The Rt. Rev. Thomas Atkinson (1807-1881): Advocate for an Apostolic and Catholic Church

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In May 1853, the Episcopal Diocese of North Carolina met in annual convention to acknowledge the defection of their Bishop, Levi Silliman Ives, to Roman Catholicism. Ives and the diocese had been locked in a five-year tug-of-war over the bishop's growing affinity for the teachings and practices of the Oxford Movement. In the fall of 1852, Bishop Ives had asked for and received permission from the diocese to travel to Europe, pleading the need for rest and recuperation. But while in Rome in December, Ives instead renounced his position as a bishop of the Episcopal Church and declared his submission to the pope. Now the convention gathered in the wake of that defection to elect his successor. The presenting question was this: What to look for in a new bishop?

One might surmise that the diocese would turn to an evangelical, or "low church" bishop, desiring to repudiate in unmistakable terms the now-discredited "high church" views of Bishop Ives.[2] But that was not the call which came forth from the convention's preacher, the Rev. F. A. Olmsted, a priest of the diocese serving at Pittsboro. Olmsted was in fact quite measured in his criticisms of the former bishop and the views he had embraced. Olmsted found much to praise in the Oxford Movement, though he conceded that it had led some to seek undue affinity with Romanism. But Olmsted insisted that Ives' defection came about because the bishop had strayed from the principles upon which the diocese was founded, and that what the diocese needed was not to repudiate, but to return to the high church teachings articulated by its first bishop, John Stark Ravenscroft. "Let us not then lose our hold upon those principles which, as Churchmen, we have hitherto cherished," Olmsted declared. He concluded:

> This Diocese has occupied heretofore, in the American Church, an elevated position for
> true, sound, and high-toned Churchmanship. Let us not be willing that she should, in any

[2] Richard Rankin, *Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen: The Religion of the Episcopal Elite in North Carolina, 1800-1860* (Columbia, 1993), 166, 167.

way, fall back from it. Let us abide steadfast by those principles upon which alone it has ever flourished, turning aside from them neither to the right hand nor to the left. Let us hope that the impress stamped upon it by its first Bishop, the lamented Ravenscroft, will remain ineffaceable. Ever blessed be the memory of that true-hearted man and noble Bishop! And may God raise up to sit in his See, one worthy to be his successor; one who shall be to us "the repairer of the breach, the restorer of paths to dwell in."[3]

The clergy decided upon the Rev. Thomas Atkinson, D.D., of Baltimore. The laity quickly acceded to the clergy's choice.[4]

What kind of man had the diocese chosen? Had they, in fact, chosen a worthy successor to Ravenscroft? Born in 1807, Thomas Atkinson was a Virginia native who practiced law before entering the ministry. From 1837 to 1843 he served parishes in Norfolk and Lynchburg, Virginia, and for the next decade he served parishes in Baltimore, Maryland.

Maryland in the 1840s had a high church bishop, William Whittingham, though the diocese itself drew from both the low and high church parties. During Atkinson's tenure in Baltimore, there were several notable clashes between Bishop Whittingham and some of the more evangelical clergy who resisted his leadership. One of the clergy of the diocese went so far as to refuse to let Bishop Whittingham celebrate Holy Communion when he came for his parish visitation. This issue was finally resolved in the bishop's favor by action of the 1850 General Convention, which established the bishop's canonical right to celebrate in any parish of his diocese as part of his visitation. Another member of the clergy ran afoul of Bishop Whittingham by conducting an abbreviated Prayer Book service in a Methodist Church after the bishop had specifically prohibited him from doing so. In both these cases, Atkinson was among those who stood with his bishop and helped to craft the written defense of the bishop's positions before diocesan convention.[5] Indeed, Atkinson's 1843 decision to leave Virginia for Maryland was, in part at

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[3] *Journal of the 37th Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the State of North Carolina* (1853): 78, 79. Hereinafter abbreviated *NCDJ*.

[4] *NCDJ*, 37th (1853): 45.

[5] *Journal of the 62nd Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Maryland* (1850): 51-55; *Journal of the 64th Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in Maryland* (1852): 30-32.

least, prompted by the fact that Atkinson did not see eye-to-eye with the decidedly low church Bishop Meade of Virginia and found Maryland more congenial.[6]

Yet Bishop Whittingham, when asked to describe Atkinson's churchmanship, refused to call him "high church." In a candid and confidential letter written to a friend in the diocese of New York who was inquiring of Atkinson's suitability as a candidate for bishop in that state, Whittingham declared of Atkinson:

> He is not to be classed in what is commonly known as a 'high Churchman.' In some respects he is yet in a state of transition. In others (e.g. in cooperation with the supporters of the American Bible Society) he is decidedly, and as I suppose without much prospect of change, averse to the policy of Bishop Hobart. His great intimacy and cordial friendship with the Bp. of Virginia (though he decidedly differs from that Bishop in many very important matters of principle and policy, yet) perhaps in large degree without his consciousness, still sways him, and would, I fear, sway him still more if thrown into a place of such fearful responsibility and great difficulty, as the presidency over a mass of such discordant materials as make up the Clergy and Laity of New York.[7]

Whittingham's remarks suggest that Atkinson could not be neatly classed with either the high church or low church parties, as the Bishop understood them. The specific issue which troubled Whittingham and prevented him from placing Atkinson squarely in the high church camp was Atkinson's support of the American Bible Society. Writing to another friend in New York, Whittingham was even more pointed in his criticism of Atkinson on this score: "To my great regret, and the Extreme annoyance . . . of not a few of his brethren in the diocese, he does [attend the meetings and promote the interests of the American Bible Society] and that after remonstrances, (not authoritative and official, to be sure, but though in a kind and brotherly way, yet warm and earnest) by his bishop."[8]

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[6] George E. DeMille, *The Catholic Movement in the American Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia, 1950), 50.
[7] William R. Whittingham to J. Taylor, 18 November 1850. Atkinson Papers, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland.
[8] William R. Whittingham to R.B. Van Kleek, 31 October, 1850. Atkinson Papers, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland.

For Whittingham, the issue of cooperating with the American Bible Society was a litmus test of true high churchmanship. Opposition to such cooperation was a hallmark of Bishop Hobart's own views, and Ravenscroft had likewise made an issue of it during his North Carolina episcopate.[9] So why did Atkinson break with Bishop Whittingham and the established high church position on this point?

Whittingham conjectured that Atkinson was still under the sway of his Virginia upbringing. But more likely it was not the influence of Bishop Meade so much as the influence of his own family that factored into Atkinson's attitude toward cooperation with other Protestants. Although Atkinson himself was raised in the Episcopal Church, he had siblings who were not. Indeed, three of his brothers were Presbyterians, one of whom would serve as the Presbyterian minister in Raleigh, North Carolina, during the period of Atkinson's episcopate in that state.[10] So Atkinson was not predisposed to express his allegiance to the Episcopal Church in ways that precluded cordial relations with other Protestants.

Moreover, Atkinson embraced a capacious vision of the Church, one which encompassed both the low and high church parties and made room for a range of theological positions. In one of his first published sermons, preached before his home congregation in Baltimore on Thanksgiving Day in 1845, Atkinson expressed gratitude for the way in which the Episcopal Church had averted schism at its 1844 General Convention. At issue were the teachings of the Oxford Movement and its "romanizing tendencies."   Atkinson thought it unlikely that significant numbers of Episcopalians would leave their church for Rome, but he did fear that those concerned to safeguard the church from any hint of Rome would cause a division in the ranks, and thereby do great harm to the peace and unity of the Church. What actually transpired, in Atkinson's view, was a free exchange of views which revealed considerable consensus across party lines.   The Baltimore rector told his congregation:

[9] For Hobart's opposition to Bible Societies, see Robert Bruce Mullin, *Episcopal Vision/American Reality: High Church Theology and Social Thought in Evangelical America* (New Haven, 1986), 50-59. For Ravenscroft's equally categorical opposition, see Rankin, *Ambivalent Churchmen and Evangelical Churchwomen*, 81.
[10] Marshall DeLancey Haywood, *Lives of the Bishops of North Carolina From the Establishment of the Episcopate in that State Down to the Division of the Diocese* (Raleigh, 1910), 144.

