

Stonewall, Woodrow, and Me

Reflections on the Other Great Commission

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I am a 1966 graduate of Jackson-Wilson Elementary School—Presbyterians, Virginians, and college professors, all three of us. But while my predecessors were called onward, to found the League of Nations or march at the head of an Army of the Living God, as the case may be, I, the third member of that triumvirate, have been left back on campus this May for the 24th year. No stonemason is poised to carve the name “Dillon” over the entrance to any elementary school of which I am aware.

A call, in the ordinary sense of that word, is a voice from elsewhere, often issuing a summons. Stonewall Jackson was indeed summoned from his mathematics classroom at VMI by Governor Letcher in 1861 to train the swelling army of recruits in Richmond, and thence to war. Woodrow Wilson was summoned by the voice of the People from the presidency of Princeton to the New Jersey Governor’s mansion, and thence to the White House. Am I not to be summoned? Or worse, have I missed my call? In the essay that follows, I rummage through mailboxes labeled Jackson, Wilson, and Dillon, looking for a “while-you-were-out” note in my own.

I was baptized, confirmed, and married to my high school sweetheart at First Church, Waynesboro, in the shadow of the hill upon which Jackson-Wilson Elementary stands. And I do have vivid memories in my youth of being moved, if not exactly called, by the sermons preached from that pulpit. I have no recollection of the homiletical details, but I do remember departing each Sunday with profound feelings of guilt and fear, even as a school child. Except perhaps on Easter, when I departed thinking of ham.

In 1973 I traveled south up the Great Valley of Virginia past Staunton and Lexington to pursue my undergraduate education in Blacksburg, and four years later quit God’s country entirely for a Ph.D. program in Philadelphia. As the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, I found myself well prepared.

In my final year of graduate school I received what I thought, at the time, might be a call, in the form of a AAAS congressional fellowship to work on Capitol Hill. Was I destined to follow in Wilson’s footsteps from the Shenandoah Valley through Academia and into the halls of power? No. I rapidly discovered that the culture of public policy is strikingly foreign to that of science. My new colleagues and I bore different assumptions about the world; we held different

values; we spoke different languages. Ultimately I found myself as lost and alone in Washington as Wilson had become by 1919.

Toward the end of my fellowship year, I visited the alcove of the National Cathedral where Wilson’s body lies entombed in Gothic splendor—so showy, so unreformed, so far from the modest white Presbyterian manse where he was born, home in the Shenandoah Valley. He deserved less.

So in 1983 I was pleased to accept an assistant professorship in the Biology Department at the College of Charleston, teaching genetics and evolution to the majors. My wife and I transferred our letters to First (Scots) Church, where if our children aren’t scolded or threatened from the pulpit each Sunday, there is at least no danger that they might be uplifted, or worse, entertained. Mildly edified, perhaps, except on Easter. And for 24 years I have labored in academia, Monday through Friday, sparingly promoted.

In the 1980s the subject of “Creation Science” appeared frequently in the headlines, and as the Professor of Evolution in the Holy City of the South, it should not be surprising that questions might arise in my classroom.

Creationism is not an error of science, but rather a modern form of idolatry, injunctions against which rest uneasily on the syllabus of Biology 350. I typically responded with invitations to inquiring students (Baptists, the poor dears!) to visit my office after class for instruction in the Christian Religion.

Young in their faith, they challenged God the Father as Pilate challenged God the Son. If He is indeed the Creator, they reasoned, then we His soldiers must rise to defend Him from Darwinism. But Christ replied, “My kingdom is not of this world.” Science and Faith are two entirely different things.

Into the 1990s, as my career proceeded unremarkably, it seemed possible that I might not be called through my vocation, but through a cherished avocation, scouting. Quite simply no other parent was willing to step forward to lead my son’s den of twelve Webelos. I “bridged over” to the scouts two years later, served as Scoutmaster of BSA Troop 50 for seven years, and was proud to see his mother pin the Eagle award on my son’s chest, as my mother had pinned mine on me.

After he left for college I volunteered for a variety of training jobs at the Council level, and served on the Conservation Staff at the BSA National Jamboree. I was walking the campgrounds at Virginia’s Fort A. P. Hill, named for the general on Stonewall



Woodrow



Stonewall

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Jackson's lips when he died, when it first occurred to me that an avocation could be a calling. Might my summons to the uniformed service be equivalent to that of Jackson's, with pain and glory measured in substantially lessened doses? And if so, were my years of academic training in vain?

