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## "An Inordinate Sense of History": James Renwick Willson 1780-1853

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"An inordinate sense of history"

James Renwick Willson

1780-1853

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A Thesis

Presented to

the Faculty of the Department of History  
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Arts

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by

Elizabeth F. Carson

1987

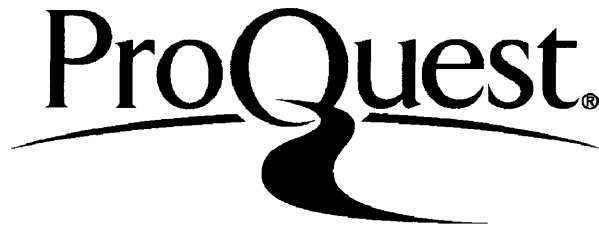
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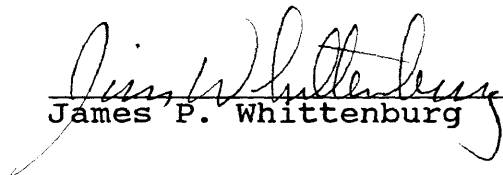
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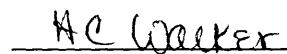
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements for the degree of


Master of Arts

  
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Approved May, 1987

  
James P. Whittenburg

  
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M. Boyd Coyner, Jr.

**Ad Majorem Gloriam Dei**

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## Preface

It is not often that a budding historian has the chance to work with the proverbial "attic full of papers." However, I have been fortunate to have such an opportunity. This thesis is the result of research in the Willson Collection, now located at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. When Mrs. J. B. Willson of Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, died in 1984, her attic was crowded with the accumulated books and papers of four generations. Her husband, James Burt Willson (1891-1976), had saved his own papers and carefully preserved those of his father, David Burt Willson (1842-1919), his grandfather James McLeod Willson (1809-1866), and his great-grandfather James Renwick Willson (1780-1853). All four men were ministers and seminary professors in the Reformed Presbyterian Church of North America, a small branch of Presbyterianism which traces its roots directly to the seventeenth-century Scottish Covenanters.

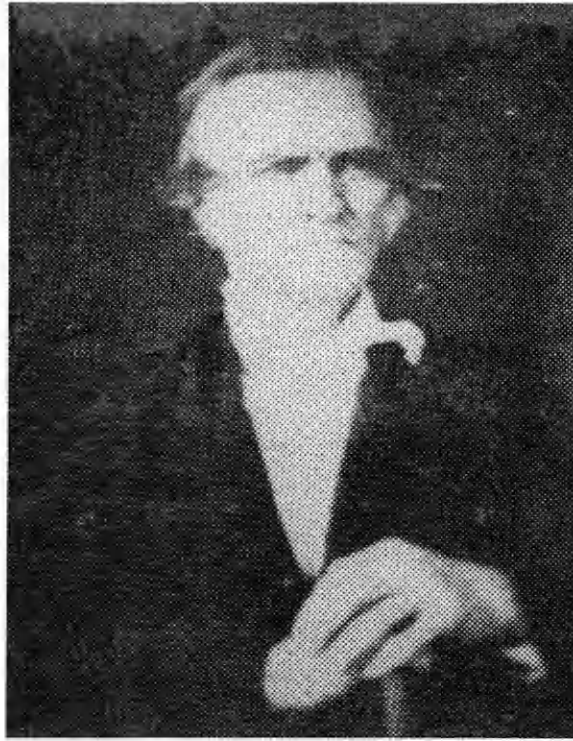
These men were excellent scholars, and their interests extended far beyond the ministry and theological study. The collection reflected these wide-ranging interests, including books on medicine, history, and literature, in addition to the many theological works, some from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. There were also many personal papers, notably the voluminous journals, lecture notebooks, sermon

notes, and correspondence of the eldest of the four, James Renwick Willson. These papers became the focus of my study. The organization and notation of the collection is described further in the Appendix, "Note on the Willson Papers."

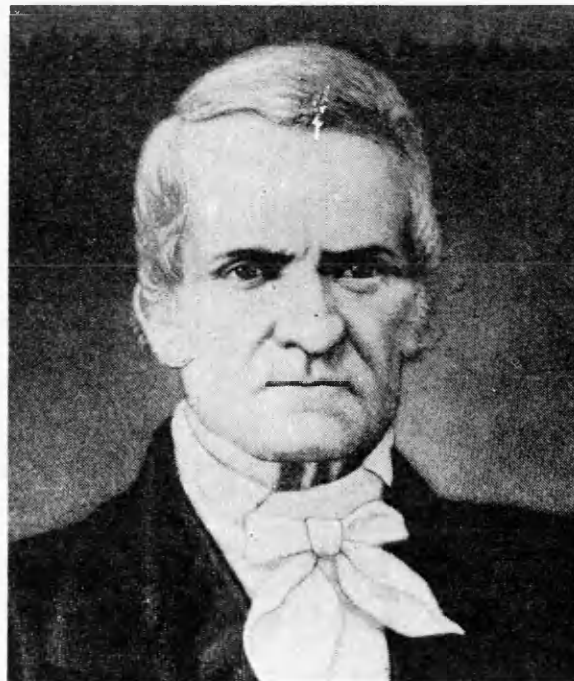
I now realize why authors thank people "without whom this work would never have been completed." First I wish to thank my advisor, Professor James P. Whittenburg, for his encouragement and constructive criticism, and for his continual reassurance that my digging around in the Willson Papers really could be worked into a thesis. I would also like to thank Professors Cam Walker and Boyd Coyner for reading the manuscript and adding their helpful comments. David A. Weir, of the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, New Jersey, also read this thesis in its earlier stages, and I am very grateful for his insightful questions and suggestions. Robert M. Copeland first suggested James Renwick Willson as a thesis topic and provided help in many ways. He also deserves much more recognition than can be given here for the labor of clearing out the Willson attic. The "dust of the ages" quickly loses its romanticism when the papers in question have spent a century in attics in coal and steel towns. My thanks also to Miss Rachel George, Librarian of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary, for her generous help and willingness to let me go through the Willson Papers after they arrived there. Last but not least



I would like to thank my father, David Carson, for being a sounding board for ideas, a shoulder to cry on when the going got rough, and a support in countless other ways. To both my parents, my heartfelt thanks.



James Renwick Willson  
photograph from the Willson Collection



James Renwick Willson  
photograph courtesy of the Reformed Presbyterian Church,  
Board of Education and Publication

## Abstract

James Renwick Willson was a Reformed Presbyterian minister who lived from 1780 to 1853. This small denomination consisted primarily of immigrants from Scotland and Ulster, and retained both its Scottish character and theology. It is the thesis of this paper that J. R. Willson was at variance with American society around him because he identified so strongly with this Scotch-Irish Covenanter heritage.

The Covenanters separated from the Presbyterian church of Scotland in the sixteenth century, protesting the king's claim to be head of the church, a position the Covenanters held belonged exclusively to Christ. As a result, their theology contained a strong emphasis on Christ's lordship, over earthly governments as well as over the church. The Covenanters in America continued to emphasize this position, and refused to participate in the government of the United States because it did not recognize this allegiance to Christ.

James Renwick Willson was one of the more outspoken Reformed Presbyterian ministers of his time. He proclaimed in the political realm, the need for American government to acknowledge Christ's lordship, and wrote extensively on the millennium, which he believed would soon be established. Willson would be classed as a postmillennialist, that is, he believed that Christ would return after the prophesied thousand years, but unlike other postmillennialists of the early nineteenth century, he emphasized God's working in the world more than man's action. But to separate Willson's ideas about politics and the millennium is making a false distinction, for they were dual aspects of his expectation for the future, when the "kingdoms of this world [would] become the kingdoms of our Lord." (Rev. 11:15)

Willson's ideas did not remain simply theoretical but brought him into conflict with the surrounding society. One sermon, entitled "Prince Messiah's Claim to Dominion over all Governments," which Willson preached in Albany, in 1831, was debated in the New York legislature, and Willson reported afterward that he was burned in effigy because of this sermon. In the following years, members of the church increasingly questioned the validity or necessity of continuing the Covenanters' political dissent, and in 1833 this controversy split the church. Willson led the conservative side and continued, to the end of his life, to defend the traditional principles of the Scottish Covenanter position.

**"An inordinate sense of history"**

**James Renwick Willson**

**1780-1853**

## Introduction

James Renwick Willson (1780-1853) was a controversial man both within his church and in the cities in which he lived. He was a forceful preacher, whose oratory was described as combining "both the majesty and the fury of the tempest." Yet he was a beloved minister, as the names of James Renwick Willson Sloane and James Renwick Willson Stevenson, ministers of the next generation, attest. Willson was always in the forefront of ecclesiastical controversies, where some saw him as a staunch, uncompromising defender of the truth, while others claimed he was unstable, vindictive, and categorically unwilling to change either his mind or an iota of tradition. Beyond the circle of the denomination, he clashed with the society around him, and once, according to his own account, was burned in effigy. He was a man whose tenaciously held principles kept him at variance with early nineteenth-century American culture. The opportunity to study his personal papers promised to shed light on this counter-cultural man, to reveal the forces that shaped one whose mentality was so different from that of the society around him.

Reading Willson's writings clearly revealed that his Scottish Covenanter heritage was the strongest influence in his life. That he was named for James Renwick, one of the last Scottish martyrs in 1688, is only one reflection of this. For J. R. Willson the events of seventeenth-century

Scotland were recent history and had a direct influence on his life. He defined his own role as successor to these earlier generations of Reformed Presbyterians, entrusted with the task of proclaiming the testimony for which they had suffered and died. His strong public stand on the sinful nature of the American government and the expected advent of the millennium, only two of the important issues of his public life, grew directly from this commitment. He carried on the principles he had inherited, though they were in many ways opposed to attitudes in the United States. This thesis will examine the background of the frontier and the Covenanter heritage which so strongly influenced Willson, then look in more detail at his ideas about politics and the coming of the millennium, and, finally, examine the interaction between this man and the surrounding society.

## Chapter One

"I was born in a log house, now old . . . "

Autobiography of James R. Willson<sup>1</sup>

In contrast to many memoirs, this statement of his birth was not the beginning of Willson's autobiography. Instead, he began the story of his life with events that happened half a century before he was born. Only after reviewing the background of his family and the Covenanter experience in the American colonies did he describe his own childhood. Clearly, Willson himself realized the significance of the Reformed Presbyterian heritage in shaping his life. The events in seventeenth-century Scotland which molded this staunch, uncompromising denomination will be explored in the latter part of this chapter.

Willson did not write his autobiography as a separate work but scattered these reminiscences through his journals. Unfortunately for those studying his life, the project was not completed; Willson did not continue it beyond 1805, when he graduated from college. He talked about his early years, but gave little information about the circumstances of his childhood. The little he provided can be supplemented by other primary accounts, like that of Joseph Smith in Old Redstone, or Historical Sketches of Western Presbyterianism and Joseph Doddridge's Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania from

1763 to 1783. Both of these men were taken to southwestern Pennsylvania as young children and were close contemporaries of Willson.<sup>2</sup>

According to Willson's autobiography, his great-grandfather Zaccheus Willson emigrated from County Down, Ireland, about 1730.<sup>3</sup> The family first settled in Delaware and then moved to McConnell's Cove, in present-day Fulton County, in central Pennsylvania. In 1770 Zaccheus's son, James Willson, and his family crossed the Allegheny Mountains to settle at the "Forks of the Yough," where the Youghiogheny River flows into the Monongahela. That river then winds its way northwest to form the Ohio at what was then Fort Pitt. The land records confirm that Zaccheus Willson, son of James, grandson of Zaccheus and father of James Renwick,<sup>4</sup> patented land there on April 3, 1769. This repetition of names from one generation to the next reflects the Willsons' emphasis on their history and the continuity of the family. The Treaty of Fort Stanwix, which opened the land west of the Alleghenies to settlement, was signed in late October of 1768. The Willsons were there, probably planting their first crops, by the next spring.

Settlers commonly crossed the mountains on two paths, Braddock's Trail, made during the French and Indian War, and the military road to Fort Pitt, which went past Bedford and Fort Ligonier. Neither of these was truly a road, in the modern sense, and neither could accommodate a wagon, so the crossing was made with all one's belongings tied to pack



animals. As a result, settlers brought very little with them, usually only several iron items for cooking and the necessary salt. Anything of wood could be made once they were established, and the seed corn for planting required a special trip to Fort Pitt.<sup>5</sup>

As on any frontier, living conditions were very primitive, and the diet was limited until the first crops of grain and vegetables were harvested. Doddridge describes the diet as primarily "hog and hominy."<sup>6</sup> The first cabins were made of "round logs with slight covering of clapboards."<sup>7</sup> Chimneys and floors came later. The house and farm buildings were usually built in the lower areas and the ridges of the hills used for boundary lines. Thus, as the saying went, "everything comes to the house down the hill."<sup>8</sup> The Willson farm, apparently, was similar, as the autobiography records, "I was born in a log house, now old in the valley on the other side of Fort Hill."<sup>9</sup> This "fort" was apparently a very old Indian mound; the settlers did not use huge earthworks for their fortifications.<sup>10</sup>

The furnishings in the house were sparse and usually of wood. Doddridge described the first tables and stools, usually made at the house-raising, as slabs of wood on round legs, while the frame for the bed was simply horizontal poles inserted in chinks in the walls and supported by forked sticks. The few spare articles of clothing were hung on pegs in the wall. For utensils, Doddridge wrote, there were a few pewter plates, spoons, and tankards, along with wooden

trenchers and bowls; china and delft were unknown.<sup>11</sup>  
Material improvements took place as people established themselves and could afford to buy more possessions, even as the routes across the mountains were opening up to provide more goods.

James R. Willson's father had been living on the frontier for ten years and had been married for nearly two of those years, when his eldest son was born in 1780. By that time there had undoubtedly been many improvements to the Willson property, though no specific accounts survive. How different things were from the descriptions Doddridge and Smith gave is difficult to ascertain. Willson mentioned in passing that as a boy he climbed a ladder to go to bed and in another account said, "It was my habit to retire along an avenue in the garden at the south end of the house, & for secret prayer & kneel down at a stump that had been cut[?] of root & rolled out against the fence." Later in the same account he spoke of descending the stairs from the porch into the avenue.<sup>12</sup> These comments imply that the house had advanced beyond the most primitive stages. Another difference was the apparent lack of any threat from the Indians. Both the Smith and Doddridge families settled in the western part of Washington County, near the present-day border with Ohio, where the Indians were a constant danger and work was continually interrupted by the threat of attack. In contrast, none of Willson's journals gives the slightest indication that danger from the Indians was a significant

factor in their lives. The Willson farm, though still very much on the frontier, was further east, almost directly south of Fort Pitt, and within fifteen miles of that stronghold.<sup>13</sup> This area of what was then Westmoreland County and neighboring Fayette County was "practically immune from savage forays."<sup>14</sup>

It was clearly a very literate household. Willson read John Locke's Essay Concerning Human Understanding when he was 13 years old and debated it with his father.<sup>15</sup> Two later letters from the father to the son survive in the Willson collection, and the inventory of the father's estate included "one lot of law books," valued at six dollars, one of the most expensive entries, and "one lot of other books and pamphlets."<sup>16</sup> Willson spoke of his mother leading family worship in his father's absence, a sign that she could read the requisite Psalm and chapter of Scripture.<sup>17</sup> However, this level of literacy is not surprising among these Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who laid such heavy emphasis on education and Bible reading.

About material possessions the autobiography gives no clue. The letters from Zaccheus Willson give some vivid images of their life, but these were written in 1812, when James Renwick was a young married school teacher in Bedford, Pennsylvania. Clearly, by this time there was no difficulty in obtaining goods in western Pennsylvania, if the items that the parents sent to James and his wife are any indication. "We have sent your bedtick and your mother has sent Jane a

present of a flannel dress. I sent Sam'l [a younger brother living with them] a pair of shoes and designs the next time [I have] safe opportunity to send him shirts and overalls and you a barrel of whiskey." This whiskey figures prominently in the letter, as Zaccheus writes elsewhere, "Your brother John is gone down river with his liquor . . . about 300 gallons of whiskey. Whiskey here is a low price and very dull sale. What time he will return I know not but as soon as he can sell to advantage."<sup>18</sup> As interesting as this is, it reveals little about the circumstances when James Renwick was a boy, twenty-five years earlier. Nor does the inventory of Zaccheus Willson's property, taken in 1827, shed much light on the earlier period. By that time Zaccheus had acquired more property and perhaps given some to his sons who farmed nearby.

Though the autobiography leaves the reader completely in the dark about the physical environment of his childhood, it reveals what the adult Willson saw as important about his own formative years. To him the significant events were those of a religious nature, so it was irrelevant to describe the house or the tasks of the various members of the family. He carefully described his earliest memory, at age three or four, when "my father . . . after catechising me on the elementary doctrines of grace, was exhorting [me] to believe on Christ and be saved."<sup>19</sup> He said nothing of his early education or farming responsibilities but told in detail about the first times he took communion. In fact, these were

such significant events that he used them as reference points for other experiences. "I entered Canonsburgh Academy Nov. 1801 . . . about one month after I partook of the Lord's [Supper] for the first time, in the church, [Reformed Presbyterian] at the first Covenanter sact. [sacrament] ever dispensed W[est] of the Allegheny mountains."<sup>20</sup>

Canonsburg Academy was begun by John McMillan, the first Presbyterian minister to settle west of the Allegheny mountains.<sup>21</sup> The Presbyterian tradition placed great emphasis on an educated clergy, and in areas without formal schools, it was common for young men to study under a minister and live with his family for a period of time. McMillan also apparently taught Latin on the grammar school level, and the young men reading for the ministry with him were often employed as tutors for the younger boys. This less formal education grew into the Canonsburg Academy, and in 1802, while Willson was a student there, the school received a charter from the Pennsylvania legislature and officially became Jefferson College.<sup>22</sup> Later it joined with nearby Washington College and under the name of Washington and Jefferson College continues today as a private liberal arts college.