No candid man could listen to the debates in the last General Convention without being satisfied that on all essential subjects, the Church is one in doctrine as she is one in order, and that where differences of any magnitude . . . do actually exist, that they are legitimate differences such as result from that liberty wherewith Christ maketh His people free. They result from the very character of the Church itself as being truly Catholic, no shred or fragment stricken off from the body of Christ, and shrinking and narrowing in its isolation, but an integral and living member of that body, capable, consequently, of harmonizing its own constituent parts, and of reconciling unity of faith, with diversity of opinion. It was then made manifest that the Church herself is neither Calvinistic, nor Arminian, that her principles are neither those of the exclusive High-Churchman, nor of the exclusive Low-Churchman, but that Calvinist and Arminian, High-Churchman and Low-Churchman, may all happily and usefully dwell together in her courts, minister at her altars, and be prepared by her disciple for that upper temple, where there is neither error nor discord, but all hearts respond to the same truths, and all voices unite in singing the same song of praise and adoration.[11]

Atkinson, then, might most comfortably be categorized as a "broad churchman," someone who cherished the Episcopal Church precisely because it could accommodate both high and low-church points of view and still retain its peace and unity.

Indeed, a closer examination of Atkinson's views suggests a striking alignment with the outlook and agenda of a notable contemporary priest of the Episcopal Church, William Augustus Muhlenberg (1796-1877), whose churchmanship also resisted simple party identification. Muhlenberg was founding rector of the Church of the Holy Communion in New York City, and a man some have called the most influential priest in the 19th-century Episcopal Church.[12] Muhlenberg was deeply concerned about what he saw as the elite cultural captivity of the

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[11] Thomas Atkinson, *National and Ecclesiastical Blessings. A Sermon, Preached in St. Peter's Church, Baltimore, On Thursday, the 12th day of December, Being the Thanksgiving Day Recommended to be Observed by the Governor of Maryland* (Baltimore, 1845), 12, 13.

[12] David Hein and Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr. *The Episcopalians* (Westport, 2004), 255-257. On the challenge of defining Muhlenberg's churchmanship, see DeMille, *The Catholic Movement*, 78; Robert W. Prichard, *The Nature of Salvation: Theological Consensus in the Episcopal Church, 1801-73* (Urbana, 1997), 20, 86; and Allen C. Guelzo, *For the Union of Evangelical Christendom: The Irony of the Reformed Episcopalians* (University Park, 1994), 61-65.

Episcopal Church. And to counter the notion that the Episcopal Church catered only to the wealthy, Muhlenberg became an outspoken critic of the practice of paying for churches through pew rents. The rationale for founding the Church of the Holy Communion in 1845 was to build a church that would from its beginning have only free pews, thereby allowing rich and poor to worship together. Muhlenberg was also interested in many of the ritual reforms spawned by the Oxford Movement: gothic architecture, better music, better ornaments, and better furnishings. He had the first vested boys' choir in America, and he took the lead in promoting women's orders in the American church. He also instituted the practice of weekly communion in his aptly-named parish. For these reasons, he has also been called the "real father of ritualism in America."[13]

Muhlenberg adopted the label "Evangelical Catholic" to describe his somewhat eclectic form of churchmanship, as he sought both to heighten and to broaden the church. And in the early 1850s he published a journal under that name, intending thereby to promote harmony within the Church by placing greater emphasis on points of agreement than on points of disagreement. Above all, Muhlenberg was committed to the proposition that Christians had a moral imperative to unite in addressing the needs of the poverty-stricken population of America's teeming cities. To this end, the *Evangelical Catholic* published numerous articles on free churches, free education, free hospitals, sisterhoods, asylums, and charities. But it was not simply class-based exclusion that troubled Muhlenberg. He was equally disturbed by the unwillingness of the Diocese of New York to admit St. Philip's—an African American parish—into union with convention. When the matter was up for debate, Muhlenberg commented sarcastically in the pages of the *Evangelical Catholic*: "Councils of the Catholic Church excluding congregations because of their color. O Marvelous Catholicity!"[14]

Atkinson shared much of Muhlenberg's approach, beginning with the commitment to the catholicity and apostolicity of the Episcopal Church. In his first sermon before his Maryland colleagues, delivered at the 1844 Maryland diocesan convention, Atkinson traced their shared ministerial authority not to a subjective ratification, or sign, given to them as individuals, but

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[13] DeMille, *The Catholic Movement*, 77.
[14] Alvin W. Skardon, *Church Leader in the Cities: William Augustus Muhlenberg* (Philadelphia, 1971), 154, 158.

rather to the fact that they had received their commission "from those who have been thus authorized, and who have been commended and enabled to transmit their authority to others," namely, from bishops in Apostolic Succession.[15] In asserting the superiority of Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism, Atkinson declared: "Whatever of good Rome has, we have, either actually or potentially, while the inestimable treasures that she has lost we retain. Our unbroken succession from the Apostles is as unquestionable as hers, our ministry certainly not less valid, our Liturgy drawn more entirely from the reservoirs of ancient devotion."[16]

Atkinson could be equally forthright in proclaiming the surpassing virtues of Anglicanism in comparison with contemporary American Protestantism, which he likened to the building of Babel, "where there is a perpetual confusion of tongues, and where the hand of every workman is against his fellow laborer." The people of this country, he declared, "demand in the Church, peace and unity, and they have acuteness enough to see that the necessary conditions of these are authority and stability. They demand, therefore, a Church which man did not make, and which man consequently cannot unmake."[17]

Atkinson's critique of American Protestantism was actually part and parcel of a broader criticism of contemporary American society, namely, that Americans had come to prize personal liberty and private gain more than civic duty and public responsibility. Rather than seeing recent growth and prosperity as sure signs of God's blessing upon the country, Atkinson counseled his Baltimore congregation to regard them as signs of divine forbearance and to brace for judgment to come.[18]

By the same token, Atkinson saw no room for complacency within the Episcopal Church. In words reminiscent of Muhlenberg, Atkinson challenged his Baltimore congregation to embrace a mission beyond its own membership, especially with regard to poor and vulnerable members of society:

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[15] Thomas Atkinson, *Authoritative Ministerial Teaching: A Sermon Preached at the Opening of the Convention of the Diocese of Maryland, May 1844* (Baltimore, 1844), 11, 12.

[16] Atkinson, *National and Ecclesiastical Blessings*, 9.
[17] Atkinson, *National and Ecclesiastical Blessings*, 11.
[18] Atkinson, *National and Ecclesiastical Blessings*, 4, 5.

