, but which kinds of justice they upheld in the atonement underneath a broad moral governmental frame. Although the concept of moral government has since waned in Baptist life, its two signature principles, glory and goodness, left an indelible mark upon the Southern Baptist Convention.*

**Key words:** *moral government, atonement, providence, penal substitution, Southern Baptist, New Divinity, glory, goodness*

In the American intellectual marketplace, religions and denominations have long exchanged and been shaped by ideas. In the case of the Southern Baptist Convention, it was shaped most significantly by two: (1) God, the Moral Governor, works all things for his glory, and (2) in doing so, he also works for the highest good of his moral universe. More than perhaps any others, these symbiotic ideas guided the thinking of the earliest Southern Baptist theologians like two rails on a track. Together, they could be bent and curved in a number of ways, but one idea always remained in comfortable proximity to the other. When President William B. Johnson (1782–1862) addressed the inaugural Southern Baptist Convention in 1845 in Augusta, Georgia, his justification for their departure from the Triennial Convention was “the glory of our God.” Johnson insisted that the reason for separation was “not disunion with any of his people; not the upholding of any form of human policy, or civil right; but God’s glory, and Messiah’s increasing reign; in the promotion of which, we find no necessity for relinquishing any of our civil rights.” Defending the right of missionaries to own slaves, Southern Baptists believed their mission to the world was “for the profit of these poor, perishing and precious souls.”<sup>1</sup>

---

\* Obbie Tyler Todd is Pastor at the Church at Haynes Creek, 1242 Mt. Zion Road, Oxford, GA 30054. He is a doctoral candidate in theology at New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, 3939 Gentilly Blvd., New Orleans, LA 70126. He may be contacted at [obbiett@gmail.com](mailto:obbiett@gmail.com).

<sup>1</sup> Hortense C. Woodson, *Giant in the Land: The Life of William B. Johnson* (Springfield, MO: Particular Baptist Press, 2005), 207.

The twin pillars of glory and goodness also survived the carnage of war. In his famous debate with Francis Wayland on the eve of the Civil War, Richard Fuller defended the practice of slavery by contending that every government must “establish those regulations which shall best promote the good of the whole population.”<sup>2</sup> However, just a month after the war, the defeated Fuller preached peace: “No Government can be either permanent or beneficial, while the people and those in authority over them are living in rebellion against the Moral Governor of the universe.”<sup>3</sup> Moral government proved to be a surprisingly durable and elastic doctrine in the nineteenth-century Baptist South.<sup>4</sup>

For good or for evil, for salvation or for slavery, the glory of God and the prosperity of his people were two ideas that remained axiomatic in early Southern Baptist theology. However, while the ideas themselves did not change, God’s moral government was an evolving concept. It is the aim of this article to demonstrate that moral governmental theory underwent a significant transition in the incipient years of the Southern Baptist Convention, from a robust doctrine of atonement drawn from the Edwardsean tradition to a doctrine of providence that still emphasized the display of God’s attributes and the Creator’s benevolence toward his creatures. During this evolution, moral government in fact took several forms. For example, the first four presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention stressed the idea of moral government in their sermons and writings, but each in their own way. Therefore, it is not sufficient to merely speak of moral government as a soteriological category, as has often been the case. Ultimately, by the close of the nineteenth century, moral governmental theory was largely a thing of the past in Baptist life due in part to the confessionalist James P. Boyce. Nevertheless, its two signature principles—glory and goodness—have left an indelible mark upon Southern Baptist theology up to the present day.

## I. THE MORAL GOVERNMENTAL ATONEMENT OF WILLIAM B. JOHNSON

In 2017, at its annual meeting in Phoenix, the Southern Baptist Convention adopted a resolution affirming Christ’s penal substitutionary atonement. In so doing, the Convention not only opposed a resurgent evangelical anti-trinitarianism; it also unwittingly distanced itself from its inaugural president, William B. Johnson,

---

<sup>2</sup> Richard Fuller, *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1860), 148.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Fuller, *A City or House Divided Against Itself* (Baltimore: J. F. Weishampel Jr., Bookseller & Stationer, 1865), 11.