One of the interesting discoveries in the Willson papers was the manuscript of a hitherto unknown history of Jefferson College, written by Willson and apparently never published. It is unfortunately incomplete, but the ten chapters with over 150 pages of closely written manuscript that do survive

seem to be the major part of the work. Though it is not dated, internal evidence suggests that it was written in 1807 or 1808, not long after Willson's graduation in 1805. In the preface he said that the work was not designed solely as a history of the college, but sought to describe "principally, the progress of society, in the western country."<sup>23</sup> This indeed he did, praising the West, its wonderful climate, and the spirit of independence and invention the region fostered. He traced the history of western Pennsylvania and then turned to the development of Canonsburg Academy and Jefferson College. He described in great detail the subjects and the methods of teaching employed. On Fridays, students reviewed the material recited during the preceding week, and a general review was conducted prior to examinations, given twice yearly by the board of trustees. Thus, Willson noted with approval, the young scholars studied the material three times.<sup>24</sup> The curriculum included Latin and Greek (he listed the authors studied in these languages), arithmetic, geometry, algebra, surveying, and geography, all grouped under the heading of Natural Science. The branch of Moral Science included logic, rhetoric, and moral philosophy, using John Witherspoon's Lectures on Moral Philosophy. Saturdays were reserved for English grammar, English composition, and oration. Each fall the students gave public orations, and prizes were awarded. Apparently this was a major event, not just for the students, but for the whole town, which turned out to hear the young men give their declamations.<sup>25</sup>

This history provides a valuable addition to knowledge of Willson's early life, as references in his autobiography are so scant. Though he read Locke when he was 13, Willson did not begin his formal education until the age of 21, and in the history of the college he defended the number of students who began their studies at a later age. He explained, no doubt describing his own situation, that a farmer establishing himself west of the mountains did not have the money available to support his son at school, nor could he spare his labor on the farm. After a few years, however, the farm was better established, and each member of the family was entitled to a share in the prosperity. Some boys then resolved to invest theirs in the cause of furthering their education.<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that Willson's frontier childhood and adolescence had an effect on him which remained throughout his life. His son later wrote that "he cared little for etiquette; and though free from any thing like rudeness or coarseness of manner, he was not what would be styled a polished gentleman. His original rusticity never fully wore off."<sup>27</sup> His own attitude toward his agrarian roots appeared occasionally in his journal. "Most wonderful has been the goodness of God, in taking me from the plowtail[?], out of a poor family in the woods, bringing me forth to feed the lambs & the sheep of his flock, by preaching, & in the professorate, & in making many books."<sup>28</sup> He wrote of the importance of Jefferson College as a place where the sons of

the frontier might receive an education without having to cross the mountains to Dickinson or Princeton, clearly a less desirable, as well as more expensive alternative. In his history of Jefferson College he seemed to be torn between scorn and admiration for these farm boys who came to be educated. They arrived, dressed in homespun, and, he noted, "a coarseness in manner too often attends this."<sup>29</sup> Since these young men were intended for public life, this lack of social grace and polish should be removed, he said, because too often capable men hung back, self-conscious about their manners and behavior. Yet Willson saw this rural manner and dress as preferable to urbane and high-style city life. He concluded that this rusticity "was inauspicious to delicacy of thought and refined sentiment; while at the same time it was favorable to boldness of attempt."<sup>30</sup> Though Willson hardly qualifies as a Jeffersonian democrat, he clearly retained the sense that solid agrarian communities were preferable to cities and urban areas. In his journal, he thanked God that "until my 22d year, when my father accompanied me to Canonsburgh Academy (1801 Nov.) that I lived in the valley on the W[est] of Fort Hill far from the temptations of the great world, & from the seductions of an academical life, & that the academy in Canonsburg and Jefferson College was the most humble & the most religious in the world."<sup>31</sup> In 1818 he called for the establishment of a seminary west of the mountains (at that point the church seminary was in Philadelphia) because parents were unwilling



to send their sons east to school. He agreed with their position because "commercial cities are dangerous places for young men."<sup>32</sup> So while Willson spent a good part of his life in the cities of Philadelphia, Albany, and Pittsburgh, he never lost the idea that frontier and rural life was preferable, that it promoted character and safeguarded moral fiber.

In 1807, two years after his graduation from Jefferson College, he married Jane Roberts, the daughter of a Scotch-Irish merchant in Canonsburg, whose brother likewise became a Covenanter minister. James and Jane had three sons and six, possibly seven, daughters; of these, only two sons and three daughters survived their father.<sup>33</sup> A biographical sketch of the older son spoke of "his parents, who were uncompromising in their attachments to the principles of the Covenanter church, being disposed to educate him for the ministry."<sup>34</sup> Willson, as a father, had consciously committed his sons to this role and wrote in his journal when they were still young children, "I also with the same awful solemnity renew my vow consecrating my two sons John Roberts Willson [then age seven, he died as a young man] and James McLeod Willson [age six] to God to be educated and brought up for the service of my dear redeemer in the work of the Lord. . . . With the same awful solemnity I have consecrated and do hereby consecrate my younger son Zaccheus Renwick Willson [age two] to the work of the Lord as I did before."<sup>35</sup> The names Willson gave his children reflect his

historical orientation and the importance he placed on establishing ties to the past. It is probable that James McLeod was named for Willson's theological professor, Dr. Alexander McLeod. Both James McLeod and Zaccheus Renwick did spend their lives as ministers in the Covenanter church. McLeod (as he was called) became a prominent minister in Philadelphia and his father's staunch ally in any ecclesiastical debate; Zaccheus worked for many years in a mission in New York City.<sup>36</sup>

Willson was equally concerned that his daughters serve God's kingdom and consecrated his daughter Mary to be a "mother in Israel."<sup>37</sup> Willson did see women in terms of the men with whom they were associated. Thus, for example, he wrote near the end of his life, "Today nearly finished reading of Uncle Tom's Cabbin [sic] by Dr. Beecher's daughter, the wife of professor Stowe, late of Lane Seminary."<sup>38</sup> Though he defined a woman's role in the context of her family, he firmly believed in education for women. His wife Jane learned Hebrew so that she could hear recitations from their eldest son, then age six.<sup>39</sup> After their youngest daughter Susan Amelia died at age twenty, her father wrote in his journal that in addition to memorizing several catechisms, "in reading, writing, arithmetic, grammar, geography, composition, history, and astronomy, she was very well instructed. She had made considerable proficiency in Hebrew, both with and without the points & in German." She also gained some skill on the piano, "but it

took too much time & was too expensive & we discontinued her lessons." <sup>40</sup> This is a telling detail, that a nineteenth-century father gave Hebrew a higher priority than piano lessons for his daughter. The three daughters who did marry all became the wives of Covenanter ministers. Willson's goals and desires for his family serve as another example of his intense commitment to the church of Christ, especially as it was manifested in the Covenanter church.

Before his marriage, Willson had gone to New York to study theology with Alexander McLeod. The only Covenanter to be included in the Dictionary of American Biography, Dr. McLeod (1774-1833) gained prominence through a series of sermons supporting the American effort in the War of <sup>41</sup> 1812. In 1800 he had refused to accept the call to his first church until it forbade membership to slaveholders. This policy was enacted by the Presbytery, and his action is credited with formally establishing the strong Covenanter opposition to slavery. His commitment to ending slavery continued with his active membership in the American Colonization Society and other antislavery organizations. Little is known about Willson's life during his years of theological training, but an enduring friendship grew between him and McLeod, as teacher and student, spiritual father and son, and co-workers in God's kingdom. As two Covenanter ministers they stood together as chosen leaders to bear the testimony God had commanded.

One of the most moving parts of the Willson Papers is a

collection of over one hundred letters from Alexander McLeod to his former pupil. The letters deal primarily with church matters: pulpit supply, news of other congregations and the like, but they also reveal a deep longing for companionship. These men who saw themselves as scanty laborers in a full harvest and witnesses in a hostile world depended greatly on one another for support and encouragement. McLeod often wrote to "my dear Willson" and once called him, "my good old son."<sup>42</sup> Because little that others wrote about Willson has survived, these letters from a close friend provide a valuable external picture of this uncompromising minister. McLeod was well aware of Willson's shortcomings, but he also saw the potential of Willson's abilities and sought to encourage and advise him in his ministry.

There were so few Reformed Presbyterian congregations in America that until 1809 they were governed by a single presbytery, divided into three regional committees. The Presbytery normally licensed a theological student to preach after he had completed several years of study. This was apparently the case with Willson, but there is no record of his licensure. He made his first appearance in the Presbytery minutes in the following cryptic statement from the October 1807 meeting: "The Court agree that James Wilson [sic], a licentiate under their inspection, on account of Providential disqualification, be and he is hereby deprived of his license, and that this be announced to him by Revd. Alexander McLeod, in a letter accompanied with suitable

remarks."<sup>43</sup> The surviving records only hint at the problem, but later references suggest Willson was having some mental or emotional difficulty. Sometime after this, Willson returned to the "Forks of the Yough," where his second son was born.<sup>44</sup> At the following meeting of Presbytery, in Philadelphia, in 1809, Alexander McLeod reported that he had fulfilled his task of writing to Willson. At the end of the meeting, "Mr. James Wilson requested the Court to give him an advice respecting his future movements. He was advised for the present to lay aside all thoughts of study with a view to the ministry, and betake himself to some secular employment for the support of his family."<sup>45</sup> After this word from Presbytery, he moved to Bedford, Pennsylvania, and began an academy there.<sup>46</sup> The school prospered, and Willson became a prominent citizen. He published what he called an analysis of the springs at Bedford, which brought many more visitors to the town.<sup>47</sup> McLeod wrote to him there in January of 1811, "No man on earth laments more than I do the dispensation which removed you from the heights of Zion. Painful are the pangs which I feel at the thoughts, of that removal being perpetual. But God's will be done." He continued with paternal concern, asking about Willson's plans for the future, whether he would stay in Bedford and continue to study medicine.<sup>48</sup> However, the situation must have changed soon after, for in May of that same year, McLeod wrote asking if Willson would consent to preach, now that the elder minister was "assured of your perfect health and

soundness of mind. And I can never be satisfied to see the talents of my Willson removed from the public service of the church."<sup>49</sup>[emphasis added] He also encouraged Willson to take up the work of writing a history of the church which he himself had started but was unable to finish. "Let the work be marked with patience, earnest observations and profound reflections. Let it be worthy of James Willson of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America."<sup>50</sup> This was strong encouragement to a man who felt that the church had rejected him.

Though Willson did not pursue further formal education, he continued to study various subjects. In Bedford he studied medicine with a local doctor and upon various occasions later in his life was called upon to use those skills.<sup>51</sup> He did receive two honorary degrees, however. One was a master of arts from Yale University in 1815, about which little else is known. He was also awarded the Doctor of Divinity from the Western University of Pennsylvania (now the University of Pittsburgh)<sup>52</sup> in 1828.

Willson continued to teach for the next several years, in 1815 moving his family to Philadelphia to teach in Grey & Wylie's Academy. The academy was a prominent one, numbering among its students the son of the Russian minister to the United States, who had previously been in Philadelphia as consul-general.<sup>53</sup> Willson's first and only full-length book, entitled A Historical Sketch of Opinions on the Atonement . . . from the Incarnation of Christ to the Present

Time; with Translations from Francis Turretin, on the  
Atonement was published there two years later.<sup>54</sup> Turretin  
was a seventeenth-century European theologian whose work  
Willson later used with his theological students. Willson  
dedicated his work to Dr. Alexander McLeod, speaking of the  
love and respect he felt for the senior minister. The book  
reveals a Willson more conciliatory toward other  
denominations than he would be later in his life. He gave  
credit to the Baptists, for example, for their extensive  
mission work, though he regretted that their children did not  
receive the sign of the covenant in baptism.<sup>55</sup> But the book  
shows that even in his younger years Willson was a man of  
intense commitment and a determined warrior for the cause of  
truth. He would give no quarter in fighting for what he saw  
to be the Lord's cause as stated in Covenanter positions.  
The goal of his history was to defend Calvinist orthodoxy  
against the inroads of Arminianism. He wrote in the preface  
that he had been advised to deal gently with those in the  
wrong, but, he stated, this was not the best way to promote  
truth. He intended to follow the example of the Apostles and  
Reformers who had spoken out boldly against heresies and  
those who taught them. Willson concluded with a statement  
which might have served as his life's motto, "Those who are  
advancing require gentleness. Those who are departing from  
truth merit even severity."<sup>56</sup>

The Reformed Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia was  
Samuel B. Wylie (1773-1852), who had emigrated from Ireland

after being involved in the unsuccessful attempt for Irish independence in 1798.<sup>57</sup> In addition to his pastoral duties and his share in the administration of Grey and Wylie's Academy, this energetic man was Professor of Latin and Greek at the University of Pennsylvania and sole professor in the small Reformed Presbyterian theological seminary.<sup>58</sup> He thought highly of this Willson who taught in his school and encouraged him to accept invitations to preach, as Willson recorded in his journal.<sup>59</sup> Apparently by this time the earlier issues about Willson's inability to preach had been resolved.<sup>60</sup> Willson had held Wylie in high regard as a scholar and a minister since Wylie, visiting western Pennsylvania to conduct church services, had asked the young Willson, then a student in Canonsburg, to parse some Latin.

I could tell its gender & blundered its declension. He went through its cases with its article, as fast as he could give it utterance; advised me to know everything that could be known of every word & to be ready in every part of the model. I record this little incident, as it gave a new & important impulse to my mode of study -- attention to the minutia of grammar. 61

Willson did follow Wylie's advice to begin preaching, and his reputation as a forceful preacher grew. In 1817, he accepted a call to the Reformed Presbyterian congregation in Coldenham, New York, about fifty miles north of New York City, near the Hudson River. Willson was to spend the majority of his years in the ministry at Coldenham, and it became home to him, though he later moved to several other cities. While in Coldenham he published a church periodical, the Evangelical Witness, which vigorously upheld Covenanter



theology, containing articles on theological issues, church history, and news from around the world. Alexander McLeod continued to encourage Willson in his labors and tried to temper his fierce zeal, telling him to attend carefully to the editorial department and keep out anything influenced by personality or party politics. He concluded, "Be patient, brother, and above all, keep from rash judgements and denunciations."<sup>62</sup> Though the magazine was apparently well-received within the church, financial pressures forced it to end after four years. Willson left Coldenham between 1830 and 1833, during which time he was minister of the Reformed Presbyterian congregation in Albany, New York. These three years were very significant in Willson's life and will be discussed in more depth in the fourth chapter.

In 1836 Willson was appointed professor of the Reformed Presbyterian seminary, which had not operated continuously to that point. Prior to 1810, men desiring to enter the ministry had studied privately, as Willson had with Dr. McLeod. In that year Presbytery formally established a seminary with a constitution which "provided systematically for the institution's control, governance, students and curriculum."<sup>63</sup> Samuel B. Wylie was the sole professor, serving from 1810 to 1817, and again between 1823 and 1827. During the time when the seminary was not operating, the students again pursued their studies privately. James R. Willson commonly had several young men studying in his home, which made him an appropriate choice to undertake

the work of the seminary when it was revived. During its early years, the seminary had no fixed location but was established where the professor lived. In 1838 Synod established another seminary in Pittsburgh to meet the need for pastors in the West and two years later merged the two seminaries into one. The united seminary was located in Pittsburgh, so Willson moved his family and theological students to western Pennsylvania.<sup>64</sup>

In 1845 the seminary was moved to Cincinnati, and Willson and his family again moved along with it. He also served as pastor of the small struggling congregation there, though declining health often prevented full performance of his duties. In 1851, after some turbulent controversies with students and other professors, he retired from the seminary as Professor Emeritus.<sup>65</sup> He spent the remaining two years of his life in the towns where he had lived before, spending the winters in Philadelphia with his son James McLeod and the summers with his old friend John Beattie in Coldenham. It was there in August of 1853 that he was injured in a fall, from which he never recovered, and he died on the ninth of September. He was buried in the churchyard at Coldenham, where a monument was erected to his memory.

How did his contemporaries view this zealous minister, so dedicated to upholding the principles of his Covenanter forebears? His son later described him in a biographical sketch:

His appearance indicated no common man. His frame,

large and massive, but not corpulent; his stature considerably above the ordinary standard; his elevated and expanded forehead; his dark, piercing eye; his thin, firm, compressed lips; his grave and thoughtful visage; his vigorous and elastic step; all gave evidence of extraordinary physical and mental energy. 66

William Sprague, a minister in Albany, and author of the standard nineteenth-century reference work Annals of the American Pulpit, was also a personal friend of Willson's. He wrote:

I was always greatly impressed with the vigour of his intellect, the extent and variety of his knowledge, and I may add with his genial and kindly spirit. I do not remember to have ever heard him utter an expression that savoured of undue harshness concerning any body. But it was currently said that in the pulpit he seemed to breathe another atmosphere; and sometimes his eloquence there combined both the majesty and the fury of the tempest. 67

A later history of the Reformed Presbyterian church stated, "Without exception he was the most powerful preacher the Covenanter church in America has ever produced. . . . His imagination was at once active and elevated, and when it took possession of him he was overwhelming in the majesty of his descriptions and the awful character of his denunciations." 68

The man who made these majestic descriptions and denunciations was shaped not only by his childhood on the Pennsylvania frontier, but also by his identity as a Reformed Presbyterian, a Covenanter. Both his character and the choices he made grew from a commitment to the principles of his forefathers. An understanding of Willson requires a knowledge of the Covenanters of seventeenth-century Scotland

and the events and issues which created what one historian has called "their inordinate sense of history and their contempt for the suggestion of reasonable compromise when principles are at stake."<sup>69</sup>

For the Church of Scotland, one of the key issues throughout the seventeenth century was determining the proper relationship between church and state. John Knox brought the Reformation to Scotland in the sixteenth century and established the Protestant church there in Presbyterian form. Throughout the seventeenth century this structure was challenged by the Stuart monarchs, who found formally established Episcopacy more conducive to supporting the doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings. In 1638 the people of Scotland joined together and subscribed to the National Covenant, described as "the protest of a whole realm against the absolutism of a king."<sup>70</sup> Later in 1643, in the midst of their conflicts with Charles I, the Scots and the English signed the Solemn League and Covenant, promising to unite to support the true reformation of religion in Scotland, England, and Ireland. To the Scots, this obviously meant Presbyterianism, but it was not necessarily seen in this same light by the other parties. Both these Covenants were seen not as compacts between persons, or even governments, but as solemn vows before God patterned on the covenants of the Old Testament.

The Scots were appalled at the execution of Charles I in January, 1649, and less than a week later in Edinburgh, Charles II was proclaimed king, not only of Scotland, but of Ireland and England as well. However, the Scots specified he was not to exercise his office until he "'should give satisfaction for religion and peace,' which included swearing to uphold the Covenants and to establish Presbyterianism in all his dominions."<sup>71</sup> According to one historian, given Charles' irreligious nature and known distaste for Presbyterianism, "it is difficult to believe that even the most dyed-in-the-wool Covenanter really accepted the king's professions at their face value," yet they insisted that he sign.<sup>72</sup> Indeed, he seemed to have regarded the Covenants simply as expediencies to gain the throne. Within two years after the Restoration of 1660, Presbyterianism was no longer the legal religion of Scotland. The Covenants and the acts of the Scottish Parliament establishing Presbyterian church government were rescinded, bishops appointed, and all ministers who would not accept their charge by appointment of a bishop expelled from their parishes. It has been estimated<sup>73</sup> that this affected nearly a third of Scotland's clergy. Those who opposed these policies of the king became known as Covenanters for their staunch adherence to the Covenants and their insistence that these were not simply acts of the government which could be repealed at will but solemn oaths binding the people of Scotland and their posterity. So it was not simply the Episcopal structure of church government

they refused to countenance, but the abjuring of the Covenants and particularly the king's self-proclaimed role as arbiter in church matters. The role of Head of the Kirk belonged to Christ, and to him alone. As their banners proclaimed, "For Christ, His Crown, and Covenants."<sup>74</sup> The government responded with heavy fines, prison sentences, banishment, even death for those who refused to participate in the established church. These penalties were pursued with great cruelty and often without the slightest recognition of judicial procedure. J. D. Douglas, generally credited with presenting a balanced picture, concludes, "The Protesters [i.e. extreme Covenanters] may have been bigoted and wrong-headed and provocative, but that was no justification for the savage fury with which the Government tried to bludgeon them into submission."<sup>75</sup>

In the late 1660's royal policy changed somewhat, and a series of "Indulgences" allowed ministers to return to their parishes if they swore to obey the law, thus supporting the king's policy and recognizing his authority to appoint them as ministers, but without recognizing the bishops. This attempt at compromise was seen by many as a wedge intended to divide the ranks of the opposition, and it was quite successful in doing this. Dissension between moderates and extremists had long divided the Covenanter opposition. Many of the moderates saw the Indulgences as a reasonable compromise and returned to their churches. The more extreme Covenanters looked on these "indulged" ministers as traitors,

for having forsworn the Covenants and made peace with the "tyrant" Charles II. One crucial disagreement within the ranks of the Protesters was the question of whether it was permissible to take up arms against an illegitimate government. The moderates said no, while others argued for armed defense against the king's dragoons. Some of the most extreme even advocated tyrannicide. There were, in fact, several pitched battles between the Covenanters and the king's forces. At Bothwell Bridge the Covenanters suffered serious losses, in part because some of the moderates still refused to participate in armed opposition, even with the threat of impending battle.<sup>76</sup>

As the conflict continued, both sides became more extreme. In 1680 Richard Cameron and a group of Covenanters rode into the town of Sanquhar and read a declaration stating that Charles II was a tyrant and usurper and openly declaring war on the king and all his supporters.<sup>77</sup> The next year Parliament passed a Test Act, requiring that every officeholder (which included ministers) swear to support the Protestant religion, the king's authority over the church, and "never consent to any change or alteration contrary thereunto . . . either in church or state, as it is now established by the laws of this kingdom."<sup>78</sup> Clearly the Covenanters would refuse to swear to this; even a number of conscientious Episcopalians resigned from office rather than take such a sweeping oath. The persecution intensified, and the last years of the reign of Charles II and those of his

brother James, were known in the Covenanter tradition as the "Killing Times." Farms were burned, property confiscated, and men and women, young and old alike, killed for refusing to swear allegiance to a king who, they believed, had usurped Christ's role as head of the church and abjured the Covenants he had sworn to uphold. The arrival of William of Orange in 1688 and the resulting Revolutionary Settlement changed the picture both politically and ecclesiastically in Scotland, and ended the persecution.