A body of Christian believers, such as is accustomed to assemble within these walls, numerous, wealthy, influential, must not only provide for themselves a suitable house of worship, but must 'remember the words of the Lord Jesus, that it is more blessed to give than to receive.' They must have schools for the instruction of the young, not only on Sundays, but throughout the week . . . . A Church without schools, is like a dwelling house without a nursery, a token of barrenness and an omen of extinction. . . . Again, such a Church ought to have those adjuncts which the spirit of the Gospel has ever caused to grow up in the spots which the Gospel visits and fertilizes—asylums for orphanage, for desolate old age, for unfriended sickness. Such as these are the fruits of faith, where the Gospel is truly preached, truly received, and truly followed. Such as these are necessary to make this Church and any Church a mirror in which to see reflected the life and character of the Lord, to Whom it is dedicated, and Whose glory it is established to set forth.[19]

Also in keeping with Muhlenberg's outlook was Atkinson's declaration that such beneficence would strengthen the internal unity of the Church and commend it to society at large.[20]

The kind of vigor Atkinson expected from his congregation, he himself expended. One of Whittingham's goals upon becoming the Bishop of Maryland in 1840 was to start a mission congregation in the heart of Baltimore. But Whittingham had no success in eliciting support for this venture from the three established Baltimore parishes: Christ Church, St. Paul's, and St. Peter's. According to the bishop, the three formed a 'magic triangle' which, he opined, operated as magic circles were said to operate in days of yore, "to the paralyzation of the energies of all within it." That state of lethargy persisted until Atkinson, then St. Peter's rector, personally put forth the "zeal, energy, enterprise and unwearied perseverance" to make it a reality. Thus Grace Church, Baltimore, was organized in 1850 and opened for public worship, with Atkinson as the

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[19]Thomas Atkinson, *Reverence Due to the House of God: A Sermon Preached at the Consecration of Grace Church Baltimore, On Thursday, October 30, 1856* (Baltimore, 1856), 16.
[20] Thomas Atkinson, "Lecture on Guilds" (n.d.), 31-35. Unpublished Manuscript, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland.

first rector, in December 1852.[21] In less than six months of taking his new post, he would be elected Bishop of North Carolina and consecrated in October of that year.

Atkinson's first major address as bishop was the "Primary Charge" he issued to his clergy at the 1855 diocesan convention, eighteen months after becoming bishop. "A charge," as historian Diana Butler Bass has explained, is a "special sermon preached by the bishop and devoted to some topic of particular concern to him or his diocese," and a first charge "sets the tone for a new episcopate."[22]

Atkinson began his charge with a recapitulation of all the commendable and distinctive features of the Episcopal Church: her adherence to the teachings and practices of the Primitive Church, her catholic and ancient creeds, her time-honored liturgy, the authority and validity of her ministry, the efficacy of her sacraments, and her publication of Holy Scripture in the language of the people. Hearers eager for the bishop to sound the distinctive notes of high churchmanship could have asked for nothing sweeter.[23]

But Atkinson coupled these paeans with a call for reform. As he had once preached to his congregation in Baltimore, so he now preached to his diocese, namely, that the mission of the Church cannot be restricted to the "higher and more educated and refined class:"

> Rather, the function of the Church, and of every part of the Church, is not to recognize and thereby to sanction and to perpetuate divisions, but to heal them; to unite men; to bring together high and low, rich and poor, bond and free. Every true branch of the Church of Christ must aim at carrying the Gospel to all men within the territory which is its appointed field of labor, and of all men, especially to the poor . . . Just so far then as a Church fails to reach the mass of society, and especially the poor, it fails in its mission as

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[21] William Whittingham to Benjamin Haight, 20 February 1850. Whittingham Papers, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland; "Historical notes" appended to Atkinson, *Reverence Due to the House of God*, 19.

[22] Diana H. Butler, *Standing Against the Whirlwind: Evangelical Episcopalians in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York, 1995), 67.

[23] Thomas Atkinson, *Primary Charge of the Rt. Rev. Thomas Atkinson, Bishop of North Carolina, to the Clergy. Delivered at the Convention at Warrenton May, 1855* (Fayetteville, 1855), 3-5.

the continuator of the personal work of Christ, and it ceases to answer the purpose for which God gave it existence and authority.[24]

To this end, Atkinson first called for greater flexibility in the ordering of services, so that they might be better adapted to congregations of laborers. He then called for drawing clergy from the laboring class, citing the great gulf of language and rapport between an educated clergy and the typical laborer:

> For the same reason that a native Clergy is more efficient than a foreign one, a man belonging to the lower classes in habit, languages and feeling, if he be only superior to them in knowledge and character, will be more welcome to them, and exert more influence over them, than one who is *his* superior [in education], but an alien to *them* in his tastes, sentiments, dialect and usages. . . . It is by drawing recruits to our Ministry from the laboring classes, and never breaking off their sympathy with those classes, that we may most reasonably hope to bring those classes into union with the Church.[25]

Atkinson's third proposed reform was to abolish pew rents, that is, the practice of building and maintaining churches by selling the pews to particular families or individuals. This practice, he noted, enshrines a division between rich and poor, consigning those who cannot pay to less desirable places to sit.[26] And his fourth and final reform was to call for endowments that would lend institutional stability to churches and schools. To this end, he called on the clergy to teach the laity their duty as stewards of their considerable personal wealth.[27]

Three points about this charge sermon bear noting. One is that it reflected in large measure Atkinson's long-standing convictions. Although Atkinson waited until his second diocesan convention to deliver his charge, stating that he first wanted to acquire a "more thorough acquaintance with the condition of the Diocese" that acquaintance seems only to have confirmed Atkinson in his settled views about the mission and ministry of the Church.[28]

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[24] Atkinson, *Primary Charge*, 6.
[25] Atkinson, *Primary Charge*, 9, 11.
[26] Atkinson, *Primary Charge*, 11-14.
[27] Atkinson, *Primary Charge*, 14-16.
[28] Atkinson, *Primary Charge*, 3.

Another aspect of the charge is its marked similarity to a call for reform placed before the House of Bishops in 1853: the so-called Muhlenberg Memorial, a petition drafted by William Augustus Muhlenberg and presented to the House of Bishops the morning after Atkinson's consecration. Indeed, the first two points of Atkinson's charge were taken directly from the Muhlenberg Memorial, which petitioned the House of Bishops to make greater provision for flexibility and adaptability in use of Prayer Book services and to extend ordination to men who had not previously been considered proper candidates for lack of educational attainments.[29] The third of Atkinson's reforms, the call for the abolition of pew rents, was of long-standing concern to Muhlenberg. So, even though Atkinson never referred to Muhlenberg or the Memorial in his Charge, the evidence that the two men remained kindred spirits is unmistakable.

Perhaps most importantly, Atkinson's 1855 published Charge would serve as a touchstone for much of what he continued to say and do throughout his episcopate. Wherever possible, he worked to extend the reach of the church across economic and racial lines and to heal divisions caused by war, prejudice, and party spirit. His considerable effectiveness in these efforts was a reflection of his carefully delimited, highly consistent, and rigorously determined pursuit of a given course of action.

We have already noted that Atkinson brought an irenic spirit to his relations with other Protestants and to his judgment of parties within the church. Sharply critical of the fragmented state of American Protestantism, and in substantial agreement with high church claims, Atkinson regarded Anglicanism's distinctive principles, such as Apostolic Succession, as a bulwark against rampant subjectivism and sentimentalism in religion. But he proceeded to implement these views with restraint, careful discrimination, and independent judgment. Whereas the strict followers of John Henry Hobart, such as Ravenscroft and Whittingham, discouraged cooperation with all interdenominational agencies, Atkinson preferred to make a case-by-case determination. Thus he lent support to the American Bible Society, believing that Episcopalians and other Protestants could unite in making the Bible more generally available, but he withheld support

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[29] For the text of the Muhlenberg Memorial, see Don S. Armentrout and Robert Boak Slocum, *Documents of Witness: A History of the Episcopal Church 1782-1985* (New York, 1994), 208-211.

from the American Sunday School Union. In the latter case, Atkinson believed that cooperation would suppress the teaching of essential doctrines, such as infant baptism.[30]

A similar capacity to look at matters from multiple vantage points, and to proceed in a measured and even-handed manner, is evident from an exchange between Judge Thomas Ruffin and Bishop Atkinson over churchyard burial policy at St. Matthew's, Hillsborough. Atkinson commended Ruffin for taking steps to provide a dedicated burial ground at the Church, but he cautioned the judge against making too great an insistence upon exclusive use of the Prayer Book burial rites:

> Never are the feelings of friends so susceptible as immediately upon the death of one they have loved and honoured, and to refuse burial to a Dissenter, because in conformity to his wishes expressed or supposed, our service was not to be used at his grave, might do the good cause more harm than a serious offence against duty or charity might inflict. And if of a married couple, one were a churchman and the other not, if the former died first & were buried in our cemetery and burial by the side of a husband were refused an affectionate and pious widow, because of her non-conformity to our principles, it would I think be considered something like persecution even after Death.[31]

Atkinson's remarks were a salutary reminder that members of the Episcopal Church do not always marry Episcopalians, and therefore a preference for our own liturgies should be tempered with pastoral sensitivities toward our non-Episcopalian family members.