<sup>4</sup> According to Mark Noll, “In surprisingly large measure ... the religion with which theologians emerged from the war was essentially the same as that with which they entered the war. Despite the conflict’s horrific character and the way it touched personally many of America’s greatest religious thinkers, the conflict seems to have pushed theologians down the roads on which they were already traveling rather than compelling them to go in new, creative directions” (*The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* [Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006], 16).

who denied penal substitution, at least in the distributive sense.<sup>5</sup> In Johnson's moral governmental view, Christ was not a substitute for people but for punishments; God's forgiveness was not a payment but a pardon. The Son of God did not endure the actual penalty under the law but offered a public exhibition of suffering equivalent to what sinners would endure in hell whereby God manifested his hatred for sin and vindicated "the rights of his moral government, which has been so awfully trampled on."<sup>6</sup> For Johnson, and contrary to the penal substitutionary model, Christ's atonement was not a saving atonement in itself. In an 1822 sermon entitled "Love Characteristic of the Deity," Johnson boldly declared,

In itself considered, the atonement of Christ does not deliver any soul from condemnation. It is the interest which the soul has in the benefits of the atonement that effects this deliverance; an interest that depends not upon the principle of atonement, but upon that by which it has been provided, and in which it originates, viz.: Love, or infinite benevolence, under the influence of which, this interest will be imparted according to the righteous and sovereign will of God.<sup>7</sup>

In other words, for Johnson, the atonement is a "medium" of salvation by which God can "maintain the dignity and preserve the rights of his moral government."<sup>8</sup> In turn, the efficient cause of salvation is not the work of Christ, but the faith of the believer. Nothing is transferred or exchanged with the sinner (i.e. penalties, merits) because the atonement carries no intrinsic value of its own in any measurable sense. The primary purpose of Christ's death is to honor the Moral Governor with the moral *quality* of Christ's suffering, not its moral *quantity*.<sup>9</sup> In order to counteract the evil effects of sin, the atonement is displayed, not distributed; communicated, not commuted. Johnson believed that this safeguarded the sovereignty of God and prevented any sinner from making demands upon the Moral Governor at judgment. In a form of cosmic public relations, God must never allow his law to appear impotent or despicable before his moral universe. "God constantly seeks his own glory," Johnson reasoned, "that in doing so, he seeks the chief good; and in seeking the chief good, displays his love, or the benevolence of his nature in the highest degree."<sup>10</sup> The twin axioms of glory and goodness guided every step of the classical moral governmental view.

<sup>5</sup> For a thorough treatment of distributive, commutative, and general justice inside the New Divinity view of the atonement, see Daniel W. Cooley and Douglas A. Sweeney, "The Edwardseans and the Atonement," in *A New Divinity: Transatlantic Reformed Evangelical Debates during the Long Eighteenth Century* (ed. Mark Jones and Michael A. G. Haykin; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2018), 121–22. According to Cooley and Sweeney, the Edwardsean version of the atonement should be labeled a "non-distributive form of penal substitution" (122).

<sup>6</sup> William B. Johnson, "Love Characteristic of the Deity," in *Southern Baptist Sermons on Sovereignty and Responsibility*, ed. Thomas J. Nettles (Harrisonburg: Gano, 2003), 58.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 60–61.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 58.

<sup>9</sup> This is not to say that pecuniary ideas had no place at all in Johnson's scheme. For instance, the sufferings of Christ were infinitely valuable in terms of their display of the honor of God's law and the Moral Governor himself.

<sup>10</sup> Johnson, "Love Characteristic of the Deity," 66.

In his sermon, according to Michael A. G. Haykin, “Johnson spoke of the death of Christ in unmistakable New Divinity terms.”<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Edwards’s theological successors, known pejoratively as “the New Divinity” by Old Light Congregationalists, were the real framers of the moral governmental view of the atonement. In fact, according to several scholars, Jonathan Edwards Jr. was its primary architect.<sup>12</sup> Although the older Edwards never placed penal substitution and moral government in separate theological corners, he laid the groundwork for the New Divinity system such that his disciples almost completely rejected the commercial nature of the atonement.<sup>13</sup> In their view, the atonement was not a penal substitution, but as Oliver Crisp has termed it, a “penal example” demonstrating the evil of sin and the goodness of the Moral Governor.<sup>14</sup> Johnson fully adopted this model, symbolizing the influence of the Edwardsean tradition upon the beginnings of the Southern Baptist Convention. Remarkably, two streams of theology with radically different views on slavery shared similar views of the atonement.<sup>15</sup>

Johnson received his ideas from a true New Divinity man. His mentor in Columbia, South Carolina, Jonathan Maxcy, was the consummate embodiment of the marriage between Hopkinsian and Baptist theology. Maxcy praised the “penetrating sagacity of an Edwards, or Hopkins,” making little distinction between the two.<sup>16</sup> Maxcy was even recognized by New Divinity theologians as someone who shared their moral governmental scheme. In his anthology of Edwardsean works on the atonement, Edwards Amasa Park included the writings of Maxcy alongside Edwardseans like John Smalley, Nathanael Emmons, Edward Dorr Griffin, and others.<sup>17</sup>

Maxcy was indeed one of the first Americans to Baptize the Edwardsean view of the atonement. Like Jonathan Edwards Jr., whom he followed as president at Union College in New York, Maxcy rejected both distributive justice (i.e. the indi-

<sup>11</sup> Michael A. G. Haykin, “Great Admirers of the Transatlantic Divinity: Some Chapters in the Story of Baptist Edwardseanism,” in *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology* (ed. Oliver D. Crisp and Douglas A. Sweeney; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 204.