In 1996 I accepted an invitation to debate a young-earth Creationist at Southeast Christian Church in Louisville, with 12,000 members, the first megachurch I ever visited. The event took place in their cavernous sanctuary on a Sunday evening, and I characterized the contest as intramural—not a debate between God and Science, but a dialogue among Christian brothers. My Campbellite hosts were surprised to discover that I was a Presbyterian, of the vanilla sort whose General Assembly offices were located in their fair city. To see an evolutionary scientist confess the Bible as the inspired Word of God was spectacle enough. But to hear such language from a PCUSA Presbyterian strained the bounds of credibility.

At the age of 14, Woodrow Wilson moved with his family to Columbia, South Carolina, then still smoldering from the fires of General Sherman. And it was in Columbia, in a statehouse still pocked by Sherman's cannon, that the Creation/Evolution controversy flared, albeit at substantially reduced temperatures, as a fresh millennium dawned.

Like most other states in the Union, whether she would wish it or not, South Carolina was in 1999–2000 developing statewide standards for her science curriculum. As our draft standards were rigorous in all respects, including on the subject of biological evolution, certain powerful political interests were mobilized in opposition.

That year's session of the South Carolina State Board of Education, during which a desultory Creationist attack on our science curriculum was turned back, returned my attention to the world of public policy. The mixture of faith and politics yields a corruption as black as the mixture of faith and science. And in Columbia, in 2000, I saw all three—faith, science, and politics—stirred together in one caldron, and heated to a boil under the lights of the TV cameras. I found myself drawn to that corruption like a yellow jacket to red Kool-Aid on a summer afternoon.

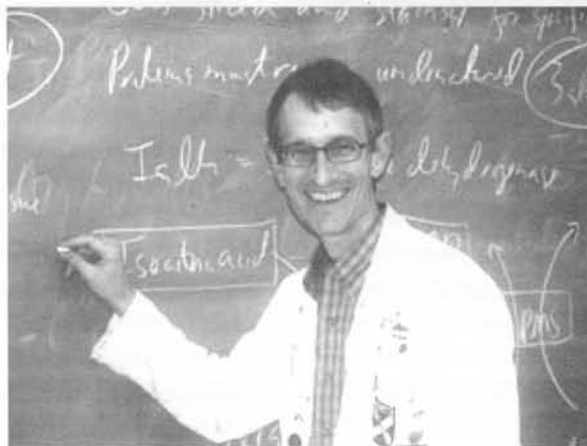
Woodrow Wilson's father, the Reverend Joseph R., hosted the first General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America. Meeting at Augusta in the fall of 1861, those "oldest, wisest, most experienced, and in a word, most suitable men," all cherished the spirituality of The Church. They had watched with sorrow as their northern brethren adopted the Gardiner Spring Resolution earlier that year in Philadelphia, prostituting the Bride of Christ before the growing government in Washington. Surely nothing could be clearer to any Christian,

indeed to any American, than the danger of confusing God with Caesar.

So in the spring of 2000 I coordinated my first Darwin Week in Charleston. On that occasion, and during the second week of every February subsequently, our primary focus has been upon high quality science across the disciplines—biology, geology, astronomy, and many others. But the work of Ian Barbour came to my attention early in the series, and I became a proponent of what Barbour calls a "dialogue" relationship between the necessarily separate worlds of science and faith. Thus we have always featured at least one religious item on the program—a panel discussion or even a sermon—typically hosted by a congregation near the College campus.

In 2005–2006 our state science curriculum cycled back for reauthorization, and the controversy that arose over the tenth grade standard on biological evolution was substantially more intense than in 2000. A citizen's group, the South Carolinians for Science Education, organized to advocate a rigorous curriculum, and I was honored to be elected President. Our opponents included the Governor, large fractions of both the House and the Senate, and much of the State Board of Education, prominently including one Mr. Ron G. Wilson of Easley.

Mr. Ron G. Wilson was unrelated to Mr. T. Woodrow Wilson, as far as I could determine from the brief biography posted on the Board's web site, doing my homework for the season's campaign. He was a colorful character nonetheless. In



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2005 Mr. Ron Wilson was the immediate past Commander-in-Chief of the Sons of Confederate Veterans, an organization of approximately 32,000 dedicated to preserving the memory of The Lost Cause. He was also a Presbyterian.

On the morning of November 9, 2005, the specific issue before the South Carolina State Board of Education, a session of 17 housewives, insurance salesmen, dentists, and weekend generals of the Confederacy, was Standard B-5 indicator 7: "Use a phylogenetic tree to identify the evolutionary relationships among different groups of organisms." It was an article of faith to Mr. Wilson and his allies, however, that the history of life has not been treelike, but rather better modeled as a lawn of grass, each sprig being called forth separately according to its own kind. This religious doctrine they sought to have imposed by the state upon all her young citizens, through the public school science curriculum. Indicator B-5.7, they resolved, must go.