Even where Atkinson's convictions were expressed categorically, as in the case of pew rents, which he regarded as a practice incompatible with the teachings of the gospel, Atkinson counseled against taking immediate, coercive measures to remove them, telling diocesan clergy in his 1855 Charge:

> But while I assert these principles, I wish by no means to be understood as insisting that Pews, where they already exist, ought to be at once thrown down. This would often

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[30] Thomas Atkinson, *Fullness, Necessary to Faithfulness in Dispensing the Gospel: A Sermon in behalf of the General Protestant Episcopal Sunday School Union and Church Book Society* (New York, 1855), 15.
[31] Thomas Atkinson to Thomas Ruffin, 22 February 1854. Ruffin Papers, Wilson Library, Chapel Hill.

involve an invasion of existing rights that ought to be respected, and a shock to feelings that ought to be spared, and would give rise to controversies more injurious to religion, than their subject-matter, if left undisturbed, could be. The evil (as I consider it) has been long fastened on us, and will have to be slowly eradicated; but one of the means tending to its removal appears to be, the temperate expression of the opinions of those who regard it as a hindrance to the successful working of the Church.[32]

Simply put, Atkinson wished to proceed with a lively awareness of how his policies and positions would be perceived and implemented, and he took pains to insure against unintended or counter-productive consequences.

Nowhere was Atkinson's capacity to embrace multiple perspectives and make discriminating judgments more in evidence than in his views on slavery and race. Atkinson shared the prevailing view among high church Episcopalians, north and south, that the Bible countenanced slavery, and that a blanket condemnation of slavery was therefore unwarranted and a violation of Christian fidelity to the biblical record.[33] Concomitantly, he embraced a policy toward slave evangelization which closely resembled that of his North Carolina predecessors, Bishops Ravenscroft and Ives. Throughout the 1850s he encouraged slaveholding Episcopalians to see to the religious instruction of their slaves, and he expected the clergy to provide such instruction whenever possible. As a slaveholder himself, he did not exempt himself from these responsibilities and frequently noted preaching, catechizing, baptizing, and confirming slaves in the course of his visitations. Such activity went hand in hand with patronizing and paternalistic attitudes toward the enslaved, and Atkinson repeatedly resorted to such attitudes, especially when encouraging slave-holding members of his own diocese to promote slave evangelization or when seeking to explain why African Americans did not flock to the Episcopal Church.[34]

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[32] Atkinson, *Primary Charge*, 14.

[33] Thomas Atkinson, *A Sermon Commemorative of the Rt. Rev. William Rollinson Whittingham, D.D., LL.D., Late Bishop of the Diocese of Maryland* (Baltimore, 1879), 13. Speaking of Whittingham (albeit he could just as easily have been speaking of himself), Atkinson declared: "But he had too deeply studied and too thoroughly believed in Holy Scripture, and he too heartily reverenced the Primitive Church to suppose that slavery was in itself, and necessarily, sinful."

[34] See for example: Bishop Atkinson, like Bishop Ives before him, commending and participating in the slave evangelization at the Lake Chapel on the property of Josiah Collins: *NCDJ,* 41st (1857): 24. Atkinson's approval of

   But Atkinson coupled his biblical defense of slavery with a willingness to see it brought to an end as a contemporary institution, so long as that result was accomplished with the cooperation of slaveholders themselves. He evidently manumitted a large number of his own slaves, though admittedly not all.[35] Such a qualified defense of slavery reflected an attitude prevalent in the upper south during the early national period, when it was not uncommon for slaveholders to "own slaves and disown slavery." It also closely paralleled the early position of Bishop John Henry Hopkins of Vermont, who in 1851 argued that slavery, albeit biblically permissible, was in practice a growing threat to the unity, character, and prosperity of the nation and should therefore be brought to an end.

By the 1850s, however, leading defenders of slavery had come increasingly to view the "peculiar institution" as a positive good and to argue strongly for its continued existence.[36] This was evidently the dominant view in the South Carolina diocesan convention, when it met to elect a bishop in May 1853, a few weeks before North Carolina met to do the same. One member of the South Carolina convention, Cranmore Wallace, believing that Atkinson's nomination had "taken a strong hold in this Diocese," wrote to Bishop Whittingham in December, 1852 to clarify Atkinson's position on slavery, stating that "No man could be elected here who was known to be opposed to its continuance." Whittingham's response to Wallace is not known, but Atkinson himself was of the opinion that his personal views on the desirability of slavery's continuance were insufficiently robust to satisfy the majority of South Carolinians and were the reason he was not elected. In any event, Atkinson received only two votes for Bishop of South Carolina.[37]

Atkinson's openness to picturing a society in which the relationship between the races was not defined by the institution of slavery reflected his studied convictions about the nature of race

racial paternalism is also evident in his memorial tribute to Collins at the 1864 Convention (Council) *NCDJ,* 48th (1864): 19, 20.

[35] Joseph Blount Cheshire, D.D., *The Church in the Confederate States: A History of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the Confederate States* (London, 1912), 262.

[36] On the eclipse of upper south attitudes, see Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us From Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (New York, 2009), 19-48; 505-534. On Bishop Hopkins' 1851 position and his subsequent shift to more strongly pro-slavery views (most likely as a the result of his growing association with Southern Bishops Polk and Elliott), see James M. Donald, "Bishop Hopkins and the Reunification of the Church" *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church,* Vol. XLVII, No. 1, (March, 1978), 73-81.

[37] Cranmore Wallace to William Whittingham 20 December 1852, Whittingham Papers, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland; Cheshire, *The Church in the Confederate States*, 263, 264; *Journal of the Proceedings of the 64th Annual Convention of the Protestant Episcopal Church in South Carolina* (1853).

itself and the nature of the Gospel. Atkinson's understanding of race was most fully articulated in an address entitled "The Unity of the Races," delivered at the University of North Carolina in April 1858. Here Atkinson noted the case made by Voltaire, Agassiz, and others that racial variety proved evidence of multiple species of humanity, and then proceeded to argue for essential racial unity: first, by contending that human variety is neither so great nor so fixed as to give evidence of different species, and then by contending for the great commonality among all humans—biologically, intellectually, morally, and spiritually. In all these areas, Atkinson found evidence of difference among the races, but only of degree, not kind. Significantly, he saw no inherent racial limitations to black intellectual advancement.[38] He concluded his remarks on an evangelical note, proclaiming the universal appeal of the Gospel to all sorts and conditions of humanity: "The Gospel every where appeals to the same affections and the same experience and every where on earth it finds a responsive chord in the human bosom, it wakes up among all men, fear, shame, reverence, gratitude, love, joy. Since men then are of one nature they must be of one blood."[39]