<sup>12</sup> Dorus Paul Rudisill, *The Doctrine of the Atonement in Jonathan Edwards and his Successors* (New York: Poseidon, 1971), 85; Robert L. Ferm, *Jonathan Edwards the Younger, 1745–1801: A Colonial Pastor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 115; Cooley and Sweeney, “Edwardseans and the Atonement,” 118.

<sup>13</sup> According to Oliver D. Crisp, “The evidence suggests that the seeds of the New England moral governmental view of the atonement were sown by Edwards himself. But he did not have the opportunity, or perhaps the inclination, to develop this in his own work” (“The Moral Government of God: Jonathan Edwards and Joseph Bellamy on the Atonement,” in *After Jonathan Edwards: The Courses of the New England Theology* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2012], 78).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>15</sup> For an examination of New Divinity abolitionism, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, “All Things Were New and Astonishing: Edwardsean Piety, the New Divinity, and Race,” in *Jonathan Edwards at Home and Abroad: Historical Memories, Cultural Moments, Global Horizons* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 121–36.

<sup>16</sup> Jonathan Maxcy, “A Funeral Sermon Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. James Manning, D.D.” in *The Literary Remains of Rev. Jonathan Maxcy, D.D.* (ed. Romeo Elton; New Haven, CT, 1844), 151.

<sup>17</sup> Jonathan Maxcy, “A Discourse Designed to Explain the Doctrine of the Atonement,” in *The Atonement: Discourses and Treatises by Edwards, Smalley, Maxcy, Emmons, Griffin, Burge, and Weeks* (ed. Edwards A. Park; Boston: Congregational Board of Publication, 1859), 85–110.

vidual imputation of righteousness) and commutative justice (i.e. the exchange of personal merit). Instead, he affirmed only public justice, or “what is fit or right, as to the character of God, and the good of the universe.”<sup>18</sup> Glory and goodness were paramount in the Maxcean atonement. As the first president of South Carolina College (later the University of South Carolina), Maxcy eventually passed on his de-commercialized view of the atonement to Johnson, who insisted that Christ’s death “is not the payment of the sinner’s debt on the principles of pecuniary or commercial justice, but a satisfaction to moral justice, to open the way for the consistent exercise of mercy.”<sup>19</sup> Over the next several decades, beginning with the Hopkinsian theology of William B. Johnson and concluding with the Hodgean theology of James P. Boyce, Southern Baptists would undergo a noticeable commercialization of the atonement during which moral government was infused with distributive and commutative justice and gradually divested of any kind of concrete soteriological framework. However, this Edwardsean evolution did not occur overnight.

## II. A COMMERCIALIZATION OF THE MORAL GOVERNMENTAL ATONEMENT

The Baptist resistance to commercial tropes in the atonement was part of a trans-Atlantic movement due to the dominance of moral governmental thought originating with Edwards and the New Divinity. Heavily influenced by the Edwardseans, English Particular Baptist Andrew Fuller believed it was “improper to represent the great work of redemption as a kind of commercial transaction betwixt a creditor and his debtor.”<sup>20</sup> As far west as Kentucky and Tennessee, Landmarkist James M. Pendleton warned, “Analogies, like figures of speech, must not be pressed too far. Sin can be regarded as a *debt* in a metaphorical sense only.”<sup>21</sup> Although the vast majority of early Southern Baptists did not fully adopt the New Divinity scheme like William B. Johnson, they greatly preferred governmental over monetary language to describe Christ’s work. Theirs was an *un*-commercialized (as opposed to a de-commercialized) atonement, downplaying, but not fully rejecting, ideas like the value, worth, or exchange of Christ’s work. The twin Southern Baptist pillars of glory and goodness remained firm, but distributive and commutative justice were introduced in varying degrees. Unlike Johnson and other moral governmentalists like Thomas Meredith and John B. White in North Carolina, who dismissed the traditional Calvinistic doctrine of imputation, most Southern Baptists affirmed the idea of Christ’s righteousness being personally accounted to an indi-

---

<sup>18</sup> Jonathan Maxcy, “A Discourse Designed to Explain the Doctrine of Atonement in Two Parts,” in *The Literary Remains of Rev. Jonathan Maxcy, D.D.* (ed. Romeo Elton; New Haven, CT, 1844), 75.