It is important to note that the Covenanters were not dying for the cause of religious liberty or toleration as we understand it in the twentieth century. Their opponents have gleefully pointed out that the Covenanters were inconsistent because they imposed their own brand of religion on others (in the form of the Covenants and established Presbyterianism) when they had the opportunity, as they did during the Interregnum. But the Covenanter writers had no desire to establish religious toleration, for why should people be permitted to do that which disobeys the word of God? Their cause was not to allow people to worship as they pleased but to establish the true Church in Scotland, under its true Head, Jesus Christ. Nor should the conflict be seen as simply a struggle between Presbyterianism and Anglicanism; it also included political issues. The Covenanters were well aware that religious and civil absolutism went hand in hand. They were protesting the arbitrary nature of Charles' reign, as well as his decrees regarding the church. An early



Covenanter, the Earl of Loudon, told the king's commissioner that "they knew of no other bands between a king and his subjects but those of religion and the laws."<sup>79</sup>

Though actively involved in bringing William and Mary to the thrones of England and Scotland, the Covenanters were not satisfied by the Revolutionary Settlement. Presbyterianism was established as the official Church of Scotland, but it was still under the control of the monarch, who thus usurped the place of Christ. And though the arbitrary government protested in the Covenants had been effectively limited, the Covenants themselves were not recognized as binding. Also, the establishment of the Anglican church in England was directly contrary to their understanding of the Solemn League and Covenant which swore to the "reformation of religion in the kingdoms of England and Ireland . . . according to the Word of GOD, and the example of the best reformed Churches."<sup>80</sup> And so the Covenanters, maybe 7000 in all, scattered in small praying societies and without any ministers (James Renwick, their last leader, had been executed in February of 1688) continued to refuse to swear allegiance to the government.<sup>81</sup> Once again, principle ruled out any form of agreement or compromise, and their self-perception as the faithful remnant had been confirmed. Forty years before it seemed as if the Covenanter cause had triumphed, as many Scots signed the Covenants and proclaimed in Presbyterianism the fulfillment of the Reformation. In the intervening years, these intransigent Protesters refused

over and over even the slightest wavering from this position. They refused the government of Charles II, refused the Indulgences, and refused the Revolution Settlement, all in the name of upholding the Kirk in its true form under its true Head. The story is told of William Guthrie, one of the first to give his life for the Covenanter cause, that not long before his execution a fellow minister asked him, "'We have a Scotch proverb, 'Jouk [duck] that the wave may go over you.' Will ye jouk a little, Mr. Guthrie?' 'Mr. Pollack,' returned Guthrie gravely, 'there is no jouking in the cause of Christ.'" <sup>82</sup> And indeed nothing could better express the Covenanter position, "There is no 'jouking' in the cause of Christ."

The particular question here is not simply the nature of these Covenanter protests and the mentality they passed down to future generations, but what perception the American Covenanters had of this heritage. A clear picture is provided by the Evangelical Witness, the denominational magazine Willson published from 1822 to 1826. In these four years of monthly issues he included no less than nine articles about the Covenanters, ranging from narratives of individual martyrs to a broader discussion of their position. He was particularly concerned with counteracting the unsympathetic view of the Covenanters in Sir Walter Scott's Waverly novels and Tales of a Landlord. Willson believed that the public image of these noble martyrs was being defamed, and it was imperative to present a true picture.

Far from seeing these people as extremists guilty of bigotry and intolerance, Willson insisted that they had held firmly to the truth and it was the "indulged" ministers who were guilty of the sin of schism for "violating their covenant [Note that he says their covenant, not simply the covenant] and preferring the favour of the crown and their own ease to the interests of the church."<sup>83</sup> These articles in the Evangelical Witness included accounts of the deaths of the Marquis of Argyle and several ministers which venerate their great faith, courage, dedication to the cause of Christ, and vilify the government which persecuted them so severely. Because of their persistent refusal to compromise, the charge of bigotry was often levelled against American Covenanters. Willson defended the Covenanter stance in another article, part of a series called "The Travels of Titus in the United States," in which one of the characters says,

"I know nothing of the Covenanter clergyman of whom you speak, but I must say I think him in the right in what you call bigotry. If he thinks that God, who sends him to preach the Gospel, commands him to do some things and not to do others; if he thinks the Bible tells him that some doctrines are true, and others are not; . . . would he not do wrong, very wrong, to part with the doctrines, or disobey the commands because some of his neighbors wish him to do so?" 84

Willson carefully noted his sources in the statements he made and even provided a list of recommended readings for his readers.<sup>85</sup> Several of these books are compilations of accounts of the various sufferings of the Covenanters, collected during and soon after the time of persecution. These were edited and published in the tradition of Foxe's

Book of Martyrs and went through many editions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Even the titles suggest that these were not simply stories but were designed to inspire similar commitment. One, entitled A Cloud of Witnesses, took its name from a biblical passage. After describing the sufferings of many for the cause of Christ, the author of the book of Hebrews says, "Wherefore, seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run with patience the race that is set before us."<sup>86</sup>

Yet more significant than even these accounts of the martyrs was the implication of this heritage for contemporary Covenanters. Willson wrote an extensive introduction to an account of one incident, the imprisonment at Dunottar Castle. He briefly reviews the events of the persecutions, then describes the connection of the Reformed Presbyterians in America, also called Covenanters, to those of the past in Scotland. It is partly because of their continued adherence to the Covenants, he says,

and partly to the similarity of their character to that of those who suffered, exhibited in their inflexible adherence to the doctrines and order of reformation, without relinquishing any part of it in accommodation to the temper of the times. To be their descendants and followers is honourable; for whatever of sound doctrine, of good ecclesiastical order, and of civil and religious liberty in Britain and America has descended to the present generation, may be traced to the sufferings of that period, as the means of their preservation. The following narrative contains a specimen of what they endured, in maintaining a conscience void of offense toward God, and in transmitting the testimony and the law, unimpaired, to

the present generation.

The implication could not be more clear: it was now the responsibility of the present generation to carry on these principles for which those before them had suffered and died. To modern ears, Willson's description of the Covenanters' "inflexible adherence" has the ring of scorn and opposition, but for him these were words of praise.

This attitude, no less than the content of the Covenanter testimony, was a legacy of their forebears. James Leyburn, in his social history of the Scotch-Irish, traces their journey from Scotland to Ulster and then to the American colonies and describes the interaction of these experiences with their religious convictions. "The inflexible logic of Calvin's Institutes could hardly have found a more congenial field than Scotland, Ulster and the American frontier. Calvin's massive, rock-like stand on religious issues contributed to the making of moral fiber."<sup>88</sup> He also comments, "The Scottish reformation had developed and cultivated a 'Presbyterian conscience' that consorted well with the Scottish temperament . . . [which believed that] compromise is evil; yielding a point, whether for the sake of politeness, or to attain a larger end, is base."<sup>89</sup>

Thus we begin to form a picture of the Scotch-Irish Covenanters and their descendants in America. J. R. Willson, in particular, absorbed the character, traditions, and principles of this heritage, and these formed a significant

part of his identity. Throughout his life he remained convinced that to give in on any points of Covenanter doctrine would mean that Renwick and others had died in vain. The "inflexible adherence" to the covenants remained a significant part of the American Covenanter position. In the letter Zaccheus Willson wrote to his son in Bedford he said, speaking of a rival group of Scotch-Irish Presbyterians, that they were "given over in marvelous manner to the sin of lieing . . . but we cannot expect much better of a people that have so awefully violated their covenant engagements." <sup>91</sup> Carrying on such a tradition created an emphasis on principle to the apparent exclusion of any sense of proportion in dealing with the issues of contemporary America.

## Notes to Chapter One

1 Lecture Book XXV, 70, 9 April 1847.

2 Joseph Smith, Old Redstone, or Historical Sketches of Western Presbyterianism (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo & Co., 1854); and Joseph Doddridge, Notes on the Settlement and Indian Wars of the Western Parts of Virginia and Pennsylvania from 1763 to 1783 (Wellsburg, VA: published for the author, 1824, reprinted 1976).

3 Day Book II, 101, 23 November 1847; however, William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, Vol. IX: Lutheran, Reformed Dutch, Associate, Associate Reformed, and Reformed Presbyterian (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1869; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 39, says the immigration was in 1721.

4 Pennsylvania, Bureau of Archives, Land Records, New Purchase, Tract #941; Genealogical information is from Mrs. J. Ralph Wilson, The Willson Family Tree (Morning Sun, Iowa: for the author, 1956).

5 Doddridge, Notes on Settlement and Indian Wars, 80; Smith, Old Redstone, 38.

6 Doddridge, Notes on Settlement and Indian Wars, 88.

7 Smith, Old Redstone, 40.

8 Doddridge, Notes on Settlement and Indian Wars, 85.

9 Lecture Book XXV, 70, 9 April 1847.

10 Doddridge, Notes on Settlement and Indian Wars, 27-28 and 311-12.

11 Ibid., 108, 88.

12 Commonplace Book, 10-11 July 1815; Lecture Book XXV, 100-101, 22 April 1847.

13 Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, IX, 39, says about fourteen miles.

14 Doddridge, Notes on Settlement and Indian Wars, 312.

15 Lecture Book XXV, 99-100, 22 April 1847.

16 Inventory of Zaccheus Willson, Records of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, Wills and Deeds.

17 Lecture Book XXV, 105, 22 April 1847.

18 Zaccheus Willson to JRW, 2 May 1815.

19 Lecture Book XXV, 98, 22 April 1847.

20 Ibid., 202, 15 May 1847.

21 Dwight R. Guthrie, John McMillan: the Apostle of Presbyterianism in the West, 1752-1833 (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1952).

22 History of Jefferson College, 128.

23 Ibid., 3.

24 Ibid., 71.

25 Ibid., 87-109.

26 Ibid., 77.

27 James McLeod Willson, quoted in Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, IX, 42.

28 Lecture Book XXV, 70-71, 9 April 1847.

29 History of Jefferson College, 74.

30 Ibid., 76.

31 Day Book II, 187, 19 August 1847.

32 Commonplace Book, 242-44, 23 March 1818.

33 Both The Willson Family Tree and William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, IX, 41, say that the Willsons had three sons and six daughters. However, in 1848, with three daughters living, J. R. Willson wrote, "To be made planters of the heavens, 1 son and 4 daughters, now there, I & my wife are honoured of God." Lecture Book XXI, 41, 5 September 1848.

34 William M. Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church (Baltimore: Hill & Harvey, 1888), 721.

35 Commonplace Book, 12, 11 July 1815.



36 Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, 722.

37 Commonplace Book, 12, 11 July 1815.

38 Lecture Book XI (2d ser.), 50, 12 June 1852.

39 Ibid., 1, [early 1852].

40 Lecture Book XXXI, 40-41, 5 September 1848.

41 Alexander McLeod, A Scriptural View of the Character, Causes and Ends of the Present War (New York: Eastburn, Kirk & Co., Whiting and Watson; and Smith & Forman, 1815).

42 Alexander McLeod to JRW, 30 April 1825, 15 January 1825; McLeod's warm sense of humor is also evident in his letters. One of them is written on the back of the constitution of the American Society for Colonizing and Evangelizing the Jews, of which McLeod was an officer. He explains to Willson, "When the time of writing arrived I found I had no paper; and to make up a letter I took the Jews Constitution. Being Secretary for foreign correspondence, there is no impropriety in using the circular in a manner foreign from the design of its contrivers..." 9 May 1820.

43 Minutes of Reformed Presbytery of America, from 1798 to 1809 (Philadelphia: James B. Rodgers, 1880), 43. This letter from McLeod, unfortunately, is not among those Willson kept; the earliest one in the Willson collection is from 1809.

44 References made by Alexander McLeod and S. B. Wylie to Willson's difficulty are quoted below. An incident describing the illness of his older son, shortly before the birth of the second, is given in Lecture Book XXXI, 19, 2 September 1848.

45 Minutes of Presbytery, 1798-1809, 59.

46 Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, 723.

47 E. Howard Blackburn, History of Bedford and Somerset Counties, Pennsylvania (New York: Lewis, 1906), 311. The portion concerning Willson is quoted from a history of the Bedford Presbyterian church by Robert F. Semple, c.1860, no further information given; Lec Book XXVI, 88, 28 July 1847.

48 Alexander McLeod to JRW, 2 January 1811.

49 Alexander McLeod to JRW, 24 May 1811.

50 Alexander McLeod to JRW, [?] November 1811.

51 Lecture Book XXVI, 90, 28 July 1847; Commonplace Book, 277, 22 February 1821.

52 Gail A. Ferris, Alumni Records Office, Yale University, to the author, 30 January 1987; Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, 727.

53 A. Dashkoff to JRW, 20 January 1816; information about Dashkoff from Nikolai N. Bolkhovitinov, The Beginnings of Russian-American Relations 1775-1815, trans. Elena Levin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975), 143, 249-250.

54 JRW, A Historical Sketch of Opinions on the Atonement . . . from the Incarnation of Christ to the Present Time; with Translations from Francis Turretin, on the Atonement (Philadelphia: Edward Earle, 1817).

55 Ibid., 115-16.

56 Ibid., preface.

57 Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, IX, 34.

58 Ibid., 35.

59 Commonplace Book, 56, 7 January 1816.

60 Because the Minutes of the Middle Presbytery for several years following 1809 have not survived, there is no record of how or when Willson was reinstated. He first appears in the Minutes of Synod in 1817, when he is recognized as a minister of the Middle Presbytery. The absence of any more concrete information on this incident leaves many questions unanswered.

61 Daybook II, 174, 17 June 1847.

62 Alexander McLeod to JRW, 7 December 1822.

63 Robert M. Copeland, Spare No Exertions: 175 Years of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Pittsburgh: by the seminary, 1986), 20.

64 Ibid., 19-29.

65 Ibid., 42.

66 James McLeod Willson, quoted in Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, IX, 42.

67 Ibid., 42.

68 Glasgow, History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, 725.

69 J. D. Douglas, Light in the North: the Story of the Scottish Covenanters (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Co., 1964), 7. The following discussion may appear to rely too heavily on a single source, but Douglas' volume is the only recent scholarly survey I am aware of, and is considered to be a very balanced account. Other sources are, David M. Carson, "History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America, to 1871" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1964), which includes a brief but succinct account of the background in Scotland, and Johannes G. Vos, The Scottish Covenanters: Their Origins, History, and Distinctive Doctrines (Shanghai, China: for the author, 1940).

70 Douglas, Light in the North, 69.

71 Ibid., 67.

72 Ibid., 65.

73 Ibid., 100.

74 Ibid., 103.

75 Ibid., 119.

76 Ibid., 140-43.

77 Vos, The Scottish Covenanters, 106-107.

78 The full text of the Test Oath is given in Douglas, Light in the North, 209-210.

79 Quoted in Douglas, Light in the North, 70.

80 The full text of the Solemn League and Covenant is given in Douglas, Light in the North, 206-208.

81 Ibid., 196.

82 Quoted, Ibid., 86.

83 [JRW], "Sketches of the Reformation," Evangelical Witness 4 (November 1826):498.

84 [JRW], "Travels of Titus in the United States,"  
Evangelical Witness 2 (December 1823):209-210.

85 Several of the best known are A Cloud of Witnesses . . . (Edinburgh, 1714; reprint ed., edited by John H. Thompson, Edinburgh: Johnstone, Hunter & Co., 1871); [Alexander Shields], A Hind Let Loose; or an historical representation of the testimonies of the Church of Scotland, for the interest of Christ . . . By a Lover of True Liberty (n.p., 1687, reprint, Glasgow: John Kirk, Calton, 1797); John Howie of Lochgoon, Biographia Scotiana: or a brief . . . account of the lives . . . of . . . Scots Worthies, etc. (Glasgow: J. Bryce, 1775, reprint edited by William M'Gavin, Glasgow: W. R. McPhun, 6th ed., 1828).

86 Hebrews 12:1.

87 [JRW], "Sufferings of the Scottish Covenanters,"  
Evangelical Witness 3 (November 1825):403-404.

88 James G. Leyburn, The Scotch-Irish: A Social History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 292.

89 Ibid., 291.

90 Zaccheus Willson to JRW, 2 May 1812.

## Chapter Two

For the 'Cloud of Scotland's Witnesses,' especially those who had lived and died in the 'persecuting times,' he [Willson] had an almost unbounded veneration. Few things would sooner rouse his indignation than a sneer at their principles or a slur on their memory. He was familiar with the minutest details of their history, and I have no doubt that he had imbibed, in some measure, their heroic faith and courage. Whatever faults he may have had, cowardice, certainly, was not one of them. In avowing what he deemed truth, and in denouncing what he deemed sin, no one could be bolder - he neither feared the face of man nor stopped to count consequences.

1

Rev. John Forsyth

Bearing testimony to the truth was no less important to the Covenanters on this side of the Atlantic than it had been to their fathers. Willson saw this as a continuing legacy; their location had changed, but their role had not. In his autobiography he described one of the major events in Covenanter history in the colonies:

In the year 1743, one hundred years after the first swearing of the Solemn League & Covenant, these first American Covenanters, renewed by solemn oath, their obligation to that & to the National Covenant of Scotland. This covenant renovation was at Middle Octorara [Pennsylvania]. My great-grandfather & all his family took part in the transaction. It was greatly blessed of God for the strengthening of their hands in holding fast the testimony of their covenant fathers. 2

Once again, the fact that he included in his own autobiography a denominational event that had taken place nearly forty years before his birth shows how strongly Willson identified with the Covenanter past.