The afternoon previous I spent combing through my complete Volume 58 of the journal *Evolution*, all twelve issues for the year 2004, marking pages on which phylogenetic trees appeared with pink sticky tabs. These I carried with me to Columbia and

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distributed among the trustees of the Board during their public comment period the next morning, to impress upon them the centrality of the phylogenetic tree in mainstream evolutionary thought. I also referred to my journal issues to make a number of ancillary points regarding the science of evolution, noting the carefully stated hypotheses, rigorous analysis, and dry math. Nobody's grandmother will be connected to a monkey, at least by name.

Nor did it appear to me that the opinion of any board member had been changed by my presentation, as the vote went with us 12–2, along the lines I would have predicted, with several prominent abstentions. After the gavel fell I came forward from the gallery to recollect my journal issues, eleven of which were immediately forthcoming. To my surprise, however, Mr. Ron Wilson asked if he could retain his for future reference. What a gold coin and bullion dealer from Easley might do with the December, 2004 issue of *Evolution*, volume 58(12), was beyond me, but I acquiesced. This seemed to provide an opening for what Ian Barbour might classify as a "dialogue."

I began by acknowledging Mr. Wilson's rank in the Sons of Confederate Veterans, noting that I myself am the only son of a Daughter of the Confederacy, not having stepped forward as yet to enlist. And after the conversation proceeded along those lines for a while, I also noted our common religious heritage, and inquired if he might be familiar with the work of R. L. Dabney.

Dabney was a Presbyterian preacher of great passion, who served as Stonewall Jackson's Chaplain and Chief of Staff 1861–62. He left the Old Dominion in 1883, after a distinguished career at Union Theological Seminary, to found the School of Theology at Austin. A. A. Hodge called Dabney "the best teacher of theology in the United States, if not the world." I have occasionally read his works on Sunday afternoons, as an antidote to what I've heard on Sunday mornings.

Yes, Mr. Wilson averred, he was a big fan of R. L. Dabney, and we exchanged a few additional pleasantries about times that may not, in their time, have been especially pleasant. Our conversation was rather naturally carried from that point to the weighty issues before the General Assembly of 1861, and the Great Schism that was to follow. I inquired whether Mr. Wilson was familiar with the Gardiner Spring Resolution, and was a bit surprised to discover that he was not.

I recounted how Rev. Gardiner Spring and the representa-

tives of similarly apostate congregations had proposed to sully The Church by demanding her entanglement with temporal political affairs. But Dabney and the Divines assembled at Augusta understood Christ's injunction to be in the world, not of it. Surely we, His saints, would not mix our religious convictions, no matter how Godly, with the base affairs of state, would we?

The public record reflects no evidence that Mr. Ron Wilson was sympathetic to this line of reasoning, if even he understood it. For he continued to vote his Creationist convictions throughout the 2005–2006 campaign. But in retrospect I myself was profoundly influenced by our brief interaction that morning after the State Board of Education meeting. For at the moment the name of Dabney crossed my lips, my eyes were opened.

What proportion of all Ph.D. Evolutionary Scientists are conversant with the Gardiner Spring Resolution? How many Presidents of Citizens-for-Science groups might also be Sons of Confederate Veterans? In an undirected world, what is the likelihood that an Eagle Scout from the Shenandoah Valley might travel through the Ivy League to the board room of the South Carolina Department of Education, preaching the spirituality of The Church, however small and unsympathetic the congregation?

It was human vanity ever to imagine that I might not have been called, or to worry that any call I might be issued could be lost in transmission. All we, His sheep, know that He is the Good Shepherd. His sheep hear His voice; we follow Him. On November 9, 2005, I was given to understand that this is not advice; it is an observation of fact.

The great commission has two parts, the second half being no less than the first. We are charged to go forth making disciples, and to know that He is with us, to the end of the age. Standing in a hail of bullets, or pushing the full 14 points at Versailles, Stonewall and Woodrow bore vivid witness to their other great commissions.

And I have been blessed to see that He is likewise with the bespectacled College Professor, laboring in academia, Monday through Friday, sparingly promoted. I would pray this blessing upon you, my reader, as well.

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means that God may still use to communicate with us.

In fairness, the Reformers had an excuse. They lived and worked before science as we know it had really got going. Copernicus's sun-centered treatment of the solar system was published just three years before Martin Luther died. Forty years later, John Calvin died while Galileo was just ten. The Westminster Confession was completed when Isaac Newton was but six years old. For those of us who have mercifully forgotten our high school science courses, Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton were early pioneers of

modern science.

However not all of the Reformers took a dismissive view of secular knowledge. John Calvin in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* wrote:

Whenever we come across these matters in secular writers, let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God's excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the

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