<sup>19</sup> Johnson, “Love Characteristic of the Deity,” 60.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew Fuller, “The Deity of Christ: The Deity of Christ Essential to Atonement,” in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller* (Harrisonburg: Sprinkle, 1988), 3:693.

<sup>21</sup> James Madison Pendleton, *The Atonement of Christ* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1885), 88–89. This work was published when Pendleton was a pastor in Pennsylvania, but Pendleton’s views do not suggest a significant change over time. Pendleton was heavily influenced by Andrew Fuller.

vidual believer.<sup>22</sup> For instance, professor James S. Mims, a follower of the New Divinity, was nearly dismissed from Furman Academy due to his rejection of imputation. Although he was able to keep his job, and despite Johnson's defense of Mims, the episode left many with a jaundiced view of the New Divinity.<sup>23</sup> Nevertheless, Johnson wrote to Mims in 1848 that he believed most Baptists in South Carolina were "moderate Calvinists," almost certainly a reference to the dominance of the Edwardsean tradition.<sup>24</sup>

Moral government was a malleable concept, and just as the New Divinity had modified Jonathan Edwards's theology, Southern Baptists eventually refashioned New Divinity thought. Even before 1845, largely due to the impact of Andrew Fuller, Southern Baptists were already negotiating the bounds of a moral governmental atonement. In Georgia, Jesse Mercer opposed a strict equivalence between the atonement and a purchase, but not without semi-commercial boundaries:

I do not mean to contend for the atonement, as a commercial transaction: but I mean to oppose the idea of a vague atonement. I must contend with Fuller that though we cannot view the great work of redemption as a commercial transaction betwixt a debtor and his creditor: yet the satisfaction of justice, in all cases, requires to be *equal* to what the nature of the offense is in reality – and to answer the *same end* as if the guilty party had actually suffered. And for Christ, as our substitute, to have suffered *less* for us than we should if the law had taken its course, would be no atonement at all, and leave us in our sins.<sup>25</sup>

Mercer's moral governmental atonement was not commutative in a *quid pro quo* sense, but notions of "more" or "less" suffering were not off limits. In the early and mid-nineteenth century, Southern Baptists found ways to stretch those limits in a number of ways.

As time passed, moral governmental theory in the SBC lost its distinctive Hopkinsian flavor. The second president of the Southern Baptist Convention, R. B. C. Howell, was not a follower of the New Divinity nor was he influenced by Fuller to the degree of Mercer. Therefore, unlike Johnson, Howell affirmed the doctrine of imputation, both of Adam's sin to his posterity and of Christ's righteousness to believers.<sup>26</sup> He argued that Christ was a "substitute for man to divine justice."<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the Edwardseans left their mark upon his theology. For example, Howell believed that Timothy Dwight's systematic theology text was one of the

<sup>22</sup> Greg Wills, "The *SBJT* Forum: The Overlooked Shapers of Evangelicalism," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 3.1 (Spring 1999): 88.

<sup>23</sup> Gregory A. Wills, *The First Baptist Church of Columbia, South Carolina: 1809 to 2002* (Nashville: Fields, 2003), 48–50.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Wills, "SBJT Forum," 87.

<sup>25</sup> Jesse Mercer, in *Memoirs of Elder Jesse Mercer* (ed. Charles Dutton Mallary; New York: John Gray, 1844), 290–91.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Boyte C. Howell, *The Evils of Infant Baptism* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1854), 95.

<sup>27</sup> Robert Boyte C. Howell, *The Covenants* (Charleston, SC: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1855), 55.

best ever written.<sup>28</sup> As a result, Howell promoted an un-commercialized, moral governmental atonement, but with the addition of distributive and commutative themes that emphasized Christ's penal substitutionary work. Not surprisingly, at the core of Howell's doctrine of atonement were the signature tenets of glory and goodness. In outlining the covenant of redemption, Howell explained,

As the righteous governor of the universe, he might have proceeded to uphold the authority of his law, by executing its penalty upon the disobedient, and thus to give an awful example of vengeance to the intelligent inhabitants of the various provinces of his empire. His *goodness* did not require that he should rescue his rebellious subjects from the misery which they had brought upon themselves, because he had already given of this an ample display in their creation and endowments, and it was still exhibited in the happiness diffused through all the regions of innocence. His *glory* does not depend upon the manifestation of any particular attribute, but of them all, on proper occasions, and in full harmony.<sup>29</sup>