The Covenanter church did face challenges and changes in

crossing the Atlantic. The major question was, in fact, the descending obligation of these covenants, whether it was the continuing responsibility of the American Reformed Presbyterians to call for "the ideal of a reformed church in a Christian state."<sup>3</sup> In 1774 or 1775 the ruling body of the church stated that "while the presbytery still continued to hold the covenants, the testimonies and sufferings of those in Scotland . . . in respectful remembrance," adherence to those covenants would not be required for membership.<sup>4</sup>

After American independence it seemed even less reasonable that they would be bound by covenants made by British parliaments. As a result, in 1782 the three ministers and a majority, though not all, of the members of the Reformed Presbytery joined with the Associate Presbytery. This latter group, known as the Seceders, had also withdrawn from the Scottish Presbyterian church over the issue of government but did not insist on political dissent as the Covenanters did. The union, which formed the Associate Reformed Church, though termed a compromise, was close to a restatement of the Seceder position. In essence, these former Covenanters gave up their stand on political dissent. For them, as for so many other European sects, the process of Americanization meant a gradual pulling away from their European traditions and distinctive principles.

James Leyburn, in discussing the Scotch-Irish experience in America, ends the story with the American Revolution. When the colonists migrated beyond the Appalachians, he says,

they were American frontiersmen rather than distinctively Ulster Scots. They no longer emphasized their transatlantic roots, but identified with the most recent place of origin. As they became American, so did their Presbyterianism, and the events of the Great Awakening reflect this movement toward experience-based religion more suitable to the American situation.<sup>5</sup> But this process is in marked contrast to the experience of the Covenanters in America. Though Willson grew up beyond the Appalachians in the third generation of an immigrant family, his intense awareness of events in seventeenth-century Scotland and his refusal to surrender any of the Covenanter principles were as strong as if he himself had come from Scotland or Northern Ireland.

The American Covenanters who refused to join the new Associate Reformed Church argued, as their forebears had before them in Scotland, that to join with the Seceders would be forswearing the Covenants and denying the true biblical view of church and government. The Willsons originally joined the Associate Reformed Church but returned to the Covenanter fold when a minister of that church came to western Pennsylvania. That he had first taken communion with the Seceders remained a distressing point for Willson throughout his life.<sup>6</sup> The Covenanter attitudes were so inflexible, and the dissent from civil government so important to them, that they regarded this very closely related sister denomination as practically infidel. It was a group of the Associate Reformed whom Zaccheus Willson called

the covenant-breakers who were given over to the sin of lying. And J. R. Willson wrote in his autobiography, "My grandmother McConnel was a Covenanter[;] . . . her husband although a Seceder was an intelligent & in all things & except attachment to ungodly civil government, very strict in his deportment as a Christian professor," and added, "he was, besides very friendly to Covenanters." In<sup>7</sup> twentieth-century society, a denomination is simply the church one attends on Sunday morning, but for these people it determined one's identity.

This small band of Covenanters, once again without any formal leadership, grew slowly, primarily by immigration from Scotland and Ireland. This immigration eventually provided several ministers for the scattered Covenanter congregations. In 1795, James McKinney, one of these ministers, published a sermon articulating the political position of American Covenanters, focusing on the secular nature of the new constitutions (both state and federal) and on their toleration of religious heresy and error. Until then, the position of the American Covenanters had been stated only in negative terms; they knew that they refused to accept the American government. McKinney's work gave them a positive declaration and a basis from which to operate. He maintained the position of dissent from the government but placed the basis of that dissent on the secular nature of the American constitution rather than referring to events and agreements in Scotland.<sup>8</sup>



Samuel B. Wylie, another of the ministers from Great Britain, already introduced as the Reformed Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia, expanded McKinney's work in a small volume entitled Two Sons of Oil; or the Faithful Witness for Magistracy and Ministry upon a Scriptural Basis, published in 1803.<sup>9</sup> The term "two sons of oil" is Wylie's literal translation of a term usually rendered "anointed ones." In Old Testament Israel, anointing with oil was part of ordination, a sign that God was calling the person to a special role. Wylie here referred to a vision of the prophet Zechariah, in which Israel's governor and high priest are called the anointed ones, that is, both ordained by God for their offices. From this Wylie concluded that both ecclesiastical and civil authority were anointed by God and set apart for distinct God-ordained roles. He referred to these as ministry and magistracy respectively, the channels<sup>10</sup> of Christ's authority over mankind.

The main body of Wylie's book is a description of ministry and magistracy: their nature, their similarities and differences, and their relationship to each other. Christ was both ministerial and magisterial head, but he held these offices in different ways. Christ's authority over the church was his directly as Mediator, the one who had died and risen again to reconcile a sinful people to a just God. The Covenanters said that authority over governments of the world had been delegated to Christ by the Father in his role as<sup>11</sup> resurrected and reigning Messiah. This was in contrast to

the Christian church as a whole, which acknowledged God's authority over the world because of his role as Creator. Covenanter writers often quoted Psalm 2: "The Lord hath said to [the son], Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee. Ask of me and I will give thee the heathen [elsewhere translated nations] for thine inheritance."<sup>12</sup> Both civil and ecclesiastical power were to recognize Christ's authority, and neither was to control the other, but each might hold the other to the proper performance of its duties. The civil branch had no "directive power about anything ecclesiastical," but was, Wylie said, "to use every lawful endeavor to promote purity, reformation and unity in the church." The civil ruler also had the responsibility to see that his people conformed to God's law, because otherwise<sup>13</sup> they would be judged by God.

Wylie then discussed the responsibility of church members to the civil government. To a rightly constituted government, of course, Christians owed honor and obedience, not only because of the threat of punishment, but also because they could obey and honor in good conscience. However, when a government did not recognize Messiah's headship, and thus rebelled against him, the response must be different. Wylie listed "reasons why Covenanters cannot yield obedience, for conscience sake to the present civil authority in North America."<sup>14</sup> His reasons were that the government permitted many sorts of heresy and religious error; it permitted deists and atheists to be elected to

high offices, it and gave legal recognition to slavery. The proper response to this was to mourn the sin of this government, pray for reform, and refrain from anything which would be considered a "homologation" to its authority. Thus Covenanters refused, among other things, to vote or serve on juries, though they agreed to follow all commands that were right and lawful, "provided it not be clogged by some immoral<sup>15</sup> circumstance."

The Covenanters' point was not simply to refuse to participate; the ultimate goal was to effect change. "We ought to use every lawful endeavor to promote reformation, such as, rational arguments, and decent remonstrances."<sup>16</sup> Standing firmly in the Covenanter tradition, Wylie called for bearing testimony, rather than active participation. Later in the book he proposed the objection, "the constitution makes provision for its own amendment; if therefore, you think it wrong, why don't you join and elect good representatives, who may be instrumental in rectifying it?" The main thrust of Wylie's response was that the end would not justify the means; under no circumstances should they swear to something that is in opposition to God's law. He continued with an intricate argument that to swear to uphold the Constitution and then pass in Congress a law to change it (thus disagreeing with it) would be perjuring the former oath to support the Constitution.<sup>17</sup> Once again, as in Scotland, the Covenanters refused to participate. Change was not dependent on their participation but awaited the working of

God. "We ought to wait patiently, under these disadvantages, till the Lord be pleased to bring back again the captivity of Zion."<sup>18</sup> With their solid Calvinist belief in the sovereignty of God, the Covenanters believed that "center stage" was God's working in the world, not what man was doing.

Wylie referred to the book of Revelation which revealed in allegorical form the events taking place on this center stage. He noted in particular the figure of the two Witnesses, which was later a recurring concern in Willson's writing and that of other Covenanters.

And I will give power unto my two witnesses, and they shall prophesy a thousand two hundred and three score days, clothed in sackcloth. These are the two olive trees, and the two candlesticks standing before the God of the earth. . . . And when they shall have finished their testimony, the beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall make war against them, and shall overcome them and kill them. [They are later resurrected] 19

The use of the word "testimony" was crucial. As Wylie said, "Faithful testimony-bearing is one part of the character of the 'two witnesses.'" It is our indispensable duty to imitate them."<sup>20</sup> The Covenanters associated themselves very strongly with the two Witnesses, as Willson at one point spoke of his Covenanter baptism as having been "baptised among God's Witnesses."<sup>21</sup> They were the few who were holding fast to God's truth, particularly in the area of rightful government. Again, according to Two Sons of Oil, "The witnesses have not yet finished their testimony. One point yet remains to be sealed with their blood, namely, the

Mediator's headship over the nations."<sup>22</sup> The implication was clear: to bear testimony to Christ's position as King of kings was the Covenanters' role.

Wylie's book played a significant role in shaping the thought of the church, and it had a particular influence on James Renwick Willson. Wylie did not simply influence Willson by his writings but also as a mentor and personal friend. Wylie's influence on Willson's thought is illustrated in much of the latter's writing and preaching, notably in an 1819 sermon entitled, The Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, which was later published as a

pamphlet.<sup>23</sup> The sermon provides a helpful framework in which to discuss Willson's convictions about government. The text for the sermon was taken from Psalm 2: "Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son, lest he be angry, and ye perish in the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little."<sup>24</sup> For Willson these verses were both a promise and a prediction that God will bring the nations in subjection to himself and a command to nations that they were to recognize God's authority.

Preaching to his Covenanter audience, Willson did not feel the need to explain or defend this principle, but in the Evangelical Witness he illustrated this point with an imaginary conversation between a Senator and a Member of Congress. The Congressman pointed out that most Christians would agree in a general way that God rules the world but

said Covenanters believed "that God Almighty has given Messiah authority to govern the nations, [and] that Messiah, in the exercises of his authority, has issued his laws, in the Bible,"<sup>25</sup> He gave a number of biblical references in support of this assertion, to which the Senator replied, "I must reject the Bible, or admit that Messiah does claim the homage of civil rulers, and that his law recorded in the Scriptures is paramount law."<sup>26</sup> This argument was more convincing in 1823 than it would be today, as the subscribers to the Evangelical Witness were generally Christians and would claim to believe the Bible, though not all of them agreed with the interpretations of the magazine's editor.

The reasoning in this article is also a good example of Willson's emphasis on logic. He could not comprehend those who would grant his premises but refuse to accept the conclusion. For him the issues were always clear-cut. The Bible laid down certain principles with clear implications for society. If one did not accept them, how could he still claim to believe the Bible? Never, that I have seen, did he acknowledge that others might take the biblical principle in another direction or that his own logical progression might not be as automatic as it seemed to him.

In the sermon, Willson's first point was to explain how man was to fulfill this duty to recognize Christ's royal authority. To show this allegiance, kings and rulers were to covenant together before God to that end, making a "social compact."<sup>27</sup> Clearly, Willson's use of the term differs

significantly from Locke's intended meaning. Reformed Presbyterians, basing their doctrine on the Westminster Confession of Faith, believed that covenants were the basis of God's dealing with man. First, God instituted the covenant of works in the garden of Eden, which was broken by man's sin, and then He offered the covenant of grace, providing for man's salvation through the redeeming work of Christ. Covenants were the prescribed way also for man to respond to God, hence the covenants that were signed in Scotland in the seventeenth century and later in the colonies.

Government was under God, Willson said, and it should recognize his revealed word as the supreme law of the land. In an Evangelical Witness article calling for biblically-based civil law, Willson again built his argument on logic. If God is creator of the world, then natural law is a revelation of His character, and the Bible is a further revelation of that same character. Therefore, all those who seek to base civil law on natural law ought to follow the Bible, as a more complete version of that same law.<sup>28</sup> As an example, Willson noted the Biblical principle that those in leadership positions should be upright and godly men.<sup>29</sup> The thought that deists, even atheists, could be elected to national office appalled the Covenanters. Here and elsewhere he suggested that criteria for elected officials should be formalized and made part of the Constitution, thus making the civil law reflect biblical principles.

Clearly, Willson's attitude toward the United States Constitution was out of step with the great reverence many Americans felt toward it. Willson saw it as a document which contained many good principles of government but also many flaws. First, and most important, it did not recognize God's authority over the government of the United States. Second, it implicitly recognized slavery in the three-fifths clause.

For Willson the slavery question was not simply an addendum to the other problems of the American government; it was a central issue and figured prominently each time he discussed the sins of the nation. In an 1836 sermon entitled Tokens of the Divine Displeasure in the late Conflagrations in New York and other Judgements, illustrated, he described the sins of the United States which resulted in these signs of God's wrath.<sup>30</sup> A full 22 pages of this sermon were devoted to a discussion of slavery, noting the increasing government attempts to silence open discussion of the subject (in banning antislavery publications from southern mail) and condemning the sin of advocating only gradual emancipation. On this last point, Willson had earlier reprinted a speech in the Evangelical Witness in which the speaker mentioned that it would, of course, be an injustice to free the slaves immediately. Willson had inserted an editorial footnote, "An injustice to whom? to the slaves? -Ed. Wit."<sup>31</sup> Though Willson was not as active in antislavery societies as his friend Alexander McLeod, he corresponded with the abolitionist Gerrit Smith and, judging from his clippings,



may have subscribed to William Lloyd Garrison's  
<sup>32</sup>  
Liberator.

Willson remained a staunch opponent of slavery to the end of his life. In a lecture on slavery and abolition several years before his death, he said (according to his lecture notes), "The remedy for all this is to call a convention, form a new constitution, & compel the oligarchs to free their slaves. If the republic does not perform this most imperative duty, the Prince of the kings of the earth, will rend the union, break by his Almighty [power?] every yoke & let the oppressed go free."<sup>33</sup> For Willson even the existence of the union, which he often termed "the confederacy," was much less important than America's responsibility to obey God.

Willson concluded this discussion of the duty of kings to bow to Messiah, saying that the supreme goal of nations ought to be to glorify God and that all political institutions are "bound to subserve the interests of the church of God, and promote truth and godliness."<sup>34</sup> This would not be, he continued, a union of church and state. Drawing from Wylie's ideas of ministry and magistracy, he described them as two human institutions, both under God, bound to obey him and to support each other, within the context of their separate roles.

Next, Willson examined contemporary nations to see how well they measured up to these principles. He began by stating that all the nations of the world were in open

rebellion against Christ's authority. Not only were the European nations in rebellion, they had given their power to the Antichrist by sanctioning the Pope and his actions. Willson elaborated, "This combination of the civil and ecclesiastical despotisms, fortifies both; produces an extraordinary depression of the human species and imparts vast force to the power of oppression."<sup>35</sup> He states here a belief common to much of American Protestantism at that time, that the Europeans were tyrannized by the joint power of civil oppression and religious darkness. Christians have always had a worldview that envisioned a great struggle between the forces of light and darkness. The particular form this view took in the early nineteenth century saw the truth of the gospel and its attendant civil liberties arrayed against the power of the antichrist and political oppression.<sup>36</sup>

Not only was this connection of God's truth with political liberties common in that society, it was a strong heritage from the Scottish Covenanters, who had struggled to uphold the true church undefiled, but also to oppose arbitrary political power. Although Willson called upon civil government to recognize the fact that it was established by God, he also believed firmly that the people must have a voice in their government, ideally through elected officials. This structure, he believed, was biblical, because in Israel the judges and early rulers were chosen by the people.<sup>37</sup> In a later sermon he wrote,

Man, who is subject to Christ, ordains civil government, by the will of the majority, in the name of the Lord. . . . It is for the Lord Christ's sake, from whom the people derive their right to frame the government, by whom the moral laws of the empire are enacted, whose honor and glory are to be promoted, and for whose sake alone that allegiance is due to this ordinance of man. 38

About the European powers he said, "In the election of the kings, the voice of the people is not heard or if it is ever heard, it is utterly disregarded. The people are considered as made for the sovereigns, not the sovereigns for the people[;] . . . all these are in open and notorious violation of the laws of God and the rights of men." <sup>39</sup> As a corollary to this, in the dialogue between the two members of Congress, the Congressman tells the Senator that Reformed Presbyterians praise the great system of representative government;

"They wish this great and salutary system to be consecrated to the glory of God in heaven. . . . Who knows but as we [the United States] have set the whole world an example in placing the security of human liberty on the firm basis of equal representation, we may also have the high honour of taking the lead in dedicating this liberty and this security to the son of God?" 40

Willson believed that government was in its essence ordained of God, and he would not accept simple majority rule. He reprinted in the Evangelical Witness "The Causes of Fasting" preached at the Covenanter church in Pittsburgh in 1822. These were not limited to the typically "religious" topics of increasing immorality and infidelity, but also addressed issues of society and government, including the charge that "while insensible to the insult offered the Lord and his anointed, it is contended that the will of the

majority, whether agreeable to the word of God or not, ought to be the supreme standard to govern the concerns of a nation."<sup>41</sup>

Willson's desire to have an amendment to the Constitution to make Christianity and personal integrity requirements for holding public office, is an example of this principle that civil law should be based on biblical standards. He argued that most people were upset by immoral leaders and so would support this amendment. However, officials had been elected who did not fit these criteria, so these requirements should be made into law. The country needed to "set up constitutional barriers around the sanctuaries of public law, that they may be preserved from profanation."<sup>42</sup>

This proposition seems to present a contradiction between the Bible becoming the law of the land and the will of the people, for what if the people vote against it? Or what about the rights of a minority who may not want it, though the majority does? Willson was not blind to these problems, though clearly his focus was the proclamation of God's truth, more than its actual implementation in American government. He believed implicitly that a polity which honored God would also be the most beneficial to its subjects. He held that the Bible was the "operator's manual" provided for the world by its creator, and he had no doubts that even from a purely practical point of view, society, as well as all of creation, would function best when following

biblical principles. Willson recognized the need for a great change in public opinion if this principle were to become a reality, which is why he placed such emphasis on proclaiming God's truth. God alone changed hearts and minds, but he used the preaching and testifying of his word to accomplish it.

Willson's final point in examining the current state of the nations was that all of them were heading for destruction, in which the vials of God's wrath would be poured out in judgment. And yet this view of impending destruction was optimistic; the time was rapidly approaching when God's truth would prevail. In the sermon, Willson made an extensive comparison between contemporary society and the period immediately preceding the Reformation. As in fifteenth-century Europe, the spirit of inquiry was spreading in science, religion, and political liberty, and knowledge of the truth was increasing. "God has multiplied greatly his witnesses, both in Europe and America, and enables them to maintain, publish and defend in the pulpit and from the press, their testimony against all these evils and in behalf of the rights of their Lord and Redeemer's crown."<sup>43</sup>

American Covenanters in the early nineteenth century did have cause for optimism about the spread of their convictions. In 1798, there were two Reformed Presbyterian ministers and three organized congregations. Twenty-five years later, there were five presbyteries and many new congregations, particularly in the West (Ohio, Indiana and Illinois). In addition, a theological seminary had been

established to meet the need for ministers. The Covenanters were gaining not only in numbers, but also in prominence. Their ministers, especially those in eastern cities, were well-known and respected. S. B. Wylie, for example, was highly regarded in Philadelphia, both as a preacher and as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania. As Willson wrote in the Evangelical Witness, "The history of the last eighteen years is replete with encouragement for the future."<sup>44</sup>

Willson carried this discussion of God's witnesses into the third point of his sermon, which set forth what responses his congregation should make to this situation. His primary point was that like the Covenanters of old, they must separate themselves from any government that dishonors God. The biblical prophecy stated that the witnesses will prophesy in sackcloth for 1260 days: "that sackcloth you profess to wear."<sup>45</sup> Not only were they to stand apart, they were to testify against these evils; as he quoted from Revelation, "They overcame by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony."<sup>46</sup> Like their Covenanter ancestors, they were to maintain a testimony against the government which did not honor Christ as its true head.