In the same year that Bishop Atkinson delivered his paper at the University, he also took steps to form a new bi-racial congregation in Wilmington, North Carolina, the city where he made his home. The presenting issues were two-fold. The existing parish, St. James', perpetuated the practice of pew rents, and in the bishop's estimation made inadequate provision for African-American worshippers. Moreover, when starting St. John's parish, a second Wilmington congregation, and erecting its new building in the late 1850s, these problems were not remedied. So Atkinson gathered a small group of like-minded Episcopalians and purchased a church building from the Protestant Methodists. Here all the seats would be free, services would be held at night for the benefit of those who had to work during the day, and African Americans would be explicitly welcomed. "Consequently, on the fifth of June [1858], a new parish was organized, under the name of St. Paul's, and a mixed congregation, the music of which was rendered by a Colored Choir, was formed. A Sunday School for Colored children was opened, but as in that

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[38] Thomas Atkinson, "The Unity of the Races" *North Carolina University Magazine* VII. No. 8 (April, 1858), 367.
[39] Atkinson, "The Unity of the Races," 369.

day it was not lawful to teach them to read, they were orally taught the Church Catechism, and to sing psalms and Hymns." So reads the earliest history of the parish.[40]

Atkinson's initiative in the founding of St. Paul's, Wilmington, should not be overlooked.[41] Atkinson's is the first name on the list of those who subscribed for the purchase of the building, and he was one of the half-dozen major contributors.[42] Moreover, Atkinson offered to lead the congregation himself and provide ministrations whenever his diocesan visitation schedule permitted. Much as he had done in Baltimore with the founding of Grace Church, Atkinson personally insured the success of St. Paul's by his "zeal, energy, enterprise, and unwearied perseverance." By 1861 the reported communicant strength of St. Paul's totaled forty-six, sixteen (approximately one-third) of whom are listed as "colored." For catechumens, the percentages were reversed: two-thirds were African American, and one-third Caucasian.[43] Before St. Paul's could become well-established, however, its existence was put in jeopardy by the coming of the Civil War.

Bishop Atkinson is now best remembered for his role in leading the Episcopal Church, through the travails of secession and war, to reunification. By January, 1861, Atkinson foresaw the likelihood of civil war and warned of its horrors. In a sermon preached at St. James' Church, Wilmington, and titled "On the Causes of our National Troubles," Atkinson acknowledged the growing rift between North and South and noted that "real war" was now on the horizon:

> Not theatrical war; not war as painted by poets and novelists, glorious in pride, pomp and
> circumstance; not war as waged in a foreign country, and which we know only in the
> columns of the newspapers; not war even as decided in a campaign or two, like ours in
> Mexico, but war in its stern reality, war as known by warriors, war as it empties villages,

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[40] Daniel Morrelle, "Extract from the History of St. Mark's Church, Wilmington, N.C." incorporated in *The Parish Register of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Wilmington, North Carolina 1872-1912,* 7, 8. Special Collections Library of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

[41] Hugh Lefler is clearly mistaken in categorically asserting that "Bishop Atkinson did not believe in mixed congregations." See Hugh Lefler, "Thomas Atkinson, Third Bishop of North Carolina," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* vol. 17, no. 4 (December, 1948), 433.

[42] The subscription list is found in the early documents, letters, and deeds of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, now in the Special Collections Library of the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

[43] *NCDJ 45th* (1861): 42.

and fills hospitals, and crowds cemeteries, war as waged between powers which are both strong and both resolute.[44]

In keeping with high church sensibilities, Atkinson refrained from speaking to the political questions driving the country to war, preferring instead to trace the underlying religious and moral causes of what he called the nation's "perilous condition." These he ascribed to a prevailing tendency among Americans to prefer shallow and sentimental religiosity over deep reverence and solemn duty to God. In describing the symptoms of this paucity of substantial religious observance, Atkinson clearly had in mind the prevailing forms of Evangelical Protestantism. He noted the "great revivals which sweep over the whole country like a conflagration," a pointed reference to the Revival of 1858. He decried the popular notion of religion as consisting chiefly "in a certain train of feelings, resulting in a hope or assurance of salvation." This emphasis upon subjective experience eroded a proper respect for the sacraments, ordinances, the ministerial office, and the Bible itself. Thus, he contended, "while the manifestations of religious feelings are more noisy and ostentatious now than formerly, the deep undercurrent of faith and reverence, which nourishes the whole spiritual life of a people, has lost much of its strength with us." And it was this general lack of reverence for law and rightful authority that now made Americans incapable of maintaining their duly constituted government.[45]

By May 1861, the prospects for war had become a reality, and North Carolina had seceded from the Union. Atkinson again took to the pulpit of St. James', Wilmington, to set forth what he termed "Christian Duty in the Present Time of Trouble." The Bishop remained grim in his characterization of the war itself, which he called a "calamity . . . direr and more to be deprecated than any other form of public evil." As to whether North Carolina was right to secede, Atkinson answered in the affirmative. For him, the issue had become a matter of whether the Union should be maintained by force or allowed to disband peacefully:

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[44] Thomas Atkinson, *On the Causes of our National Troubles: A Sermon Delivered in St. James' Church, Wilmington, N.C., on Friday, the 4th of January, 1861: Being the Day Recommended By the President of the United States to be Observed in Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer* (Wilmington, 1861), 4.
[45] Atkinson, *On the Causes of our National Troubles*, 8-14.

That old Union to which we were all at one time so deeply attached, is now dissolved. It cannot be, at this time, amicably reconstructed. No one proposes it shall be done—no one supposes it can be done. Shall there then be a voluntary and friendly separation, or an attempt at subjugation. This is really the question before the people, lately known as the people of the United States. How strange that there should be any doubt as to the answer!! That men should hesitate which to prefer, a peaceful separation of those who cannot agree, or civil war, with all its horrors, and all its uncertain issues!![46]

 But Atkinson did not think that the legitimacy of secession in any way guaranteed Southern success, militarily or morally. Atkinson believed that in recent decades America had been tried by prosperity and had yielded utterly to temptation. Now, he declared, the time had come for all Americans, South and North, to be tried by adversity. He encouraged his hearers to cherish unity and mutual affection, to exercise restraint in vindictive, malignant and scornful language toward those once our friends, and to rely upon prayer, the steadfast use of the Church's sacraments, and her "calm, soothing, and elevating" services.[47]

Atkinson's realistic appraisal of the course and the cost of war, and his cautionary words about the use of inflammatory language were not heeded by all his southern colleagues. But they were noted with approval by northern bishops. Writing to Whittingham in August 1861, Connecticut Bishop John Williams remarked: "If all our brethren had spoken as Atkinson has, how much better off should we be today than we are!"[48] Williams most likely had in mind Bishops Leonidas Polk of Louisiana and Stephen Elliott of Georgia, both of whom equated political secession with ecclesiastical secession and were now calling for the organization of a separate Episcopal Church in the Confederacy.

Atkinson would eventually lead the Diocese of North Carolina into union with the Episcopal Church of the Confederacy. But for Atkinson, this was a decision that needed to be made in a careful, deliberate manner by the diocese itself. And until such time as the Church in North

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[46] Thomas Atkinson, *Christian Duty in the Present Time of Trouble: A Sermon Preached at St. James' Church, Wilmington, N.C. on the 5th Sunday after Easter, 1861*, (Wilmington, 1861), 6.
[47] Atkinson, *Christian Duty in the Present Time of Trouble,* 7-14.
[48] John Williams to William Whittingham, 26 August, 1861. Whittingham Papers, Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland, Baltimore, MD. On Bishops Polk and Elliott, see Harold T. Lewis, *Yet With a Steady Beat: The African American Struggle for Recognition in the Episcopal Church,* (Valley Forge, 1996), 44.