Although Howell maintained a penal substitution, the most important aspect of his doctrine of atonement was still the display of Christ's work, not its distribution. Christ's death was an "awful example" to God's moral universe. Like all moral governmentals, Howell was fixed upon the idea that Christ's death had an audience. God's supreme glory and man's highest good are "true throughout the whole moral universe of God" because both are inescapably public realities tethered by the love of God.<sup>30</sup> Howell retained the essence of a moral governmental atonement without dispensing with distributive or commutative justice. His covenant theology even allowed him to use the contractual language of "surety" and "agreement" without employing overtly commercial themes, a noticeable difference from Johnson and others.<sup>31</sup>

The third president of the Southern Baptist Convention, Richard Fuller, exhibited the same kind of un-commercialized, moral governmental atonement. In fact, moral government was one of the most prominent doctrines in his preaching. However, like Howell, Fuller was not willing to reject distributive and commutative justice. He likewise employed words like "surety" to depict the contractual nature of God's covenant with the church. Fuller called his listeners to the "imputed righteousness" of Christ that was "imparted" to sinners.<sup>32</sup> But he clearly overshadowed commercial themes in favor of governmental language.<sup>33</sup> Words like "price" and "paid" and "debt" are almost completely absent in his sermons, unless used in a parabolic or metaphorical sense. When Fuller described penal substitution, he primarily did so in a moral governmental frame, praising the "innocent and august substitute" who became "the most memorable assertion of the divine holiness and

---

<sup>28</sup> Robert Boyte C. Howell, *The Terms of Communion at the Lord's Table* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1846), 192. Timothy Dwight was Jonathan Edwards's grandson.

<sup>29</sup> Howell, *Covenants*, 36.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>32</sup> Richard Fuller, *The Sermons of Richard Fuller* (New York: Sheldon & Co., 1860), 148, 324.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

justice which had ever been presented to the contemplation of the moral universe.”<sup>34</sup> For Fuller, the most important feature of Christ’s atonement was that it was publicized, not paid. He conceived of justice in public terms: “If the divine mercy should raise guilty creatures to such glory at the expense of divine and righteousness, the whole economy of Justice would be demolished, and the moral governor of the universe would be only a weak, imbecile being, who suffers his laws to be dishonored, and rebellious creatures to triumph over him.”<sup>35</sup>

Fuller represents the trajectory of moral governmental theory in the Southern Baptist Convention because the concept of moral government is ubiquitous in his sermons yet it is used just as much as a doctrine of providence as it is a doctrine of atonement. Fuller did not view moral government in a strictly soteriological light. “In natural religion,” he stressed, “we can know God only as a creator and moral governor.”<sup>36</sup> As an all-encompassing reality, God’s moral government determined every aspect of the Christian life. Thus, it imbues nearly all of Fuller’s published works. While his view of the atonement was not a robust, well-defined scheme like that of Maxcy and Johnson, it was nonetheless shaped by the idea of God’s moral government. Despite its distributive and commutative differences with the New Divinity, the basic DNA was the same: glory and goodness. Fuller insisted, “the moral universe was intended as an exquisite machinery, a vehicle through which might forever circulate a love and happiness flowing directly from God himself.”<sup>37</sup> With its twin pillars still intact, the moral governmental atonement became increasingly commercialized and blended with penal substitutionary concepts until the idea of moral government was no longer synonymous with the atonement itself. Instead it became coextensive with the divine attributes. Southern Baptists coopted the central soteriological principles of the Edwardsean tradition in order to turn moral government into a glory-seeking, good-promoting doctrine of God.

### III. MORAL GOVERNMENT AS DIVINE PROVIDENCE

In many ways, the New Divinity had always regarded God’s moral government as something which transcended the atonement. It antedated even Edwards himself. The idea was drawn from the “moral discourse of the Enlightenment.”<sup>38</sup> As Mark Noll has demonstrated, the Edwardsean emphasis upon moral government, though initially championed by Edwards, was a response to the Real Whig discourse of American public life. It “began with Bellamy, was developed further by Dwight, and came to prevail everywhere among New Englanders in the generation of Beecher and Taylor.”<sup>39</sup> With the rise of Universalism which utilized tradi-

---

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 102–3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>38</sup> Mark Valeri, *Law and Providence in Joseph Bellamy's New England: The Origins of the New Divinity in Revolutionary America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 42.