The deepest responsibility for proclaiming these truths rested on the minister; "The duty of bearing testimony devolves, in a very emphatic manner, on the ministers of religion." They were the sentinels who would warn of the approach of the enemy.<sup>47</sup> This view of the minister's role

was another prominent theme in Willson's writing, and he saw his own role very clearly as one called of God to proclaim the truth. In the draft of a history of American Reformed Presbyterian congregations, Willson wrote about one of his own sermons which he felt had influenced the public mind, "Dr. Willson thinks he has satisfactory evidence that this was so; and he thinks that for this purpose, in the providence of God, he was translated to Albany."<sup>48</sup>

Throughout his life he identified strongly with this role and compared it to the prophets of the Old Testament proclaiming the truth to sinful kings.<sup>49</sup> One of his earlier journals contains the draft of a letter to President Monroe, written in 1818. After reminding the president of the several times they had been introduced, Willson said he knew the respect due such a distinguished man, "but Sir, I am a minister of the gospel of that Redeemer, who as king of nations, has elevated you to the presidential chair of these confederated republics. As such I hold myself bound to speak to you with plainness, Republican plainness, and ministerial freedom and friendship." He presented his ideas about the need for government to recognize Christ's authority with great frankness and even addressed the president's private religious life.<sup>50</sup> Willson clearly saw himself as a representative of the high king to a subordinate leader.

Willson also encouraged his listeners to observe the signs of the times, to watch the condition of nations and the character of the church. They were to read magazines and

newspapers to be well-informed about the state of the church and the world. The goal was to "shape our testimony so as to direct it against the perpetually changing aspects of error and iniquity."<sup>51</sup> No one followed this advice more devoutly than Willson himself; in fact, the nature of his voluminous journals becomes clear with this explanation. The bindings of his two large "Daybooks" stand open at an angle, stuffed with newspaper clippings about events all over the world, from the latest conflicts in Europe to the price of wheat and corn in major cities. The entries in the journals provided a commentary on the clippings; Willson clearly followed his own advice to learn what men intend to do and how that reflected God's plan for the world.<sup>52</sup> He would often conjecture about current events, and what impact those would have on the future, particularly in Europe.

Willson concluded the sermon by calling for fervent prayer that God would speedily bring the changes he had promised. In the meantime, his people were to stand firm in their testimony to God's truth, and "rely upon the agency of the Spirit of God accompanying his word, for accomplishing a glorious work."<sup>53</sup> For Willson, as for earlier Covenanters, change awaited God's action. As God's people they were to bear testimony to God's authority and commands, though the efficacy of their action depended on God's choosing to work through them. This was a role Willson took seriously and fulfilled energetically. He was conscious of his role as both a physical and spiritual descendant of the Covenanters



and saw his task as carrying the banner of truth to the next generation. He studied and absorbed the history of his branch of Presbyterianism, from seventeenth-century Scotland to the renewing of the Covenant at Middle Octarara. He learned from older ministers like McKinney and Wylie and then took his place in the ranks to lead in proclaiming the testimony of Messiah's headship. The minister of the gospel had a special role in public proclamation while maintaining political dissent to show the sinful nature of American government and its need to acknowledge God's authority. Though God was directing the action, it was not as though they labored in the dark, because they were given a glimpse of the script, as it were, in the prophetic book of Revelation. For the Covenanters, the central statement of that book was in the eleventh chapter: "The kingdoms of this world [shall] become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ."<sup>54</sup> This was their desire and goal in the realm of politics, but was simultaneously the definition of the coming millenium. The two were virtually inseparable parts of the same picture, and the following chapter will focus on millennialism as a complementary aspect of Willson's thought and show how that too reflected his Covenanter worldview.

## Notes to Chapter Two

1 John Forsyth, a fellow minister, quoted in William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, Vol. IX: Lutheran, Reformed Dutch, Associate, Associate Reformed, and Reformed Presbyterian (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1869; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 45.

2 Daybook II, 102, 23 November 1847.

3 David M. Carson, "History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America, to 1871," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1964), 49. The extent of the "Americanization" of the church is one of the major questions of this dissertation.

4 Ibid., 49.

5 James G. Leyburn, The Scotch-Irish: A Social History (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), 273-274.

6 Lecture Book XXV, 115, 28 April 1847: ". . . while I who had [been] baptized among God's Witnesses was committing sin by sitting at a corrupt communion table." Willson referred to the Associate Reformed as Seceders, though technically the Seceders were the Associate Presbyterians, one of denominations which merged to form the Associate Reformed Church.

7 Daybook II, 107, 23 November 1847.

8 Carson, "History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church," 59.

9 Samuel B. Wylie, Two Sons of Oil; or the Faithful Witness for Magistracy and Ministry upon a Scriptural Basis (1803; reprint, Montgomery, N.Y.: printed by Thomas & Edwards, 1832.)

10 Ibid., 4-5.

11 Ibid., 7-9.

12 Psalm 2:7,8.

13 Wylie, Two Sons of Oil, 18,20.

14 Ibid., 34.

- 15 Ibid., 49.
- 16 Ibid., 46.
- 17 Ibid., 67.
- 18 Ibid., 50.
- 19 Revelation 7:3,4,7.
- 20 Wylie, Two Sons of Oil, 69.
- 21 Lecture Book XXV, 115, 28 April 1847.
- 22 Wylie, Two Sons of Oil, 51.
- 23 JRW, The Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah (New York: E. Conrad, 1820).
- 24 Psalm 2:10-12.
- 25 [JRW], "Dialogue on Messiah's Headship over Nations," Evangelical Witness 1 (March 1823):343.
- 26 "Dialogue on Messiah's Headship over Nations," 345-6.
- 27 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 6.
- 28 [JRW], "The Bible as the Supreme Law of the Land," Evangelical Witness 1 (November 1822):166-68.
- 29 Ibid., 30.
- 30 JRW, Tokens of the Divine Displeasure in the late Conflagrations in New York and other Judgements, illustrated (Newburgh, N.Y.: printed by Charles Cushman, 1836).
- 31 Andrew Wylie, "A Praise to God for Independence; a sermon on July 4, 1823," Evangelical Witness 2 (November 1823):157.
- 32 JRW to Gerrit Smith, 27 January 1840; a complete copy of the first issue of the Liberator, as well as other clippings on the slavery issue are inserted in Daybook I.
- 33 Lecture Book XXX, 37, 6 June 1848.
- 34 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 19.
- 35 Ibid., 35.
- 36 [Ashbel Green], Christian Advocate 3 (1825), often

discusses world events in this context; see also Ernest Tuveson, Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 23 and *passim*.

37 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 40.

38 JRW, Prince Messiah's Claims to Dominion over all Governments and the Disregard of his Authority by the United States in the Federal Constitution (Albany: printed by Packard & White, 1832), 15.

39 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 40.

40 [JRW], "Dialogue on Messiah's Headship over Nations," Evangelical Witness 1 (March 1823):348.

41 John Black and Robert Gibson, "Causes of Fasting," Evangelical Witness 1 (February 1823):310.

42 [JRW], "Travels of Titus in the United States," Evangelical Witness 2 (Nov. 1823):163; see also "Dialogue on Messiah's Headship over Nations," Ibid., 346-8, and Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 19.

43 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 50.

44 [JRW], "Essay on Modern Missions," Evangelical Witness 2 (October 1823):105-106, and Carson, "History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church," chapter 4: "Into the New Century" and chapter 5: "The New Optimism."

45 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 54-55.

46 Ibid., 56.

47 Ibid., 58.

48 Daybook I, 209, 30 August 1839.

49 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 56-58.

50 Commonplace Book, 260-262, 27 March 1818.

51 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 60.

52 There are many examples, including: Daybook I, 74-76, 20 January 1832: predicting military action by various European powers; Daybook II, 21, 26 February 1846: a long discussion of the "Corn law revolution" in England and

its impact on American agriculture and manufacturing; Commonplace Book, [no date given, early summer 1815], discusses Napoleon's army; Daybook II has extended discussions of the Mexican War, which Willson strongly opposed, In one case he was disturbed that the American army had attacked Monterey on the Sabbath, saying that General Taylor "delights in violating the Lord's day," Daybook II, 90-91, [?] November 1846.

53 JRW, Subjection of Kings and Nations to Messiah, 61.

54 Revelation 11:15.

### Chapter Three

His [my father's] imagination was peculiarly powerful and excitable. He saw everything. He dealt with no abstractions--all was, to him, concrete, living reality. Hence some of his peculiarities. The invisible world of the good and the bad was to him not only a real but a present existence.

1  
James McLeod Willson

The study of millennialism has increased dramatically over the last several decades, producing many books and articles examining its diverse aspects and its role in American history.<sup>2</sup> Millennialism is a large topic that has taken many forms; as a result any attempt to generalize runs a great risk of oversimplification. Despite this danger, it is important to take a broad look at its expression in the United States in the early nineteenth century, as a background to discussing the millennial ideas of James Renwick Willson and comparing his ideas to those of his contemporaries.

The biblical basis of millennialism is drawn from various apocalyptic sections of Scripture: the prophecies of Daniel and Ezekiel, parts of the gospel of Matthew, and most notably, the book of Revelation:

And [the angel] laid hold on the dragon, that old serpent, which is the Devil, and Satan, and bound him a thousand years, and cast him into the bottomless pit, and shut him up, and set a seal upon him, that he should deceive the nations no more, till the thousand years should be fulfilled: and after that he must be loosed for a little season. And I saw thrones and they sat

upon them, and judgment was given unto them: and I saw the souls of them that were beheaded for the witness of Jesus . . . and they lived and reigned with Christ a thousand years. But the rest of the dead lived not again until the thousand years were finished. This is the first resurrection. . . . 3

Sometimes interpreted literally, sometimes allegorically, sometimes envisioned in the distant future, sometimes expected quite soon, this thousand year period, or millennium, has formed a significant part of the Christian church's expectation for the future.

One of the dominant themes of millennialism in the United States has been the idea that this country was destined to play a special role in God's plan for the future. The Puritans coming to New England in the early years of settlement dreamed of establishing a "city upon a hill" to show the Europeans how a God-ordered society would operate. In the next century John Cotton's Theopolis Americana placed the anticipated New Jerusalem on this side of the Atlantic, and Jonathan Edwards, seeing the outpouring of the Spirit during the Great Awakening, wondered if the colonies might be the site of the beginning of the millennium.<sup>4</sup>

As the eighteenth century progressed, according to some historians, the focus of millennialism became secularized, and this association of the advance of God's kingdom with events in the American colonies contributed significantly to the drive for American independence. Nathan Hatch describes this transformation to what he called "civil millennialism":

In marked contrast to the apolitical millennial hopes of

Jonathan Edwards, which had been based on the success of the revival, civil millennialism advocated freedom as the cause of God, defined the primary enemy as the antichrist of civil oppression rather than that of formal religion, [and] traced the myths of its past through political developments rather than through the vital religion of the forefathers. 5

While Hatch roots this development in the anti-Catholic rhetoric of the French and Indian War, Alan Heimert attributes this change to the revitalized Calvinism of the Great Awakening. This movement's "radical, even democratic, social and political ideology and evangelical religion embodied and inspired, a thrust toward American nationalism."<sup>6</sup>

These historians point to writings and sermons of this period which, they say, reflect how strongly and frequently Americans associated their cause with the Lord's and used religious and millennial terminology to describe political aims. In 1776, one minister proclaimed, "God Almighty, with all the power of heaven is on our side. . . . Michael stands ready, with all the artillery of heaven, to encounter the dragon and to vanquish this black host." He concluded his sermon by saying that the struggle between the American colonies and Great Britain was one "of the last efforts, and dying struggles of the man of sin."<sup>7</sup>

According to both Nathan Hatch and Alan Heimert, this politicized millennialism, which had been a crucial part of the ideology of the Revolution, continued into the first decades of the nineteenth century and played an important



role in the formation and growth of the new nation. Heimert quotes the 1801 political speech of a Democratic leader in New Jersey, who called his audience to thank God and continue to trust that he would crown their righteous cause with success.<sup>8</sup>

In a study entitled Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role, Ernest Tuveson explores this American perception that their country was to play a "starring role" in God's plan for the world.<sup>9</sup> He describes how this idea became inverted; from seeing America play a role in God's plan, people moved to associating God's plan with their own vision for America. The continued use of religious and millennial rhetoric then "baptized" American actions as being an advancement of God's kingdom. A prime example of this view was Julia Ward Howe's composition, "Battle Hymn of the Republic," which associated the Civil War with the millennial return of the Lord.<sup>10</sup> Thus many historians see a close bond between millennial ideas and political thought as Americans envisioned the realization of both of these in the progress of the United States.

Another school of thought, however, disagrees with this view of a "civil millennialism." Though these historians agree that millennialism in America was a strong force in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, they focus on its religious character and the resultant social impact rather than its political orientation. Timothy L. Smith, for

instance, argues that "millennial expectation, which Nathan Hatch finds central in Republican political rhetoric, was more religious than ideological in character, . . . and preoccupied as much with the future of all mankind as the special role of the United States in securing it."<sup>11</sup>

Postmillennialism, the belief that Christ will return at the culmination of the thousand years of peace and prosperity, was the dominant form of millennialism during this period.<sup>12</sup> There were those, called premillennialists, who

believed that Christ would return before the millennium. These groups included the Millerites, who took literally William Miller's prediction of the return of Christ in 1843 and went to the hilltops to welcome Him, and other communities such as the Shakers and the Mormons.<sup>13</sup> However,

these sects were the aberrations in American society in the early nineteenth century, rather than the norm.<sup>14</sup> Unlike

these who looked for the physical return of Christ to establish the millennium, the postmillennialists, who included the majority of the Protestant denominations, believed that God was working through people to establish his kingdom on earth. Thus their millennial expectations became a motivating force behind much of the social action of the nineteenth century. They could see signs of God's work around them; clearly the millennium was imminent.

Indeed, in the early nineteenth century, millennialism seems to have been the characteristic American symbol for expressing collective hopes and ambitions for the future. Millennialism encompassed American nationalism,

glorified American social order, and supported the idea of progressive improvement destined to make the world over in the image of an idealized American Kingdom of God. 15

This millennial concern to bring the promised kingdom of God on earth had many visible results, notably the myriad benevolent societies that appeared in the early decades of the nineteenth century. The missionary and Bible societies reflected the concern to spread the light of the gospel overseas to dispel both spiritual darkness and political oppression. Ashbel Green, a prominent Presbyterian, and former president of Princeton, wrote in his church magazine that the Czar of Russia had withdrawn his support from the work of Protestant missions and Bible Societies in his country when he realized that with the knowledge of the gospel it would be impossible for his serfs to be content with their lot. The light of truth would show up their sorry condition and cause them to rise against him. "His love of arbitrary power has proved to be stronger than his regard to the word of God or happiness of his people."<sup>16</sup> This comment reflected the American Protestant view of a link between "paganism" and tyranny. But these joint forces of oppression were on the wane as the light of the gospel spread around the world to dispel them both. Green commented, "The great and glorious enterprise of evangelizing the world, by which our age is distinguished, is in general making a successful<sup>17</sup> progress in every part of the world."

Nor was the focus exclusively international. Domestic

concerns were reflected in the associations created to reform individual morals and the shortcomings of society. They believed that religion and true Christian character were essential for the prosperity of a nation, for if liberty descended into licentiousness the nation could not expect to continue in stability and peace. They saw interrelationships between many social ills; poverty, for example, was attributed to the drunkenness of the lower classes. Just as knowledge of the gospel would lead to the overthrow of oppression, so knowledge of God's truth would solve these social problems. If people knew better, argued these reformers, they would behave better, and so education became a major goal of benevolent societies. These included the Home Mission Society, the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the Sunday School movement. Other associations were organized to solve particular evils, such as the movements for peace and temperance. Abolition was one of these, and though it developed into a movement with a character and life of its own, its roots were planted in the American Antislavery Society and the American Colonization Society.

Some historians portray these organizations as a concerted effort by conservative elements in society to limit change and maintain their own status. "For God's greater glory, society's greater stability, and the maintenance of Federal principles, men believing themselves the trustees of

the Lord and their brethren's keepers formed societies to make other people behave."<sup>18</sup> Lois Banner, however, makes a convincing argument against this interpretation, saying that Griffin, the author quoted above, and others have seen only one aspect of the movement. She points out the significant religious, and particularly millennial, motivations to improve society, along with the republican desire to educate "good citizens" and the genuine, though at times naive or misguided benevolence which characterized these organizations.<sup>19</sup> The work of Timothy Smith provides a helpful addition to this picture. His work highlights the religious aspects of the millennialism of this period and shows that not all the focus for reform was on social action. "The triumph of God's justice, peace, and love in society . . . required the sanctification of individuals."<sup>20</sup> This emphasis on conversion and the search for personal holiness was exemplified in Charles G. Finney, the lawyer-turned-evangelist, and Phoebe Palmer, a prominent leader in the holiness movement, particularly among women.<sup>21</sup> Though the search for personal holiness was an individual struggle, it was not devoid of social concern, as Smith concludes that Finney and Methodism were significant "not simply by laying upon popular idealism novel religious meanings, but by bringing to American culture at a moment when ethical concerns were widely shared a highly sophisticated system of theology that aimed at the perfection

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of man and social institutions."

The benevolent societies illustrate the tremendous optimism of early nineteenth-century America. These people saw major problems in society but believed that reform was possible and the solution within their grasp. They counted their freedom from the tyranny and oppression of Europe a blessing of God. It was now their responsibility to fulfill the potential of the United States, by building a society that would bring God's kingdom on earth. What had been for Jonathan Edwards a work of God in the hearts of men was increasingly becoming the work of men in societal reform, though it was still many decades before people would talk about the "social gospel." Armed with this vision, these optimistic reformers set out to bring in the millennium.

This, then, was the background against which James Renwick Willson articulated his millennial thought. His ideas in this area were strongly influenced by his theological professor Alexander McLeod, who in 1814 published a series of thirteen sermons entitled Lectures upon the  
Principal Prophecies of the Revelation.<sup>23</sup> These were well-known beyond Covenanter circles; Fred Hood calls McLeod one of "the two comentators [on the millennium] read most widely by Americans in the middle and southern states."<sup>24</sup> Unlike Covenanter political thought, which was a strong part of the Scottish tradition, this emphasis on and interest in<sup>25</sup> the millennium seems to have been a later development.

This is not to say that the American Covenanters simply adopted the postmillennialism of the surrounding culture. Instead McLeod, and Willson to an even greater extent, shaped these ideas to conform to the Covenanter emphasis on God's sovereignty. The millennial expectation that God would overthrow the nations opposing him and raise up obedient ones echoed Willson's political principles, and his political desire that the kingdoms of this world would become the kingdoms of the Lord was equally a millennial hope. So for Willson the millennium would be, by definition, a fulfillment of his political goals. Unlike many American postmillennialists who united their political and millennial ideas by focusing on America as the fulfillment of millennial prophecy, Willson had no such attachment to the United States. He hoped that as it had been the first to establish representative government, it would also be the first to acknowledge Messiah's place as King of nations. But Willson clearly had a primary allegiance to a higher authority; his citizenship was in the kingdom of heaven.

That Willson was influenced by McLeod's writing on Revelation is not surprising; their close friendship lasted nearly three decades until McLeod's death in 1833. Willson was not slow to criticize those he felt were hindering the cause of Zion, but his journals record only praise of McLeod. Fifteen years after McLeod's death, Willson noted in a sermon outline, "This classification of the essential attributes of

saving faith, is Dr. Alexander McLeod's, my most excellent & very great theological preceptor."<sup>26</sup> This high regard extended to McLeod's work on Revelation. In the Evangelical Witness Willson presented an abstract of Principal Prophecies (extending over three issues), which he called a review,<sup>27</sup> though the sermons had been published ten years before.