Carolina, gathered in convention, acted to change its connection, he remained a bishop of the Episcopal Church, regardless of whether North Carolina seceded from the Union. Accordingly, Atkinson gave his official consent to the election of William Bacon Stevens as Assistant Bishop of Pennsylvania, even though North Carolina had seceded, and he refrained from participating in the consecration of Richard H. Wilmer as Bishop of Alabama because Wilmer was not duly elected by the Episcopal Church and the constitution of the Church in the Confederate States had yet to be ratified. Some of his Southern colleagues viewed Atkinson's behavior in these two instances as tantamount to disloyalty to the Confederate cause, and Atkinson took great pains to explain his actions to the diocese in his 1862 address to convention.[49]

But the wisdom of Atkinson's deliberate and conservative course of action, along with his cautionary attitude toward the war itself, became evident in the months following the end of hostilities in April 1865. As one of his successors, Bishop Joseph B. Cheshire, has noted: "Of all the Southern Bishops he [Atkinson] was the least embarrassed or trammeled by the results of the war. . . . He had no need to struggle to reconstruct his principles, or to cast about how he might save the remnants from the wreck. Party heat had not affected his judgment in 1861, and he came to the consideration of the situation in 1865 with the same calm mind and clear vision."[50]

One proof of Cheshire's observation is the fact that Atkinson could preach virtually the same sermon at the end of the war as he had at its beginning. In his Wilmington sermon from May 1861, Atkinson had suggested that the country was soon to pass from the height of prosperity to the depths of ruin and should gird itself spiritually to withstand the ordeal with unshaken faith in God. In May 1865, preaching from his temporary quarters in Wadesboro, North Carolina, he returned to the same theme, noting the calamities which had indeed befallen the Confederacy and the precipitous fall of the South from unbounded prosperity to utter ruin, again counseling the need for a Job-like faith that would praise God regardless of circumstance.[51]

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[49] *NCDJ, 46th* (1862): 19-23.
[50] Cheshire, *The Church in the Confederate States*, 271, 272.
[51] Thomas Atkinson, "Sermon Preached in Wadesborough [North Carolina] May 14, 1865." Unpublished Manuscript in the Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland.

More importantly, Atkinson grasped the significance of taking immediate steps to reunite the Church. He had long prized peace and unity as the hallmarks of the Episcopal Church, and he now pursued the course of action requisite to restoring the Church to that condition. Atkinson was not the only bishop desirous of such a reunion. In the summer of 1865, the Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, John Henry Hopkins of Vermont, extended an invitation to all the southern bishops to attend the upcoming general convention, scheduled to take place in Philadelphia in October of that year. Bishop Horatio Potter of New York did likewise. These northern bishops represented the long-established high church position that slavery was biblically sanctioned and abolition was a "political" subject upon which the Church should refrain from taking a position. Consequently, they were predisposed to seek the return of their southern colleagues of similar outlook.[52]

Nevertheless, considerable obstacles to reunification remained. Not all northern Episcopalians shared Hopkins' views. Evangelical bishops such as Charles McIlvaine of Ohio, were strongly anti-slavery, held the South responsible for the war, and were not predisposed to accept the return of southerners to the fold without first extracting statements of contrition. Northerners were especially offended by the words and actions of Bishops Polk and Elliott in justification of the southern cause. Other northern bishops simply thought that action was premature: they believed that the dioceses that formed the Church of the Confederacy should act first to disband and seek reunification, and only then should the northern Church move to accept them. Many southern Episcopalians agreed, and one southern bishop, Thomas Davis of South Carolina, actually favored the continuance of a separate Southern Episcopal Church.

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[52] The subject of the reunification of the Episcopal Church in the aftermath of the Civil War has received extensive scholarly treatment. Journal articles devoted to the subject include: Mark Mohler, "The Episcopal Church and National Reconciliation, 1865," *Political Science Quarterly,* Vol. 41, No. 4, (Dec., 1926), 567-595; Henry T. Shanks, "The Reunion of the Episcopal Church, 1865," *Church History,* Vol. 9, No. 2 (June, 1940), 120-140; Lockert B. Mason, "Separation and Reunion of the Episcopal Church 1861-1865: The Role of Bishop Thomas Atkinson," *Anglican and Episcopal History* Vol. LIX, No. 3, (September, 1990), 345-365. The subject is also treated in more general scholarly works. See especially: T. Felder Dorn, *Challenges on the Emmaus Road: Episcopal Bishops Confront Slavery, Civil War, and Emancipation,* (Columbia, 2013), 342-359, and Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr., *Episcopalians & Race: Civil War to Civil Rights,* (Lexington, 2000), 9, 10.

In the midst of this cacophony, Atkinson addressed the North Carolina diocesan convention in September 1865. The Bishop not only urged reunification of the Church but also made the case for immediate action. Having justified the creation of a separate body in the Confederate states solely on practical political grounds, he now regarded the defeat of the Confederacy and the re-establishment of the authority of United States government as removing all justifications for an independent organization. By acting now to reunite, the Episcopal Church would be cementing "its claim to be a pure and vigorous branch of the Church Catholic, rising continually into wider usefulness and higher influence." By failing to act, the Church north and south would most likely devolve into a "bundle of hostile sects," divided by political sentiment. Atkinson could foresee rival congregations being established in the same community, catering to northern or southern sympathies, and Atkinson was especially concerned by what he already saw of a southern propensity to harbor grievance. To forestall this unhappy prospect, Atkinson called the Church in North Carolina to remember its longstanding commitment to "cohesive principles" and to trust that those in favor of perpetuating discord would prove small in number. He then returned once more to his call for acting quickly, declaring: "The interests are too momentous to be left to the hazards and uncertainties of time. May God give us wisdom and understanding and faithful hearts to see our duty and to follow it!"[53]

That the convention would act in accordance with the bishop's heartfelt appeal was by no means assured. A committee formed to consider the bishop's call was divided in its recommendation, with a majority report supporting the proposition favored by the bishop, namely, that the diocese be "prepared to resume her position as a diocese in connection with the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States" and to that end, elect clerical and lay deputies to attend the upcoming general convention. A minority report, also placed before the convention, insisted that the diocese act in concert with a majority of the southern dioceses. Only upon defeat of the minority report was the majority report adopted, and only then did the convention proceed to the election of deputies.[54]

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[53] *NCDJ, 49th* (1865): 19-22.
[54] *NCDJ, 49th* (1865): 31, 33.

In the end, there were but two southern bishops, Atkinson and Henry C. Lay, attending the October 1865 general convention in Philadelphia. And only Atkinson went with the approval of his diocese and in the company of a diocesan deputation. Once in Philadelphia, there was more work to be done to effect reunion. Atkinson and Lay, uncertain of their reception, refrained from taking their places in the House of Bishops on the opening day of convention until explicitly encouraged to do so. But that step alone did not suffice to guarantee rapprochement. There remained the thorny issue of how to word a resolution of thanksgiving for the end of the war and the reunification of the Church. Some wished general convention to give thanks for the re-establishment of the authority of the national government over all the land and for the abolition of slavery. Atkinson demurred. Southerners, he said, could give thanks that war was over and could acquiesce in the re-establishment of national government. But having hoped and prayed for a different outcome, they could not in good conscience say they were thankful for the defeat of the Confederacy. Atkinson, therefore, proposed a substitute: that thanks be rendered for the restoration of "Peace to the country and unity to the Church." This wording was adopted in the House of Bishops by a 16 to 7 margin, the two southern bishops present abstaining. Ultimately it prevailed in the House of Deputies as well. This temperate action paved the way for other southern dioceses to rejoin the national Church, a process that was completed by May 1866.[55]

With the reunification of the national Church on terms acceptable to southern sensibilities, assessments of Atkinson's pivotal role in the 1865 General Convention customarily conclude. Certainly it was a signal achievement, accomplished in the face of widespread calls for delay and expression of sentiments that could easily have derailed the result. In large measure, it was a triumph for the high church consensus that did not divide the church over slavery before the war and that actively sought its reunification thereafter. In the fall of 1865, however, it still required a southern bishop to respond to these overtures with acumen and persistence in order to bring them to fruition. And for this, Atkinson is rightly remembered.