<sup>39</sup> Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 290–91.



tional Calvinistic, commercial themes of payment, and with the ascendancy of republican ideas of government during the Revolutionary age, the New Divinity wielded moral government as a contextual way of enshrining the sovereignty of God during an era in which it was attacked from seemingly all sides. Therefore, God's moral government was always about God himself and his good and righteous providence over the earth. The doctrine of atonement was simply the primary way in which the New Divinity promoted their theocentric scheme.

As the children of the American Revolution who celebrated their Jeffersonian government, Southern Baptists gladly welcomed a doctrine that seemed to clothe the principles of Scripture in the best ideals of their fledgling nation. In the early republic, moral government also served as a suitable alternative to the traditional Puritanical idea of a national covenant. Rather than God favoring America on the basis of covenant theology, Southern Baptists believed that covenants were made with individual believers and that moral law is applied impartially to all nations.<sup>40</sup> As a result, Baptist patriotism was more prone to invoke the standards of divine government than the privileges of divine election. Southern Baptists were equally intent upon defending the sovereignty of God, but in the South, where Universalism was less potent and Edwardseanism less pervasive, their motivation for de-commercializing the atonement and their ability to develop the kind of rigorous theological system as the New Divinity were lessened. As a result, similar to the theology of Jonathan Edwards, moral government and penal substitution became increasingly compatible concepts until the commerciality of the atonement no longer competed with governmental language and the idea of moral government belonged to theology proper and not the doctrine of atonement.

Before James P. Boyce delivered the severest critique of moral governmental theory by a Southern Baptist, another confessionalist, Patrick Hues Mell, held firmly to a traditional penal substitutionary view of the atonement which emphasized the commerce of Christ's work. As a sharp critic of "the Hopkinsians," the fourth president of the Southern Baptist Convention exhibited few signs of moral governmental influence upon his doctrine of atonement, insisting that Christ "paid the full price for the redemption of His people."<sup>41</sup> Mell's view was unashamedly commercial in nature, upholding distributive and commercial justice. However, unlike Boyce, Mell did not dispense completely with the idea of God's moral government. Rather, it became the crux of his doctrine of creation and divine providence. Defending the doctrine of predestination, Mell wrote, "1. God, as the governor of the world, administers all things according to his sovereign pleasure."<sup>42</sup> In his mind, predestination "necessarily grows out of the character of God, and his connection with the universe as its creator, upholder, and governor."<sup>43</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> Mark Valeri, "The New Divinity and the American Revolution," *The William and Mary Quarterly* Vol. 46.4 (Oct. 1989): 744-45.

<sup>41</sup> Patrick Hues Mell, *Predestination and the Saints' Perseverance, Stated and Defended* (Charleston: Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1851), 81.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

No longer did God's moral government serve as the primary framework through which to interpret Christ's work. Instead, as a doctrine of providence, its primary function was now to accentuate the character and attributes and law of the Creator as the noble counterpart to the detached God of Deism. Despite its evolved form, Mell's version of moral government was still a very public concept, operating according to the twin Edwardsean axioms of glory and goodness. Mell insisted that God "has devised a more gracious way to maintain the honor of his law. His own honor and the authority of His law are maintained while He gives transgressors time and space for repentance."<sup>44</sup> Against the Arminian accusation that the Calvinist God was cruel and unjust, Mell responded, "We refer the reader, however, to an able treatise on this subject by President Edwards, entitled, '*God's ultimate end in the creation.*'"<sup>45</sup> Southern Baptists were cutting almost all formal ties with the New Divinity, but Jonathan Edwards himself continued to cast a long theological shadow over their thinking.

The theology of John Leadley Dagg was the apex of the Edwardsean evolution in the Southern Baptist Convention before its decline with the Princetonian theology of James P. Boyce and Basil Manly Jr. From love to being in general to disinterested benevolence to moral necessity and inability, Dagg's *Manual of Theology* was a showcase of Edwardsean ideas on a level never before seen in Southern Baptist life.<sup>46</sup> Although Dagg did not cite him by name (or anyone else outside of Scripture), no mention of Edwards was necessary. The spirit of the Northampton Sage hovered over its pages.