This review provides a valuable picture of McLeod's work through Willson's eyes and reveals many ideas important to them both. "The great object of the Apocalypse," McLeod introduced this discussion of Revelation, "is to exhibit the states and fortunes of the Church of Christ, under the last of those dreadful beasts of prey--the Roman empire in its various forms."<sup>28</sup> Thus, he said, Revelation showed on a universal scale, the struggle between the church of Christ and the nations established in opposition to Messiah and supported by the power of Satan. It was the history of a war still to be fought, written in allegorical form. It reassured the Christian church, often persecuted and diminished in number, that God was in control and had destined destruction for the powers opposing Him. The object of the destruction predicted in Revelation was the earth, which McLeod defined as the "Antichristian empire":

It is not precisely the emperor, the kings or any of the kings; nor the people, nor the Pope nor the Roman church, nor the territorial dominions of the pope, or of the emperor, but it is all of these, combined by a corrupt religion, embodied with despotic power, in opposition to the public social order which Christianity demands of the nations of the world, and which shall actually be established in the millennium. 29



McLeod was critical of Europe because of the lack of representative government and the dominance of the Catholic church. The Covenanters had an additional reason to look for disaster to fall on European powers, particularly Britain, because the British government had persecuted and made martyrs of their Covenanter fathers. While America had many sins and much cause to repent, McLeod said, it had not shed the blood of martyrs as nations in Europe had.<sup>30</sup> McLeod then discussed the judgment brought against these evil powers, represented in John's vision by various symbols.

During the first stage, successive seals were opened, followed by the sounding of successive trumpets, each of these events bringing some disaster on earth. Then the angel blew the seventh trumpet which ushered in the period of the vials. When the seventh vial was poured out, the thrones of iniquity would be overthrown and the millennium begin, when "the kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ."<sup>31</sup> McLeod described this at length, saying that the nations, which had always in fact been under Christ, then would be so "professedly and with understanding."<sup>32</sup> "True religion now comes to be formally avowed by them in their political capacity," and they will support, "not a state religion, not a worldly sanctuary, but the pure religion of the Bible, in a consistent manner. The system of revealed truth for the first time influences their whole social relations, and directs their polity: and they

publicly proclaim their submission to Messiah."<sup>33</sup>

The vials were a major focus of Willson's study because they were to accomplish the destruction of the forces in opposition to God. As a follow-up to his review of Principal Prophecies of the Revelation in 1823, he wrote an article in the Evangelical Witness entitled "Exposition of the Seven Vials of Revelation 16," in which he discussed at length the interpretation of each of the vials.<sup>34</sup> He assigned each vial to a period in Western history, saying that the outpouring of the fifth vial which "shook the seat of the beast" was a sign of the Reformation, which dealt a mortal blow to the Roman Catholic church. The sixth vial Willson called the "tide of revolution," which was overthrowing the European governments, first by American independence, then with the revolution in France. Revelation also describes<sup>35</sup> unclean spirits, like frogs, which went over the earth.

Willson interpreted these as the heresies which threatened the church: "infidelity, Socinianism [Willson's term for the modified Calvinism of Samuel Hopkins], Arianism [Unitarianism], Quakerism, Shakerism, idolatry, and Arminianism," and he repeated the apostle's warning that the saints must keep their garments clean in the midst of this.<sup>36</sup> The seventh vial, which caused a great earthquake, would then bring the final overthrow of the governments that raised themselves up in opposition to God's kingdom.

Though these events were of great significance to

Willson, or perhaps because of that, his interpretation of the vials changed several times in his life. Earlier, in 1818, after reading Revelation in family worship, he recorded in his journal his understanding of the symbols and images. Here he focused more on the trumpets, referring to various Reformers, Luther, Calvin, Knox and others, as the successive trumpets. "The American people becoming covenanted I hope will be the sounding of the 7th trumpet. Of course all the vials have yet to [be] poured out[;] of this indeed, I have no doubt."<sup>37</sup> By 1823, in his article on the vials, he believed that they were then in the midst of the sixth vial. That his own views changed did not shake his confidence in the validity of biblical prophecy or the imminence of the events described. While human interpretations could be and often were flawed, the Bible as the word of God remained the unquestioned statement of truth.

Like an amateur ornithologist scanning the sky for birds and consulting his field guide to identify what he has seen, Willson scrutinized the news of events both local and abroad, to see what was happening as predicted in the book of Revelation. In 1830, at the age of fifty, he began an extensive journal, often making entries five or six times a day. The flyleaf of a later volume explained that these ledgers, as he called them, were begun in Albany in 1830 to "record the progress of vial VII, the effusion of which began that year in the plague of cholera."<sup>38</sup> The following,

written early in 1832, is a typical discussion,

Under the hail trumpet, the Danes, or Northmen conquered England, which, I think was less wicked than England is now. From all this I infer that the Russians, under this vial will conquer England. The tame manner in which, the British ministry, & the French king have permitted the Poles to be vanquished, seems to me to have prepared the way for the subjugation of Belgium[;] Holland, with her navy, and Russia with her tremendous army of 1500.000[sic] drilled soldiers, would annoy, yes subjugate England, torn as she now is by factions. . . .

This is only a small portion of a long discussion which he concluded by saying, "These thoughts have been suggested in part by the complexion of the news of this day, from England to the 30th of last November."<sup>39</sup> Elsewhere other examples have been given of the extent to which his journals were an attempt to see the events around him as God's action in the world, and how they were reflected in the "mirror of Revelation."<sup>40</sup>

Willson did not explain exactly why the plague of cholera in 1830 represented the beginning of vial VII. He was interested in assigning dates, not only to past events, but also to prophecy not yet fulfilled. Unlike the premillennial sects who expected the sudden return of Christ and predicted the day and the hour, Willson looked for the millennial kingdom to develop over a period of time. However, he remained intensely interested in when these changes would begin. Suggestions in the prophecies were always quite cryptic: the prophecy of Daniel in the Old Testament, often seen as a counterpart of Revelation, spoke of "times, a time and half a time."<sup>41</sup> A "time" was

interpreted as a year, making this total three and a half years. Correlating with this, Revelation spoke of forty-two months, or elsewhere the same period of time, 1260 days.<sup>42</sup>

Thus it was generally accepted that the millennium was to begin in 1260 years, but 1260 years from when? The obvious choice was the birth of Christ, but the millennium had not come in 1260 A.D., so the commentators looked for a later date. McLeod began with the fall of Rome, dating that with the establishment of the Eastern empire in 606 A.D. By this method, the final destruction would climax and the millennium begin in 1866.<sup>43</sup> Willson agreed with this calculation, but he felt that both Daniel and John would have figured in the slightly shorter Jewish years; thus the commencement of the millennium would be in 1848.<sup>44</sup>

Willson expanded this prediction in an unusual way in a later Evangelical Witness article entitled "The Commencement of the Millennium."<sup>45</sup> Here he said that others, notably one Mason, had begun counting the 1260 years in 532, when Justinian established the bishop of Rome as head of the church. Twelve hundred and sixty years after this was 1792, "the Commencement of the Millennium in politics, or which is the same thing, the determination of the people to be free."<sup>46</sup> (To my knowledge, this is the only time he uses this definition of the millennium.) When Willson calculated this in Jewish years, the result, conveniently, was 1774, the beginning of the American Revolution. Willson called this

event the "political millennium," making a distinction unique to this article, saying the "ecclesiastical millennium" would be 1260 years from 606, the date McLeod had given. He concluded that "the commencement of the ecclesiastical millennium, will be 1848, in the United States, and 18 years after, 1866 in Europe."<sup>47</sup> Thus here he calculated two aspects of the millennium, ecclesiastical and political, each beginning in America and occurring 18 years later in Europe.

One expects to find discussion of this forthcoming event in Willson's journal in 1848, but little was said. In early December 1847 he stated that 1848 had actually begun at the autumnal equinox.<sup>48</sup> On the last day of the year he wrote, "1847. December 31. The last day of Daniel's 1335 days--& of John's 1260. Tomorrow is the day [of] vengeance in[?] God's heart[?]. It will be the beginning of the year of God's redeemed; as it will take vengeance on his & the church's enemies. Amen."<sup>49</sup> Journal entries in 1848 do not speak to this subject beyond the common entries desiring God to overturn the nations; rather surprisingly, there is little discussion of the European revolutions of 1848. Some of this may have been the disillusionment he experienced as he grew older. "Religion is in a lower state in Coldenham, in Newburg, Albany, in Allegheny with [i.e. near] Pittsburgh, and in Cincinnati, than when I began to preach in those places. It is so everywhere I know of--more worldly knowledge & more gospel order & testimony of Christ, but less

evidence of vital godliness. Lord, how long! O Lord,  
 forsake not me, & my family & thy covenant society."<sup>50</sup>

Another possible reason he described little in 1848 was his belief that the millennium would begin, not with a cataclysm, but gradually, as God sent judgment to overthrow these powers in opposition to him. McLeod had spoken of 1866 as the commencement of the millennium and said that it would be fully established by the year 2001.<sup>51</sup> Judgments such as the vials would cause cataclysmic events, but not ones that would necessarily appear supernatural. To Willson, who placed such emphasis on God's sovereign power and direction of events in the world, all events were supernatural. Though he recognized the existence of second causes, he made no distinction between natural and supernatural; it was not as if events continued on their own until God decided to intervene in some miraculous way. For Willson to say that the European powers would fall because of revolutions, beginning with those in America and France, was not in any way to detract from divine causation. God might not be visible on the stage where they played their roles, but he had written the script and was directing the action.

Thus Willson and the other Covenanters placed the emphasis on God's action, while the mainstream millennial ideas tended more and more to emphasize man's role in the process of changing society. It would be a mistake to see this issue in either/or terms; it was not that Covenanters

said God would do it while every one else said that man's labor would bring the millennium. Willson himself wrote at one point, "Heaven will accomplish the work in its own time . . . but he will accomplish it by means. Every Christian should do his duty. If we are always silent, it will never be effected."<sup>52</sup>

Once again, however, the action called for was verbal, repeating the Covenanter emphasis on bearing testimony. That God would use this testimony to change public opinion is a recurring theme in Willson's writing. He spoke of the seventh vial, poured into the air, as the equivalent of public opinion:

For as all great revolutions in the natural world are effected by the changes produced in the atmosphere, so the revolutions in the moral world are produced by the operations of public opinion; and through this medium, all the judgements of the vial are accomplished. The air too is the seat of Satan's empire, who is called the prince of the power of the air. 53

In another article several months later he expanded this discussion of public opinion, saying that it was not "fickle fads," but rather "those habits of thought, reflection, attachment or opposition," that develop over a long period of time, often several generations. These changes might start slowly and not be visible in the beginning, but once they gained momentum they could not be stopped.<sup>54</sup> In discussing political change in America he said, "The religious sentiment of the nation needs only to be informed, awakened to reflection, consolidated, and directed to the object and the



means of accomplishing it. Such a consolidation and effort, would, I apprehend, overawe the ungodly."<sup>55</sup>

The minister had been assigned a special role in bearing the testimony to influence this change. McLeod noted that the vials were given to the angels who poured them out, by one of the four beasts, also translated, "living creatures." These, he said, represent ministers of the gospel:

A few of more public spirit, of more correct information, of greater fidelity to the social concerns of the Christian world, and of less subserviency to the schemes of temporizing politicians, who deliver up to the angels, the plagues which came upon the nation. They do so, by explaining and applying the predictions--by testifying against lawless power--by plainly pronouncing sentence, from the word of God, upon the opposers of righteousness--by actual encouragement to the instruments of vengeance. . . . 56

Willson had a very similar view, and he occasionally referred to fellow ministers as angels, a term which translated literally means messenger. In the beginning of the book of Revelation John was given messages for the various churches of Asia, saying, "Unto the angel of the church at Ephesus, write . . . Unto the angel of the church at Smyrna write . . ." <sup>57</sup> For a while Willson even adopted this as a form of address, referring in his journal to fellow minister <sup>58</sup> John Black as "Angel Black."

Willson's perspective on the ministry is another sign of the unity of the political and millennial aspects of Willson's thought. As ministers proclaimed the truth of God's word to the nations and called political institutions to recognize their true king, they were proclaiming the

testimony that would usher in the millennium. In an exposition of the prophecy of Ezekiel, Willson explained, "The flax line [which in the prophet's vision was used to measure the temple in Jerusalem] is the word of God, the role of moral duty by which the ministers of religion, in the discharge of their public functions, are to measure the civil institutions of the nations where they minister.<sup>59</sup> This is a statement of his political thought, but it comes from an article about the millennium.

This grand change, in which the whole world order would be transformed, would happen as God worked in the world, using those who were obeying his command to testify to the truth. "The voice of God will cause this change."<sup>60</sup> Willson's vision contrasted sharply with the millennial views dominant at that time. Rather than uniting the millennium and politics by focusing on the United States, as the vision of the New Jerusalem became increasingly secularized, Willson, along with McLeod and other Covenanters, saw the reformation in politics and the coming of the millennium as dual parts of the same great transformation that would be accomplished by the hand of God. Willson, following McLeod, had taken a prevalent idea and made it his own, in the process transforming it to support the Covenanter vision of the kingdoms of this world openly and willingly becoming kingdoms that honored Christ the Messiah.

## Notes to Chapter Three

1 James McLeod Willson, quoted in William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, Vol. IX: Lutheran, Reformed Dutch, Associate, Associate Reformed, and Reformed Presbyterian (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1869; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 42.

2 Dietrich G. Buss, "Meeting of Heaven and Earth: A Survey and Analysis of the Literature on Millennialism in America, 1965-1985," paper presented at the Workshop on Christianity and American History, Gordon College, May 1984; James H. Moorhead, "Between Progress and Apocalypse: A Reassessment of Millennialism in American Religious Thought," Journal of American History (December 1984):524-42.

3 Revelation 20:2-5.

4 David E. Smith, "Millenarian Scholarship in America," American Quarterly 17 (Fall 1965):539,40; C.C. Goen, "Jonathan Edwards: A New Departure in Eschatology," Church History 28 (March 1959):29.

5 Nathan O. Hatch, "The Origins of Civil Millennialism in America; New England Clergymen, War with France, and the Revolution," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d ser. 31 (July 1974):429.

6 Alan Heimert, Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966), vii.

7 Samuel Sherwood, quoted in Nathan Hatch, The Sacred Cause of Liberty: Republican Thought and the Millennium in Revolutionary New England (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 21-22. For an opposing view, see Harry S. Stout, The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986). Stout argues that historians have used exclusively printed sermons, which were preached mid-week for special occasions, and were therefore oriented more toward secular topics. The surviving manuscripts of Sabbath sermons, he says, show a strong emphasis on the traditional doctrines of the Christian faith.

8 Heimert, Religion and the American Mind, 100-101.

9 Ernest Tuveson, Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role (Chicago: University of Chicago

Press, 1968), vii and passim.

10 Tuveson discusses this in chapter 6: "The Ennobling War."

11 Timothy L. Smith, "Righteousness and Hope: Christian Holiness and the Millennial Vision in America, 1800-1900," American Quarterly 31 (September 1979):21.

12 Fred J. Hood, Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837 (University, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 70-71.

13 Alice Felt Tyler, Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War (New York: Harper & Row, 1944), chapters 4 and 6.

14 Timothy L. Smith, Revivalism and Social Reform in Mid-Nineteenth-Century America (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1957), 228.

15 Hood, Reformed America, 68.

16 [Ashbel Green], "Public Affairs," Christian Advocate 3 (May 1825): 237.

17 Green, "Religious Intelligences," Christian Advocate 3 (May 1825):230.

18 Clifford Griffin, Their Brother's Keeper: Moral Stewardship in the United States: 1800-1865 (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1960), xx; see also Charles I. Foster, An Errand of Mercy: The Evangelical United Front, 1790-1837 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1960).

19 Lois W. Banner, "Religious Benevolence as Social Control: A Critique of an Interpretation," Journal of American History 60 (June 1973):23-41; see also Hood, Reformed America, 226-227.

20 Smith, "Righteousness and Hope," 23.

21 Ibid., 24-38.

22 ibid., 44.

23 Alexander McLeod, Lectures upon the Principal Prophecies of the Revelation (New York: Whiting & Watson, Eastburn, Kirk & Co., 1814).

24 Hood, Reformed America, 69; Hood does err, however, in assigning Alexander McLeod to the Reformed Dutch church. Though McLeod did receive calls from other denominations, often more prestigious ones offering significantly larger salaries, he chose to remain in the Reformed Presbyterian Church.

25 My cursory reading of the biographical sketches mentioned in the first chapter revealed many sermons and scaffold speeches on Christ's right to be sole head of the church, but little eschatology, beyond the assurance that one day Christ would rule in his rightful place.

26 Lecture Book XXX, 146, 6 August 1848.

27 [James R. Willson], "Review of McLeod on Revelation," Evangelical Witness 1 (April, May, June 1823): 413-21, 452-60, 494-505.

28 Principal Prophecies, quoted in "Review of McLeod," Evangelical Witness 1 (April 1823):417.

29 McLeod, Principal Prophecies, 260.

30 Ibid., 344.

31 Revelation 11:15.

32 McLeod, Principal Prophecies, 200.

33 Ibid., 200-201.

34 [JRW], "Exposition of the Seven Vials of Revelation 16," Evangelical Witness 2 (August and September 1823):3-15, 52-53.

35 Revelation 16:14.

36 [JRW], "Exposition of the Seven Vials," Evangelical Witness (September 1823):53.

37 Commonplace Book, 233, [?] March 1818.

38 Daybook II, 1, 30 January 1846.

39 Daybook I, 74-76, 20 January 1832.

40 [JRW], "Exposition of the Seven Vials," Evangelical Witness (August 1823):3.

41 Daniel 12:7.

42 Revelation 13:5, 11:3.

43 McLeod, Principal Prophecies, 473.

44 [JRW], "Review of McLeod on Revelation," Evangelical Witness 1 (June 1823):500-505.

45 [JRW], "The Commencement of the Millennium," Evangelical Witness 3 (February 1825):78-79.

46 Ibid., 78.

47 Ibid., 79.

48 Daybook II, 231, 4 December 1847.

49 Daybook II, 248 31 December 1847.

50 Daybook II, 129, [?] January 1846.

51 McLeod, Principal Prophecies, 475-76.

52 [JRW], "Travels of Titus in the United States," Evangelical Witness 2 (November 1823):164.

53 [JRW], "Exposition of the Seven Vials," Evangelical Witness 2 (September 1823):55.

54 [JRW], "Essay on the Present State of Europe," Evangelical Witness 2 (December 1823):216.

55 [JRW], "Travels of Titus in the United States," Evangelical Witness 2 (November 1823):164.-

56 McLeod, Principal Prophecies, 235.

57 Revelation 2:1,8.

58 Commonplace Book, 166 [After p. 168, Willson began again with 162; this is the second p.166]; dated: "1820. week 10. day 6." Willson temporarily adopted this method of dating to avoid the 'heathen' names of the months.

59 [JRW], "Ezekiel's Millennial City," Evangelical Witness 3 (May 1825):208.

60 McLeod, Principal Prophecies, 343.

## Chapter Four

. . . a man of genius, whose fancy sometimes runs away with his judgment--a man of fervour, faults and powerful intellect.