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[55] See Mason, "Separation and Reunion of the Episcopal Church 1861-1865: The Role of Bishop Thomas Atkinson," 360-365.

But there is another, related aspect of Atkinson's work in the fall of 1865 that also merits attention, namely, his continuing efforts in promoting the Church's work among African Americans. Bishop Cheshire's observation that Atkinson was the southern bishop "least embarrassed or trammeled by the results of the war" applies with equal force to his racial policies and practices. Since Atkinson had refrained from making an ideological defense of slavery, he was less troubled by its abolition and more receptive to the incorporation of African Americans into the common life of the Church.

In the same address in which he set forth the case for reunification, he told a convention of former slaveholders that they had no reason to look back with particular satisfaction on how they had previously behaved:

> Some of us have ever feared, while the colored people were in the condition of slavery, that the power and control which the white race possessed over them was not exer-cised in such a way as to make us acceptable to God, and faithful stewards in His sight.

Atkinson hastened to note that some slaveholders were kindly intentioned: "But the system [of chattel slavery] was no doubt defective . . . and, at any rate, God in His Providence has definitely set it aside." The Bishop then proceeded to set forth the case for treating the newly emancipated with justice and kindness: for paying their wages honestly, for extending them religious instruction, and for helping them form their own congregations.[56]

The convention committee responsible for drafting a response to this portion of the bishop's address subsequently crafted its own call for "bold, decisive, and definite action." Just as the political and social status of African Americans had radically changed, so there must be a corresponding change in how the Church approached its work with those who were newly emancipated. No longer could the Church rest content with consigning them to a subordinate role in predominantly white congregations. Rather, the report called for the Church to take the lead in creating new black congregations and to invest in the cultivation and training of black vestrymen, catechists, Sunday School superintendents, and clergy. The power to elect clergy for

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[56] *NCDJ, 49th* (1865): 22-24.

black congregations should reside with their own vestries, and the black clergy of the Episcopal Church should be welcomed to serve in North Carolina. To the committee, the very nature of the Church itself compelled such a response: "As we believe the Church to be Apostolic and Catholic, we feel bound to do all within our power to convey its holy teachings as rapidly and as potently as possible, to every soul committed to our care, whether its casket be Anglican or African."[57]

Just as Atkinson believed that urgent action was required in the matter of reunification, so he likewise believed that urgent action was called for in how the Church addressed the change in status of African Americans. And having garnered the backing of his own diocese for both of these initiatives, he went to general convention to work for their joint implementation. Atkinson and Lay were seated in the House of Bishops on October 4, 1865. The very next day, Atkinson was appointed to a special committee of the Board of Missions to consider the Church's response to the freedmen of the South. The following week, the committee made its report, calling for the creation of the "Protestant Episcopal Freedman's Commission," a recommendation which was unanimously adopted.[58] The Commission, once formed, took due notice of the position North Carolina had adopted with respect to "the education and elevation of the freedmen," republishing the 1865 North Carolina convention report in its entirety under the heading, "Southern Men as Co-Workers: North Carolina Council and the Freedmen."[59]

After returning to North Carolina, Atkinson quickly set about forging a strong working relationship between his diocese and the Freedman's Commission. Within months, a school had been opened in New Bern, with two teachers and 140 students, and plans were underway to establish a church as well. One of the teachers, Harriet A. Chapin, concluded her report to the Commission, with the following observation: "Bishop Atkinson is anxious this work should succeed in Newbern. He says it will have a great deal of influence in the whole State. If it is

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[57] *NCDJ, 49th* (1865): 36-38.
[58] *Protestant Episcopal Freedman's Commission: Occasional Paper, January, 1866.* (Boston, 1866) Transcribed by Wayne Kempton and posted to Project Canterbury, 2010. 1, 2. For an overview of the work of the Freedman's Commission, see H. Peers Brewer, "The Protestant Episcopal Freedman's Commission, 1865-1878," *The Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* Vol. XXVI, No. 4, (December, 1957), 361-380.
[59] *Protestant Episcopal Freedman's Commission: Occasional Paper, January, 1866.* Appendix G.

successful other clergymen will be encouraged to attempt the same in parishes where they are not willing to attempt it now."[60] Miss Chapin's remarks are significant for two reasons: they underscore Atkinson's investment in this work and they reveal Atkinson's appreciation for the challenge of implementing it. Because Atkinson knew that making a good beginning and demonstrating the effectiveness of this work was critically important, he chose a community where he thought the prospects of success were excellent.

In keeping with Atkinson's strategy, it is not surprising to learn that the second freedmen's school created under the commission's auspices would be in the Bishop's hometown of Wilmington. At the bishop's insistence, St. Paul's Church, closed since 1862, reopened, but now as home to a mission school and a black congregation. By the time the diocesan convention gathered in May 1866, Deacon-in-charge Richard Jones reported 10 baptisms, 14 confirmations, and 39 communicants—along with a school of more than 200 children.[61]

Why did Atkinson now choose to pursue a strategy of creating a separate black congregation at St. Paul's, instead of re-instituting the antebellum bi-racial congregation? He spelled out the rationale in his 1866 diocesan convention address: the education of the freedmen must now be a mission priority, requiring targeted support and the application of resources devoted exclusively to this goal. Moreover, Atkinson was convinced that if the Church was to be successful in this endeavor, it would need to make provision for African Americans to enter the ordained ministry of the Church. For Atkinson, this was simply another instance of his long-standing position on the indispensability of native clergy for any missionary endeavor to an underserved population. Without black clergy, there could be no effective ministry to African-Americans. And so, he asked rhetorically, "Is it to be endured that a Church which claims to be the Catholic and Apostolic Church in North Carolina, shall systematically refuse to do anything for the religious welfare of one-third of the people of North Carolina? . . . I hope the Convention at its present meeting will take some steps toward inaugurating a system of preparation of colored Ministers

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[60] *The Spirit of Missions,* Vol. 31(1866), 164.
[61] *NCDJ* 50th (1866): 42.

for the colored people."[62] What Atkinson clearly knew, but did not make explicit, was that blacks would abandon the Episcopal Church entirely if such provisions were not made.

In partial fulfillment of his call for the Church in North Carolina to cultivate and educate black leadership, the Bishop worked actively to see to the establishment of St. Augustine's School in Raleigh, North Carolina. Once again, Atkinson was operating in close conjunction with the national Church's Freedman's Commission, under whose auspices the school was organized and funded.   But it was Atkinson who enlisted ten North Carolina Episcopalians, five clergymen and five laymen, to serve with him as the Incorporators, or trustees, of the new institution. And it was the trustees who, in turn, prevailed upon the executive in charge of the commission, the Rev. Dr. Brinton Smith, to leave his national post and become the president of the nascent institution when it opened its doors in January 1868.[63] In underscoring the significance of St. Augustine's in the overall strategy of the Freedmen's Commission, the Commission cited Atkinson for corroboration:

> The Committee have felt for some time that it was essential to the permanent success of their work that persons of color, of both sexes, should be trained as teachers, and thus become centers of influence . . . . On this subject Bishop Atkinson thus writes: "In order that the education of the Freedmen at the South shall be general and effective, it must, to a great extent, be conducted by teachers of their own color. . . . In this point of view, a Normal School seems to be altogether indispensable to the effectual accomplishment of the good work on which the Church has entered."[64]

Both Atkinson and the Commission recognized that no amount of direct assistance to the newly-emancipated could compensate for a lack of investment in blacks themselves, as clergy and as teachers. Moreover, they knew that support for work with the freedmen might soon wane, and that evidence of indifference to their plight, in the North as well as the South, was already becoming apparent. Thus, they worked quickly and collaboratively to see St. Augustine's

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[62] *NCDJ* 50th (1866): 18,19.
[63] *The Spirit of Missions,* vol. 32 (1867), 817,818. See also Thelma Johnson Roundtree, *Strengthening Ties that Bind: A History of Saint Augustine's College,* (Raleigh, 2002), 3-8. The work of founding St. Augustine's also benefitted from the support of the national Freedman's Bureau, which supplied the first building and furniture for the school. See *The Spirit of Missions,* vol. 34 (1869), 190.
[64] *The Spirit of Missions,* vol. 32 (1867), 823.