Moral government is one of the chief themes in Dagg's *Manual of Theology*, the first systematic theology text written by a Southern Baptist. However, Dagg's moral governmental theory resembled that of Patrick Hues Mell more than anything from the New Divinity. In fact, Dagg was careful to distance his views of justice and the work of Christ from New Divinity views, even while he shared so much in common with them. Dagg begins his chapter on divine providence with an appeal to God's government: "God's care of his creation is termed providence; and includes Preservation and Government."<sup>47</sup> The former president of Mercer University even includes an entire section on moral government, which he defines as such: "Moral government is a department of God's universal administration, specially adapted to moral agents, furnishing scope for the exercise of their moral agency, as, also, on God's part, for the exercise of his justice. It is not inconsistent with the rest of his administration, but is distinct from the rest, and is the holy of holies, in which the great Supreme manifests his highest glory."<sup>48</sup> Although moral government had relocated to a different department, its guiding principles of glory and goodness were

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 52–53.

<sup>46</sup> John L. Dagg, *A Manual of Theology* (Harrisonburg: Gano, 1982), 45, 46–47, 128. Ironically, Samuel Hopkins's concept of disinterested benevolence was a response to Jonathan Edwards's metaphysical idea of love to being in general. However, Dagg used both concepts in some measure.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 120.

still the same. So committed was Dagg to these twin pillars that he was even willing to redefine public justice. After affirming distributive and commutative justice, Dagg takes aim at the New Divinity concept:

Some have admitted another distinction, to which the name Public Justice has been given. This determines the character of God's moral government, and the rules according to which it proceeds. It may be regarded as a question of definition, whether the existence and character of God's moral government shall be ascribed to his justice or his goodness. As this department tends to the greatest good of the universe, there appears to be no reason to deny that it originates in the goodness of God; and if it be ascribed to his Public Justice, that justice may be considered a modification of his goodness.<sup>49</sup>

Instead of rejecting New Divinity theology completely, John Dagg was reappropriating Edwardseanism into the new Southern Baptist thinking, and he was doing so according to their own central principles. Southern Baptists were adopting Edwardsean ideas, but on their own terms. Moral government was primarily a matter of God's attributes, not of his atonement. Therefore, Dagg explained, "As God's moral perfections are the glory of his character, so his moral government is the glory of his universal scheme."<sup>50</sup>

In Dagg, the attribution of moral government and the commercializing of the atonement reached their apotheosis. Not only had Dagg redefined public justice, he also better defined commercial justice.

Though justice in government, and justice in commerce, may be distinguished from each other, it does not follow, that whatever may be affirmed of the one, must necessarily be denied of the other. Distributive justice is not that which determines the equality of value, in commodities which are exchanged for one another: but it does not therefore exclude all regard to magnitudes and proportions. In the language of Scripture, sins are *debts*, the blood of Christ is a *price*, and his people are *bought*. This language is doubtless figurative: the figures would not be appropriate, if commercial justice, to which the terms *debt*, *price*, *bought*, appertain, did not bear an analogy to the distributive justice which required the sacrifice of Christ.<sup>51</sup>

The commercialization of the Southern Baptist doctrine of the atonement had come full swing. Southern Baptists were still abiding by core moral governmental principles but were now convinced that they were not mutually exclusive with commercial themes such as debt and price. They had effectively removed moral government from the doctrine of atonement in order to establish a moral governmental doctrine of divine providence and to assert a more commercially-defined work of Christ still supported by the twin Edwardsean pillars of glory and goodness. The moral governmental atonement of William B. Johnson had bequeathed its genetic material to Dagg's theology, but the shape and scheme had evolved into

---

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 328–29.

something much different. In James P. Boyce, the fifth president of the SBC and the inaugural president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, this theological shift reached its inevitable conclusion.

#### IV. THE END OF MORAL GOVERNMENT

The commercializing of the atonement in Southern Baptist theology coincided in some ways with the confessionalizing of the atonement. As Michael Haykin explains, “Many of the major Southern Baptist theologians of the latter half of the nineteenth century preferred to find their theological moorings in an older expression of Calvinism, one more tied to the confessional heritage of the seventeenth century than to the revivals of the eighteenth.”<sup>52</sup> This trend spelled the end of moral government as a dominant force in Southern Baptist theology. By the time James P. Boyce penned his *Abstract of Systematic Theology* in 1887, just a year before his death, Southern Baptists had not simply neglected the idea; they were now offering entire critiques of the moral governmental doctrine of atonement and its theological corollaries. Hodgean theology had prevailed over its Hopkinsian counterpart.