Ezra Stiles Ely describing J. R. Willson<sup>1</sup>

Willson's strong beliefs and proclamations about the state of affairs in the United States and the need for the country to correct its position before God did not exist in a vacuum. This chapter will focus on two occasions when his action of proclamation provoked a response. The first shows Willson's relationship to society as a whole; the second examines his role in the dispute which split the Reformed Presbyterian church in 1833. These incidents were shaped not only by Willson's ideals, but also by the strengths and weaknesses of his personality and the continuing influence of past events and people in his life.

In 1839, while writing a history of the Albany congregation, Willson examined his reasons for leaving Coldenham, where he had been for thirteen years, and moving to Albany. His first concern had been to prevent the latter congregation from falling under the influence of those in the denomination who were questioning the Covenanter position of political dissent. Second, he said, was "the prospect of exhibiting the testimony and pleading the cause of God's covenanted administration in a larger theatre."<sup>2</sup> He also mentioned the appeal of operating his academy without having

to take in boarding students, which, he said, had greatly added to his fatigue. It was common at that time for ministers to teach school to supplement their meager salary.

Willson's opportunity to "plead the cause of God's covenanted administration in a larger theatre" did come in Albany. His powerful preaching drew many people, especially to the evening services. Through the fall of 1831, Willson had been preaching on successive topics of the Reformed Presbyterian Testimony. It is significant that the church statement of doctrine was called the Testimony, clearly reflecting the Covenanters' self-proclaimed role as witnesses to God's truth. This was not a standard denominational practice; even the major Presbyterian church in America (often referred to as the General Assembly) called its statement simply a constitution.<sup>3</sup> Willson discussed the subject of Christ's sovereignty under five headings; the final one, on the 23rd of October, was a sermon entitled "Prince Messiah's Claim to Dominion over all Governments and the Disregard of his Authority by the United States in the Federal Constitution."<sup>4</sup>

This discussion of Messiah's dominion closely follows his earlier sermons on the subject; however, Willson was more forceful and pointed in his examination of the American government and constitution than he had been earlier. The government, he said, must recognize that its authority is delegated from Prince Messiah, and this recognition must be specifically stated in the Constitution. Though the United



States had many moral laws, they alone did not constitute recognition of Christ's position. Willson also disagreed with those who argued that the recognition of Christianity in certain state constitutions was sufficient. Because the federal Constitution established the authority over the states, that organ must acknowledge the government's allegiance to God. But it did not. Willson interpreted the First Amendment, the traditional "separation of church and state clause," to say that since Congress is forbidden to do anything for the "advancement of the Christian religion," then "any law that would encourage or countenance an act of homage to Jehovah" is forbidden by the Constitution. For Willson, therefore, the government said essentially it would do nothing to promote the honor of God's name, a stance that placed it in direct opposition to God's command.<sup>5</sup>

Willson was particularly disturbed by the number of "ungodly" men who held office, a violation, he felt, of the scriptural command that rulers be upright and God-fearing. To demonstrate this point, he examined the character of the presidents of the United States. He praised the role George Washington played in the independence and establishment of this country, but noting that "there is no satisfactory evidence that Washington was a professor of the christian religion, or even a specific believer in its divinity . . . ", he concluded that Washington was a Deist.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Jefferson, he said, was an "avowed infidel" and "notoriously addicted to immorality"; about Madison he

wrote, "For the honor of his country, we hope that he will not contrive to die on the fourth of July [as both Adams and Jefferson had done]." His only comment about James Monroe was that he "lived and died like a second-rate Athenian philosopher."<sup>7</sup>

In addition to describing the nation's ungodly leaders, Willson denounced the evil of slavery, which he felt was supported by the Constitution, in the three-fifths clause and in having permitted the slave trade to continue until 1808. The laws of the United States enforced slavery; hence swearing to uphold the Constitution and the nation's laws was swearing to support this evil institution. For Willson this was yet another sign that the United States was in rebellion against Messiah, who came to earth to "proclaim liberty for the captives."<sup>8</sup>

At the end of his sermon, almost as a postscript, Willson spoke briefly about the antimasonic controversy which was then raging in New York, praising the Antimasonic party which, he said, declared that there should be moral qualifications for holding public office in the United States.

The common moral sense of the community will act on the principle, that immoral oaths unfit those who swear them for being the public conservators of the social order. . . . Whatever some may intend, the great body of the people who constitute this party, are determined that the rulers of this nation shall be moral men--and they will, in this matter prevail, for Heaven is on their side. 9

This sermon gave Willson the opportunity he had been

seeking to proclaim the duty and allegiance that government owed to Prince Messiah. The conclusion reflects his confidence that the Lord was working through the Covenanters' faithful proclamation of their testimony. "The public mind will soon become so enlightened by the Word and Spirit of the Lord that the atheist and the deist shall no longer be able to sustain their power."<sup>10</sup>

The public response to this sermon illustrates the gap between Willson's basic outlook and that of the majority of citizens in Albany. The first reaction came the following week, when the substance of the sermon was published in the Albany Daily Advertiser. It had been submitted by a correspondent who felt that the "National Reformation it espoused ought to be supported." This writer also commented on Willson's delivery, "He pours it [a sermon] forth over the pulpit upon his hearers in a torrent of thundering eloquence, like the waters of the cataract of Niagara, which leaves an indelible impression on the mind."<sup>11</sup> This was apparently the only positive response in print, and even this one in many ways missed the point of the sermon. Willson himself did not approve of the article, noting in his journal several weeks later, "an unfair abstract of the sermon was given by a Masonic lawyer."<sup>12</sup> Willson had not intended simply another jeremiad on the moral decline of the nation. While that decline concerned him, he looked to the cause, which was, for him, the United States' refusal to honor Christ the Redeemer. The root problem was the need for the young American

government to take a further step. Once the government recognized that its authority to rule came from Prince Messiah, the moral problems of society, which were symptoms of the deeper issue, would be solved more easily.

This account precipitated two more letters to the newspaper. One, signed "A Professor [meaning one who professes] of Christianity," strongly objected to Willson's apparent attempts to unite church and state. Religion, the correspondent wrote, was a necessary part of American life, but it was to be in the "hearts, and not made the basis of civil or political law."<sup>13</sup> This American notion of the privatization of religion was contrary to the Covenanter position that all areas of life were under Christ's lordship. For Willson, a minister of the gospel was responsible for preaching about godly governments as well as personal piety. The "Professor of Christianity" continued, "With deference to Mr. Wilson [sic], than whom no clergyman has more of my respect, I would ask whether he has not carried his principle, or whether his principle has not carried him a little too far."<sup>14</sup> What Willson considered a staunch and admirable devotion to principle, other Americans viewed as excessive.

Several months later, in January of 1832, Willson published the sermon, which provoked an even greater public outcry, most notably a debate in the state legislature. This debate was recorded briefly in the antimasonic paper, the Albany Evening Journal, edited by Thurlow Weed, later a

well-known journalist and politician. A full account of the debate was printed by the Albany Argus, which Willson called the "state paper" because it supported the administration of Governor Throop.<sup>15</sup> The Assembly, the lower house of the legislature, traditionally asked clergymen of the city to open each day's session with prayer. Two days following the publication of "Prince Messiah," a resolution was introduced in the house stating that as Willson had "wantonly assailed the good name of the revered Washington, and insulted the memory of the illustrious Jefferson," as well as attacked members of the house, he should be excluded from the list of clergymen who were to serve as chaplains. (In the notes accompanying the pamphlet, Willson had accused Mr. Myers, a Jewish delegate, of opposing prayer to Jesus Christ. The sermon also stated that 27 members had voted against prayer in the Assembly. The vote had in fact been on whether to pay these clergymen from state funds, and those who voted no felt they had been unjustly portrayed as "anti-prayer."<sup>16</sup>)

During the debate, not a single member spoke in favor of the pamphlet, and the entire discussion concerned whether passage of the resolution would "make the mole-hill of glory which the author of the pamphlet, in his blind and crooked course, has raised to hi[s] fame, a mountain of importance," as one member grandiloquently stated. The major protest against the pamphlet focused on Willson's criticism of Washington, Jefferson, and others. One member spoke of "the glorious name of the Father of his Country . . . That name is

a hallowed one--from our earliest years we have been taught to venerate it." Another proclaimed that "he who had the hardihood and impudence to call Washington an infidel and Jefferson a libertine, could scarcely receive anything short of severe and summary condemnation."<sup>17</sup>

Though Willson's accusations were made in strong, rather abusive language, his conclusions would not be seen as particularly slanderous in the twentieth century. That Washington was a deist rather than a dedicated orthodox Christian and that Jefferson was not always chaste in his morals are accepted today. But this debate took place in January, 1832, less than a month before the exuberant national celebration of Washington's centenary, when the praise of this hero was at its peak. To Willson, this canonizing of Washington was yet another example of the rebellion of the American government against God. On Washington's birthday he wrote,

The Daily Advertiser, the Federal paper . . . says 'the child,' meaning Washington, 'increased in wisdom & in stature favoured by heaven and beloved of men.' Thus he applies to Washington what the evangelist applies to Christ. In the conclusion of the same article, he adds, 'Spirit of our departed Washington, if it is permitted thee to mingle once more with thy countrymen, descend & spread wide among us, the influence of thy principles, and the admiration of thy example.' Thus he prays to the titular saint. 18

The Assembly also voiced strong opinions that ministers ought not to meddle in politics. The members were upset that Willson "was willing to forget the high sanctions of his office and to throw himself into the arena of political

contention." Another spoke of him as a political priest.

Such condemnation reveals how completely Willson's view of the role of ministers in society differed from the legislature's. Willson saw himself as the ambassador of the King of kings whose direct authority extended over the nations as fully as over the church. As he had written in the prospectus to the Evangelical Witness:

    Holding Messiah as the centre of God's counsels and administrations, and the universe the field on which he expiates his glory, we place all things in creation under contribution; and shall not shun to declare the whole purpose of Jehovah, nor deem any creature which He has made, or any event which He has decreed, unworthy of our notice. 20

As with the magazine, so from the pulpit; all things were under God as Creator and Christ as Redeemer and were appropriate subjects for the attention of His ministers. Governments, no less than individuals, had duties toward God, and ministers were to call them to place their allegiance in the proper place. Willson's frame of reference was completely different from the American principle of the separation of church and state. He agreed that the institutions of the church and the state were to be distinct; the Scottish Covenanters had died to maintain the church's independence from the state. However, each institution was under God and should follow the dictates set forth in the Bible. This concept was foreign to the New York Assembly, who, for all their debate, did not deal with Willson's main point. They saw only criticism of the hallowed founding fathers, and of themselves, and felt affronted that a

minister of the gospel should meddle in politics. They did not respond to the testimony Willson was proclaiming. Though he was a forceful and eloquent speaker, his main thrust was ignored.

At the end of the lengthy debate, the resolution against Willson passed 96 to 2. Even the two members voting against it specified that they "concurred with the house in the estimate of the pamphlet. But they were unwilling to contribute to the notoriety, which they were satisfied, was the aim of its author."<sup>21</sup>

In relation to this incident Willson wrote, both in his journals and in print, that on February 22, the night of Washington's birthday, he had been burned in effigy by a drunken mob of revelers for having preached and published "Prince Messiah." He himself was out of town, which prevented bodily harm, and also prevented him from being a witness to the incident. I have not found any external evidence to confirm or disprove this event, but it assumed great significance in Willson's life. He described it in an article on persecutions of the church in his magazine the Albany Quarterly early in the summer of 1832, and he wrote of it a number of times in his journals.<sup>22</sup> The entire incident, but particularly the burning in effigy, loomed large in his memory, and like his first Covenanter communion, he used it as a reference point to date other events. He began the account of a friend's visit, "the fall after the attack on Prince Messiah by New York Assembly . . ."<sup>23</sup>



It is difficult to determine Willson's personal response to these events because, despite the extent of his journals, they were intellectual rather than emotional in nature. He did not say, "I am angry," or "this hurt me." Even his journals were proclamation of God's truth. Sometimes he used them to draft articles or speeches, but even sections not directly intended for an audience have the same declamatory style. Willson's journals were not so much intended to explain or justify his actions to posterity as they were further manifestations of his zeal to examine everything around him in light of God's working in the world. The journals do give some indication that he felt isolated and alienated by this incident. He wrote that he knew of no magazine, except the Covenanter, the Reformed Presbyterian periodical in Ireland, that would agree with the principles of "Prince Messiah." But, he stated, God, the angels, and "all the spirits of just men made perfect in heaven" held similar principles; therefore he was assured his cause would triumph.<sup>24</sup>

Willson only briefly describes the effects of the sermon. In November he said that it had influenced the outcome of the state elections, and he also credited it with bringing together early antislavery sentiment in Albany.<sup>25</sup> That he commented so little shows that his primary concern was to be a faithful witness to God's truth, while the effect of the sermon in changing hearts and minds would be the work of God's spirit. Though public acclamation was not his goal,

the number of times he spoke of being burned in effigy reveals that he did feel persecuted. Shortly after "Prince Messiah" was published, Willson wrote in his journal, "I still rely on God who has provided for me & my household, that he will not forsake me & mine, while I am engaged in pleading for his kingly honour & glory. In his hands I leave my reputation."<sup>26</sup> The opposition Willson encountered, though discouraging, also confirmed that he was faithfully performing his task because persecution had been prophesied for the Witnesses in Revelation.

What made this time more difficult for Willson was that while he was being rejected by the Albany legislature and criticized in the press, within the church itself a debate was raging about the church's proper relation to civil government.<sup>27</sup> Willson believed he was standing firmly in the centuries-old Covenanter position, proclaiming the testimony which was their God-given task in bringing the future kingdom. However, some of his fellow ministers were heartily embarrassed by Willson's outspoken criticism of the American government. The traditional Covenanter position on civil government was once again being questioned as the denomination struggled with its position in relation to American society.

In his book Social Sources of Denominationalism, H. Richard Niebuhr discusses the changes immigrant churches experienced when they came to this country.<sup>28</sup> He describes simultaneous forces for accommodation and conflict, as

religious groups sought to fit in with the surrounding society, but at the same time to maintain their distinctiveness. The interaction of these forces pulling in opposite directions shaped American denominations, particularly between 1812 and the Civil War. He mentions the Covenanters and the Seceders as an example of this process. That most members of both groups united in 1782 to form the Associate Reformed church was an example of accommodation, as they admitted that former disagreements no longer applied in America.

The Covenanters who did not join the Associate Reformed church continued to emphasize the Scottish tradition. Niebuhr points out that to maintain a unique European character within American society requires increasing isolation, like the Amish or the Mennonites.<sup>29</sup> The Reformed Presbyterians, however, while holding themselves apart from society around them, were not to withdraw from the world. Instead they were to testify against its evils and seek to bring reform by the proclamation of the truth. These requirements placed them in the difficult position of refusing to participate in society but continually orienting themselves toward it, as Willson directed, so their testimony would be effective. To counteract pressure to conform to society and maintain their Scottish character and ideas required continual emphasis on their unique position. As a committee report at an 1830 meeting of Synod stated, "It is our decided conviction that the only sure ground of success

in that work in which we are engaged, is placed in a minute and conscientious adherence to the doctrines of this church, as they are exhibited to the world in our standards."<sup>30</sup>

David M. Carson, in his history of the church, discusses this question of accommodation. Early in the century there had been great optimism that the Covenanter proclamation of the sovereignty of Christ over the nations would soon be brought to fruition in the millennium. But when the society did not move in the direction the church expected, pressure increased for the church to conform to the surrounding society. Carson argues that it was particularly difficult for the prominent ministers in the large eastern cities (notably Wylie and McLeod) to continue to maintain the extreme views of the Covenanter tradition. In the church as a whole, the commitment to distinctiveness seemed to be on the wane. Between 1829 and 1833, five young ministers left the church to join the Presbyterians, including the sons of two prominent ministers, and J. R. Johnston, a son-in-law of Alexander McLeod.<sup>31</sup>

The question of political dissent was brought to Synod several times. In 1821, a Covenanter settler in Illinois sent a paper to Synod asking about the question of serving on juries. His region of southern Illinois had a large number of Covenanter settlers, and it was often difficult to find men willing to swear oaths and serve on juries. At issue was Synod's earlier statement prohibiting jury duty. Because this directive had not been widely communicated, some felt

the official church policy remained in doubt. At this point, rather than responding with the firm statement of 1806, Synod stated that "no connexion with the laws, officers, or the order of the state, is prohibited by the church, except what truly involves immorality."<sup>32</sup> This was technically a restatement of the church's position, but it revealed a significant change in emphasis. Earlier writings, such as Wylie's Two Sons of Oil, held that a person who wished to engage in political activity, had to prove that he was not by his act implying approval of the government.<sup>33</sup> The implication of the new statement shifted the burden of proof, saying that those who wished to prohibit certain political acts had to prove that such acts specifically involved immorality.

Another reflection of the pressure for accommodation was the reaction to an 1825 proposal from the General Assembly of the Presbyterian church for a "plan of correspondence." Alexander McLeod, a good friend of Stephen Rowan who chaired the Presbyterian committee, was a strong supporter of this interaction and was appointed chairman of the Reformed Presbyterian committee. The 1827 report of the joint committee agreed on the goal of using "all scriptural means . . . to bring their several ecclesiastical connections to uniformity in doctrine, worship and order . . ." and to "recognize the validity of each other's acts and ordinances."<sup>34</sup> This statement represented a significant change from the Covenanters' vigorous denunciation of the

errors of other churches. McLeod himself had been the primary author of the Reformed Presbyterian Testimony which concluded each chapter by listing the errors of other denominations.

The leader of those opposing this proposal was James Renwick Willson. According to a Samuel Wylie, Willson had threatened that if this plan passed, he would leave the church and join the "true Dutch Reformed church." This recently created denomination was a group of congregations which had broken with the large body of Dutch Reformed churches over similar issues of accommodation to American society.<sup>35</sup> Several years later, Willson published the speech he had made against the proposed "treaty of correspondence," in which he promised to support it "should it appear that this treaty is as well-calculated to please God, and promote his Covenant-cause, as it is to procure popular applause."<sup>36</sup> He pointed out the heresies which had entered the Presbyterian church since its association with the Congregationalists in New England and threatened that these heresies would then enter the Reformed Presbyterian church. In addition, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church had proposed correspondence with the Roman Catholic church. Thus, Willson predicted, the object of all of this correspondence was the horrible prospect of union with the Papists. For Willson, the prospect of deserting the distinctive principles of the Covenanter testimony would result in increasing heresy, and finally

sacrifice the great principles and achievements of the Reformation to allow the church to be swallowed up by the Roman Catholics.<sup>37</sup> The proposal for correspondence with the Presbyterians was tabled indefinitely, but Willson said it was the origin of the later problems in the church.<sup>38</sup>

In 1832 a committee chaired by Samuel B. Wylie presented to Synod a "Pastoral Address" dealing with the topic of the church's relations with civil government.<sup>39</sup> The key argument of this statement was that while Reformed Presbyterians in America held to the testimony of the martyrs in Scotland, they would agree to differ on certain points of interpretation, as Synod had not yet laid down a final statement on civil government. "The morality or immorality of the character of these institutions, the recognition or the rejection of their authority, therefore, could never have been any legitimate term of communion in our church."<sup>40</sup> Instead, this had been left to local jurisdictions to decide for individual cases. The authors continued to anticipate a future state in which government would acknowledge Christ's lordship but argued that this ideal should not be held up as the minimum standard of acceptance. The United States, they said, protects life, property and religion, has many other good characteristics and is "the best government on earth and of all governments existing, possess[es] the fairest claim to be designated the ordinance of God."<sup>41</sup>

Along with these general comments, the Pastoral Address had harsh criticism for Willson's "Prince Messiah" sermon.

Though the version presented to Synod contained only indirect criticisms, specific reference to Willson and his sermon was added in the published pamphlet. Wylie, the primary author of the Pastoral Address, scorned Willson's assertions that the Congress was forbidden by the first amendment to do anything to advance the Christian religion and that the omission of God's name from the Constitution was "a deliberate deed, done with intent to declare national independence of the Lord of Hosts."<sup>42</sup>

The authors [the diatribe continued] thus publicly disclaim all responsibility for the obnoxious sentiments contained in the publication above referred to, and express their unqualified reprobation of the inconsistent, partial and erroneous statements with which it is replete. The mental alienation under which its author labours, divests him of all personal responsibility. And as this has now become notorious, there is little danger that the ravings of insanity will be mistaken for the expressions of truth.<sup>43</sup>

In addition, five pages of this thirty-two page pamphlet were dedicated to defending Washington's Christianity. Such a response was not unexpected from the Albany legislature but was surprising from the author of Two Sons of Oil.

Not surprisingly, Willson was the outspoken leader of the conservative side of this debate, those who felt that the church had always forbidden participation in American government and that this policy should not be changed.<sup>44</sup>

The official church magazine, the American Christian Expositor, was edited by Alexander McLeod, but because of ailing health, many of his duties were performed by his son John Neil McLeod. The younger McLeod, like his father a



Covenanter minister, was a supporter of Samuel B. Wylie (whose daughter he had married), and the Expositor reflected his views that the position of dissent was no longer necessary.

Willson, upset by this "new light" slant of the church magazine, began to publish an alternative, entitled the Albany Quarterly. Ostensibly a history of the church, this periodical also contained a section of articles and current religious news. It is not coincidental that Willson's church magazine was two-thirds history. Here again we see the Covenanter link between his "inordinate sense of history" and his refusal to consider any form of compromise. Willson felt that the best defense against the forces of accommodation threatening the church was a strong dose of history, to remind people of their Covenanter heritage and why they held the convictions they did. In the "Essays" section of the magazine, Willson wrote forcefully on the subject of civil government. In an article entitled "Present Duty of Reformed Presbyterians," he spoke of the danger of the church's abandoning principles which it knew to be required by God and accused his opponents of lowering the standards of church membership simply to increase numbers in the church. Only the principle of Messiah's headship, Willson wrote, "can justify them in continuing to preserve a separate establishment."<sup>45</sup>

With two rival magazines and the publication of the Pastoral Address, events were hastening to a crisis. A

special meeting of Synod suspended the men who had published the pamphlet, but they refused to leave their pulpits. At the following regularly scheduled meeting of the church high court in April, 1833, dissension erupted with the calling of the roll, and Wylie and his supporters withdrew to form an alternate Synod. Though there were endless strictures passed by each group and many polemics published pointing out the errors of the other, the split seems to have been regarded as a fait accompli, and reconciliation was not a significant topic of discussion.<sup>46</sup> The two denominations, about equal in size, continued to exist separately, both called the Reformed Presbyterian Church, though Wylie's group was later distinguished by the term General Synod.

For the rest of his life Willson was very bitter about "Wylie & Co," as he called them. Though his journals do not reveal his private emotional responses, the break with an elder minister whom he had so greatly respected must have been particularly painful. But Willson's distress only sharpened his tongue and his pen. In the Albany Quarterly he printed a list of "Clerical Temptations," several of which were aimed anonymously but directly at other ministers. He spoke of the temptation to swear allegiance to the government simply to be appointed a professor at a university, a charge which presumably referred to S. B. Wylie.<sup>47</sup> Many cruel personal attacks from both sides survive in print, and it is probably better that what was said in the heat of debate on the floor of Synod lies buried in antiquity. There are

indications enough that it would not bring honor to those who bore the name of Christian.

The death of Alexander McLeod in early 1833, in the midst of this controversy, was a tragedy. It appears that even to the end he continued in the role of peacemaker. The same man who had advised Willson to refrain from rash judgments and actions wrote in 1831, "There is room enough<sup>48</sup> for all who love Zion without jostling along the road."

In a late letter, which unfortunately has no date, McLeod spoke of being near death and asked Willson to come to preach for him. He wished that Willson and McMaster (one of the leaders of the "New Lights") could be at his home together, as they had been before. Though the letter is difficult to decipher, he seems to have wanted them to appear in public<sup>49</sup> together, perhaps as a sign of reconciliation. In an article in the Albany Quarterly in late 1832, Willson says that Dr. McLeod defended him against criticisms S. B. Wylie had published in the Christian Expositor.<sup>50</sup> Willson valued this continuing sign of McLeod's respect and friendship; on one letter he noted that it had always been his custom when in New York to stop at Dr. McLeod's home, "as much as if he had been my father, which indeed he was."<sup>51</sup>

In the church controversy, McLeod had supported his son John Neil and was considered by many to have sided with his son and S. B. Wylie. Because of his prominence and the great respect he was accorded, there was substantial debate over where his final loyalties lay. A published deathbed

statement seemed to support the traditional Covenanter position, but the wording was vague at crucial points.<sup>52</sup>

Willson, however, was convinced that the dying minister had remained true to the Covenanter position, and only for reasons of infirmity and fatherly prejudice had he permitted the "New Lights" to claim his support.

Willson continued to proclaim God's testimony to public institutions and struggled to keep the Covenanter church in line with the principles of its Scottish heritage. He became embroiled in later controversies, some of which seem almost trivial, such as his refusal to compromise on whether a precentor, the man who led the congregational singing by "lining out" the Psalms for the congregation to repeat, should sing two lines of the Psalm at a time or only one.

Other issues were of much greater significance. In 1839 Willson reacted angrily to a resolution by the leaders of the Coldenham congregation that blacks might sit only in the balcony. He appealed to Presbytery to overturn their decision, writing a twelve-point "Reason of Protest" against this "Liberia of the Sanctuary."

You dishonour the adopted sons and daughters of God Almighty. You will not pretend to deny that the coloured members of the congregation are saints. . . . You dishonour Christ. He admits them to sit with him at his communion table & yet you dishonour him by your [two illegible words] declaring that those who eat & drink with him, shall not sit on the same floor, lest you be defiled. What! Christ's guests defile you! 53

Willson argues that their resolution encouraged slavery by depriving blacks of their rights solely on the basis of

color. He then expressed a more individual concern: "You debase so aged & most exemplary a Christian as Jephtha Williams, [who] may be as dear to God as any who voted for that resolution, of the privilege of taking a seat near the stove. . . . The effect, if this resolution prevails, will be to prevent such infirm people from attending church, when the weather is incliment[sic]."<sup>54</sup> He supported these points with many biblical quotes and logical reasons, as he did all his other arguments, and closed his statement with a harsh response to the reasons given for the proposal. "Public sentiment . . . is that sentiment the rule by which a Covenanter consistory [ruling body of elders and deacons] is to be directed in judgement? Is that God's peace in his church which is procured, by depriving the disciples of Christ of their rights? Are all the poor, who do not pay much into your coffers, to be trodden down because of their poverty? O shame!"<sup>55</sup>

On the evils of slavery and the rights of blacks, J.R. Willson was as staunch and uncompromising as he was on the issues of civil government or church doctrine. The Scottish heritage which created this tenacious and uncompromising character remained a dominant influence to the end of Willson's life.

### Conclusion

J. D. Douglas's description of the Scottish Covenanters, "with their inordinate sense of history and their contempt for the suggestion of reasonable compromise when principles are at stake," provides a succinct picture of James Renwick Willson.<sup>56</sup> That this portrayal rang true 150 years later on this side of the Atlantic illustrates, as this thesis has attempted to show, the extent to which Willson was shaped by his Covenanter heritage and made their cause, their principles, and their mentality his own. The result was a man of staunch and uncompromising character, a tenacious fighter for the truth as he saw it.

The goal of Willson's life was to be a witness to the testimony God had entrusted to the Covenanters, to proclaim Messiah's authority over the nations of this world. From one perspective, Willson's life was a failure; his opportunity in Albany to "exhibit the testimony and plead the cause of God's covenanted administration in a larger theatre" resulted only in his censure by the legislature and the press for issues tangential to his main point. By the end of his life there appeared, if anything, less possibility that the United States government would openly acknowledge the sovereignty of Christ. But Willson's focus was proclamation rather than implementation. His responsibility was to testify faithfully; changing men's hearts was the work of God. He could say with the apostle Paul, "I planted, . . . but God gave the increase."<sup>57</sup> Though disappointed not to see the

inauguration of the millennium, the time when the kingdoms of the world willingly and openly would become the kingdoms of the Lord, he ended his life in the full confidence that the Lord would yet bring that to pass.

The irony of Willson's life is that his strengths were better suited to seventeenth-century Scotland than to the United States two centuries later. His force of will and unflinching commitment would have served him well in facing the Scottish Council or the scaffold. But like a commander who prepares his defenses for an attack by sea and then finds it comes by land, Willson's character was out of place in his own environment. He was facing a society that did not execute dissenters; it condemned them to be ignored. Willson never wavered in his proclamation, but the public was not listening. While he did not suffer physical death because of his ideas, he endured martyrdom of a different sort. His unyielding temperament was called fanaticism, his commitment to one standard of truth, bigotry. American society had no interest in acknowledging Messiah's dominion and disregarded Willson's attempts to be Messiah's representative. As Samuel Eliot Morison wrote of another more famous dissenter, Henry David Thoreau, "His revolt was directed against a society so confident and vigorous that it could afford to ignore him."

## Notes to Chapter Four and Conclusion

1 Ezra Stiles Ely was a prominent Presbyterian minister in Philadelphia, and a friend of Willson's; this comment was quoted by John Forsyth in William B. Sprague, Annals of the American Pulpit, Vol. IX: Lutheran, Reformed Dutch, Associate, Associate Reformed, and Reformed Presbyterian (New York: Robert Carter & Bros., 1869; reprint ed., New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), 45.

2 Daybook I, 204, 30 August 1839.

3 The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, containing the Confession of Faith, the Catechisms, and the Directory for the Worship of God: Together with the Plan of Government and Discipline, as amended and ratified by the General Assembly, at their sessions in May 1821, 2nd. ed. (Philadelphia: Alexander Tower, 1833).

4 James R. Willson, Prince Messiah's Claim to Dominion over all Governments and the Disregard of his Authority by the United States in the Federal Constitution (Albany: printed by Packard & White, 1832).

5 Ibid., 20.

6 Ibid., 31.

7 Ibid., 32.

8 Ibid., 27.

9 Ibid., 42.

10 Ibid.

11 Albany Daily Advertiser, 31 October [1831], Willson's clipping, marked in the margin, "No. I".

12 Daybook I, 62, 18 November 1831.

13 Albany Daily Advertiser, 1 November [1831], Willson's clipping, marked "No. II".

14 Ibid.

15 Albany Argus, 30 January 1832.

16 Ibid.



17 Ibid.

18 Daybook I, 83, 22 February 1832.

19 Albany Argus, 30 January 1832.

20 [JRW], "Prospectus," Evangelical Witness 1 (August 1822):6.

21 Albany Argus, 30 January 1832.

22 [JRW], "Persecutions," Albany Quarterly, n.d. [see note on Willson papers], first issue [after p. 48], 19. [This issue includes news of the meeting of Synod in April, 1832, and was criticized by S. B. Wylie in the July 1832 issue of the American Christian Expositor, so the date falls somewhere between April and June.] Accounts in his journals include: Daybook I, 207-08, 30 August 1839; Lecture Book XXV, 94, 20 April 1847; Lecture Book XXVI, 23ff, 9 July 1847; Lecture Book XI (2d ser.), 171, 22 February 1853. However, there seems to be no description of the incident at the time it happened. This is difficult to establish for certain, as that particular volume (Daybook I) is a hodge-podge of material and contains many sections written at different times.

23 Daybook II, 85, 17 April 1847.

24 Daybook I, 79, 27 January 1832.

25 Daybook I, 62, 18 November 1831; Daybook I, 209, 30 August 1839.

26 Daybook I, 77-78, 29 January 1832.

27 Gilbert McMaster, The Moral Character of Civil Government, considered with reference to the political institutions of the United States, in four letters (Albany: W. C. Little, 1832) [Judging from the handwriting and style of the marginal comments, this was JRW's copy, but the margins were trimmed when it was later bound, leaving only tantalizing hints of what he said]; David C. Scott, Calm Examination of Dr. McMaster's Letters on Civil Government (Newburgh, N.Y.: printed by Charles Cushman, 1832); Gilbert McMaster, A Brief Inquiry into the Civil Relations of Reformed Presbyterians in the United States according to their Judicative Acts . . . (Schenectady: printed by S. S. Riggs, 1833); David C. Scott, An Exposure of Dr. McMaster's "Brief Inquiry" (New York: printed by H. Bunce, 1833); and others.

28 H. Richard Niebuhr, Social Sources of

Denominationalism (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1929).

29 "Only isolation enabled some small remnants of the Covenanter and Seceder Presbyterians to maintain themselves in independence from the united body, though the hoary traditions of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Scotland, to which they appealed for justification of their separate existence, had lost meaning in nineteenth-century America," Niebuhr, Social Sources of Denominationalism, 220.

30 "Meeting of Synod 1830," American Christian Expositor 1 (August 1830):62-63.

31 David M. Carson, "History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church in America, to 1871," (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1964), 93 ff. He also raises the question of whether the strong party spirit of this era (Jackson vs. the Whigs) might have influenced church members to want to vote on that issue, but says he found no evidence to support this. The debate clearly centered on the issue of accommodation.

32 Ibid, 96.

33 Samuel B. Wylie, Two Sons of Oil; or the Faithful Witness for Magistracy and Ministry upon a Scriptural Basis (1803; reprint, Montgomery, N.Y.: printed by Thomas & Edwards, 1832), 47.

34 Quoted in Carson, "History of the Reformed Presbyterian Church," 97-98.

35 [S. B. Wylie], "Sessions of Synod . . . August 1831," American Christian Expositor 2 (July 1832):107.

36 JRW, "'Arguments against the Treaty of Correspondence with the General Assembly,' Speech of Dr. Wilson[sic] in General Synod, 1827," Albany Quarterly, n.d., fourth issue [after p. 294], 43.

37 Ibid.

38 JRW, "Speech of Dr. Willson, 1827," Albany Quarterly, n.d., fourth issue [after p. 294], 43.

39 The Original Draft of a Pastoral Address, from the Eastern Subordinate Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church to the people under their immediate inspection (New York: W. Applegate, printer, 1832).

40 Ibid., 9.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 20.

43 Ibid.

44 This is one place where the Covenanter experience does not fit Niebuhr's thesis. He reasoned that, as one might expect, recent immigrants would hold to European tradition, while native-born Americans would prefer assimilation. Here, interestingly enough, Willson, the third-generation American, is the conservative, while Wylie, and to some extent McLeod, both immigrants (Wylie from Ulster and McLeod from Scotland), were supporting change.

45 [JRW], "Present Duty of Reformed Presbyterians," Albany Quarterly, n.d., second issue [after p. 96], 17.

46 Statement of Some Recent Transactions in the Southern Reformed Presbytery, . . . by several ministers of the Southern Presbytery (New York: Greenwich, printer, 1833); Minutes of the Eastern Subordinate Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church . . . April 9-16, 1833, Albany Quarterly Extra, published by the Order of Synod (Albany: Hosford & Wait, printer, [1833]); Proceedings of the General Synod of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, in North America, Session XVI [the group which had withdrawn considered itself to be a continuation, not something new] (Philadelphia: John Young, printer, 1833); and others.

47 [JRW], "Clerical Temptations," Albany Quarterly, n.d., first issue [after p. 48], 20.

48 Alexander McLeod to JRW, 8 October 1831.

49 Alexander McLeod to JRW, n.d. [last letter of Willson's stitched bundle].

50 [JRW], "Dr. Wylie's 'Animadversions on Albany Quarterly' Corrected," Albany Quarterly, n.d., third issue [after p. 144], 21; see also S. B. Wylie, "Animadversions on Albany Quarterly," American Christian Expositor 2 (July 1832):101-14.

51 Alexander McLeod to JRW, 28 July 1831; Willson's comment on reverse.

52 Uncatalogued single printed sheet, Willson Collection.

53 Uncatalogued mss., signed "Jas. R. Willson, Coldenham 1839. Dec. 17".

54 Ibid; The large Williams family were faithful Covenanters in Coldenham, and one son, Charles, attended the church seminary under J. R. Willson in Cincinnati. Tragically, he was compelled to give up his theological studies because of a head injury received when trying to aid another black man. This man was being dragged by some whites toward the Ohio River; presumably they intended to kidnap or return him to slavery in Kentucky. This information from Robert M. Copeland, Spare No Exertions: 175 Years of the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary (Pittsburgh: by the seminary, 1986), 53.

55 Ibid.

56 J. D. Douglas, Light in the North: The Story of the Scottish Covenanters (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 7.

57 I Corinthians 3:6.

58 Samuel Eliot Morison, Oxford History of the American People (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 527.

## Appendix

## Note on the Willson Papers

After the death of Mrs. J. B. Willson, the papers of the four men were taken to the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, where they are in the process of being catalogued. This thesis used only the papers of James Renwick Willson and followed his identification of its contents. A brief description of his papers will make my notations clearer.

J. R. Willson's earliest writing of a personal nature was a commonplace book he and his wife began in 1812. Though this started with carefully copied quotations, Willson filled a large part of it with notes for his book on Christ's atonement and later used this volume as a journal. It will be referred to as Commonplace Book. In 1830 Willson began to keep a daily record (he usually made entries four or five times a day) in large volumes which he called Day Books. It is not known how many of these there were because only two survive. One, called Day Book I, dates from the early 1830's, though half the book was later used in the mid-1840's, and the other, which I have called Day Book II, from 1846-1848.

Willson generally gave his sermons and lectures from outlines. (He called them skeletons and once commented, "No one makes skeletons like my brother Samuel.") These were kept in small notebooks, often ones he made himself by stitching together bundles of paper (he usually used the sheets wrapped around letters which served as envelopes). He called these "Lecture Books" and numbered them with Roman numerals. Few of the early ones survive, and the series ran past 30. Toward the end of his life he apparently began numbering again; these will be identified as "2d ser." To complicate matters, Willson often made entries of a personal nature with his sermon and lecture notes, so the reader will notice that most references to his autobiography refer to one of the Lecture Books.

During his years as a minister, Willson published two church magazines. The four volumes of monthly issues of the Evangelical Witness were published in Coldenham, between August 1822 and December 1826; no issues were published from August to December 1824, apparently because of financial difficulties. Later in Albany, beginning in 1832, Willson published the Albany Quarterly, an alternate denominational

magazine, to counteract the "New Light" slant of the official magazine, The American Christian Expositor. This publication also grew from his desire to write and publish a history of the Reformed Presbyterian church. The format he used was to publish the history serially, giving his readers 48 pages of history in each issue (no matter if it ended in the middle of a sentence) and 24 pages of "Essays &c." Unfortunately, when these were bound later in the nineteenth century, the cover pages were removed, leaving no information about volume number or date. The result is this rather confusing pagination: 1-48, history; 1-24, essays; 49-96, history; 1-24, essays; 97-144, history; 1-24, essays; etc. The notes to material in the essay section are given as follows: first issue [after p.48], 19.

This thesis has only probed the surface of the material available in the Willson collection; it contains much that one hopes will be used to shed additional light on the history of the American Covenanters and these four generations of its leadership.

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## Vita

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