Aside from Boyce’s willingness to occasionally use the words “govern” and “government” in his doctrine of providence, vestiges of moral governmental theory are almost nowhere to be found in his theology. The publicity of God’s works that so defined the Edwardseans is significantly curtailed in Boyce’s framework such that God no longer punishes sin for the good of the moral universe, but strictly for its own sake. In fact, this is Boyce’s first and primary critique of the moral governmental view of the atonement, namely “the nature which it ascribes to sin. It does not regard it essential that all sin should be punished. Therefore sin does not in itself intrinsically deserve punishment.” In his second and third critiques, Boyce takes direct aim at the Edwardsean view of goodness that so defined the Southern Baptists of the past:

2. It places the punishment of sin on a wrong basis, namely, the good of the universe as involved in the moral government of God; and not because it deserves punishment as sin.
3. God is here beheld, not as a righteous judge taking vengeance on the violators of his law, nor as a rightful king punishing those who have rejected his authority, but simply as a benevolent being entirely regardless of his own nature, or of the difference between right and wrong, punishing some men for the good of others.<sup>53</sup>

That which his Southern Baptist predecessors celebrated as something which worked both for God’s glory and the good of his moral universe, Boyce dismissed as a complete overshadowing of the evil of sin and the nature of God. In Boyce’s

---

<sup>52</sup> Michael A. G. Haykin, “Great Admirers of the Transatlantic Divinity: Some Chapters in the Story of Baptist Edwardseanism,” 206.

<sup>53</sup> James P. Boyce, *Abstract of Systematic Theology* (Escondido, CA: den Dulk Christian Foundation, 1887), 309.

mind, moral governmental theory was *too* public, neglecting the intrinsic evil of sin itself and forsaking divine justice. Whereas Johnson made public justice the centerpiece of his soteriology, and Fuller (who converted Boyce) broadened it to theology proper, and Dagg renamed it goodness, Boyce had no room for it at all, at least in the way these men had conceived of it. According to Boyce, the atonement was “not a mere exhibition of God’s determination to maintain his government for the benefit of his creatures, according to the governmental hypothesis.”<sup>54</sup> Former Southern Baptists after Johnson had not believed that the display of God’s justice was necessarily antithetical to its distribution, but Boyce did.

If glory and goodness were two foci on a plane, and Johnson’s moral governmental view the most Edwardsean extreme, Southern Baptists had slowly traced an ellipse which included different forms of divine justice until it reached the theology of James P. Boyce, which had no room left for Johnson’s public justice. By the end of the nineteenth century, glory and goodness were still present in Southern Baptist theology, but they did not resemble the moral governmental concepts which had been promoted by Baptists in the South for decades. Though still present, these ideas were rather muted in Boyce’s theology compared to many of his Edwardsean predecessors. While making a distinction between penal and “pecuniary” satisfaction, Boyce’s was a fully commercialized atonement, not shying away from exact ideas like “value” and “price” that had kept so many Edwardseans from affirming a limited atonement. He even made reference to “the price demanded of love by justice.”<sup>55</sup> The demise of moral governmental theory in the Southern Baptist Convention had been achieved, relegating governmental themes to the doctrine of providence while eviscerating the atonement of its most basic moral governmental assumptions.

Today, although the theology of Boyce has been recaptured in the flagship seminary he started and moral governmental theory has largely disappeared in the Convention, the twin pillars of glory and goodness still remain in Southern Baptist life. Penal substitution rules the day, but it would seem that moral governmental theory yet persists in its most basic form. Nearly a century after the publication of James P. Boyce’s *Abstract*, the Edwardsean John Piper’s thesis of Christian Hedonism, “God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him,” reintroduced a new generation of Southern Baptists to the two symbiotic ideas which had helped forge their own denomination.<sup>56</sup> As Southern Baptists continue to recover their own theological heritage, the first leaders of their Convention serve as a reminder that early Southern Baptist views of the atonement were rarely so neat and tidy as many would like to think. Even under a Calvinist umbrella, the SBC welcomed an array of beliefs regarding the exact nature of the atonement. They were a blend of styles and themes, many of which might surprise Baptists today. Southern Baptist

---

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 317–18.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>56</sup> In his *Desiring God*, John Piper explains that this principle was derived from Scripture as well as the Westminster Confession and its first article: “The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever” (*Desiring God: Meditations of a Christian Hedonist* [Colorado Springs, CO: Multnomah, 1986], 17).

theology was molded significantly and irrevocably by James P. Boyce, but it did not begin with Boyce. A host of Southern Baptist theologians preceded him, and in the early days of the Convention, the question was not which “theory” one affirmed, but which kinds of justice one upheld underneath a broad moral governmental frame. May these founders and framers of the SBC call their theological descendants back to the God who is both good and glorious, and to the sobering reality that Southern Baptists have always been a diverse people linked by common ideas.