School established, and made immediate plans to provide training for black clergy as well as teachers.[65]

Equally significant was Atkinson's commitment to accepting black clergy and congregations into union with his diocesan convention—a conviction he shared with William Augustus Muhlenberg, among others. In the years following the Civil War, this proved to be a deeply contentious matter throughout the south, nowhere more painful to witness than in the 1876 rejection of St. Mark's, Charleston, by the Diocese of South Carolina.[66] But in North Carolina, no issue was ever publicly made of clergy serving black congregations being entitled to seats in convention, albeit Atkinson was challenged by a member of the standing committee over whether to give the same endorsement to black candidates for ordination as to whites.[67] Nevertheless, the Bishop was able to carry the day: black clergy were given seat and voice in convention, and when it was time for St. Mark's, Wilmington, the successor black congregation to St. Paul's, to apply for union with convention in 1873, the congregation received unanimous acceptance.[68] In this regard, North Carolina stood alone among southern dioceses and among the predominantly white denominations of the state.[69]

This record on behalf of ministry with African Americans in the years following the Civil War reflects the personal investment Atkinson was willing to make to further what he saw as the

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[65] See the reports of J. Brinton Smith in the *Spirit of Missions*, Vol. 33 (1868), 320-322; Vol. 34 (1869), 190, 191.

[66] T. Felder Dorn, *Challenges on the Emmaus Road: Episcopal Bishops Confront Slavery, Civil War, and Emancipation,* (Columbia, 2013), 405; George F. Bragg, *"The Whittingham Canon:" The Birth and History of the Missionary District Plan,* (Baltimore, n.d.), 4, 5.

[67] *NCDJ 54th* (1870): 13, 14.

[68] "Since my last report the congregation of St. Mark's Parish has applied for admission into union with the Diocesan Convention, and has been, I am happy to say, admitted by unanimous vote." C.O.Brady, Rector. *NCDJ 57th* (1873): 56, 57.

[69] George Freeman Bragg numbered Bishop Atkinson among the "militant minority" of white men and women who "lost no opportunity to work for the best interest of all, black and white, and such have co-operated in preserving to the Church 'an open door' to the colored race." Of Atkinson, he wrote: "Bishop Atkinson . . . ere the smoke of Civil War had cleared came bravely forward in North Carolina, battling in the face of hard, bitter and unrelenting prejudice, established St. Augustine's College for the education of the colored race, organized colored parishes and had them admitted into union with his diocesan convention. And when the Standing Committee refused to pass the papers of a colored candidate for holy orders, invited two 'Yankee' Negro priests from the North to come into his diocese and admitted them to full privileges in his convention. Other Southern Bishops labored earnestly to do the same thing, but could not." George Freeman Bragg, Jr. "The Episcopal Church and the Negro Race," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church,* Vol. IV, No. 1, (March, 1935), 50, 51. The favorable comparison of the Episcopal Church in North Carolina with the efforts of Presbyterians, Baptists, and Methodists is made by Roberta Sue Alexander, *North Carolina Faces the Freedmen: Race Relations During Presidential Reconstruction, 1865-1867* (Durham, 1985), 67-75.

Church's mission. At Grace Church, Baltimore, at St. Paul's, Wilmington, both before and after the Civil War, and then in the establishment of St. Augustine's School, Atkinson repeatedly demonstrated his willingness to work persistently for objectives he deemed important, mobilizing resources and seeking collaborative alliances. And he brought a similar determination to his work on behalf of church reunification.

It is important to grasp the underlying theological coherence of all these efforts. They all reflected Atkinson's long-standing core convictions about the nature of the Church and its claims to unity, apostolicity, and catholicity.[70] He worked to insure that these marks of the Church were made manifest in its life and work; he wanted his fellow Episcopalians to honor these convictions and act upon them in principled ways. Thus in challenging the Church to fulfill its responsibilities to the freedmen, Atkinson called attention to the distinctive opportunity and obligation provided by the manifest unity of the church. Preaching before a congregation in Washington, D.C., in June 1868, Atkinson described the urgent need for freedmen schools and reminded his hearers of why the Episcopal Church should be in the forefront of those responding to this need. He concluded his appeal with these words:

> And the coloured man is imprest, as the whole nation is imprest by the unity of the Church. He sees it the same from Maine to Texas from North Carolina to California. He sees his former master & his Northern friend reuniting in efforts for his improvement, while elsewhere he sees men of the same religious communion, separated by particular antipathies, & traducing & reviling one another, more than ever men of the world permit to themselves. Now will the Church do this great work for which she is so well adapted?[71]

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[70] George Freeman Bragg recognized the underlying theological rationale for Atkinson's efforts and how it imparted a distinctive character: "At the very close of the Civil War, in the year 1865, the late Bishop Atkinson of North Carolina had promptly laid down, and insisted up, the Catholic ideal, with respect to the diocese over which he presided. His position was both original and unique. His was the first and only Southern Diocesan Convention which took such [a] position." Bragg, *"The Whittingham Canon,"* 5.

[71] Thomas Atkinson, "Sermon Preached at the Church of the Ascension, Washington, D.C. on June 7, 1868," 28. Unpublished manuscript in the Archives of the Episcopal Diocese of Maryland. Atkinson evidently gave a version of this same sermon in May, 1868 at the meeting of the Board of Missions in Hartford, CT. That sermon is summarized in an account of the meeting published in the *Spirit of Missions,* vol. 33 (1868), 536-538.

For Atkinson, then, the reunification of the Church was bound up with furthering the Church's mission and making a credible, common witness on behalf of the most vulnerable members of society.

But the Episcopal Church reunited after the Civil War only to nearly divide itself in two over matters of ritual. The period from 1866-1874 marked the height of controversy in the Episcopal Church over ritual, and Atkinson's position within that controversy is worth noting. Atkinson initially took a moderate stance; in 1866 he refused to join twenty-eight of his fellow bishops in condemning certain contested practices such as the use of altar candles, reverences to the altar, and Eucharistic vestments. As the controversy wore on, Atkinson made clear his long-standing anti-Roman bias and took a firm stance against the practice of saying private confession to a priest before taking communion. The North Carolina bishop, like many bishops of the American Episcopal Church, remained wedded to an earlier stage of high church development which continued to value the Reformation and draw at least some firm points of contrast between Rome and Canterbury.[72]

Atkinson's commitment to a high church ecclesiology, while certainly not embracing full-blown Anglo-Catholicism, is still well worth appreciating for its moral and social implications. Atkinson spoke unambiguously about the need for the Church to remain catholic, by which he meant that the Church could never permit itself to rest content with embracing only one segment or class of society. And this became the bedrock of his insistence that the Church seek to minister to and incorporate African Americans.

The Episcopal Church in North Carolina, like the state and much of the nation, did not always make good on these principles. Atkinson himself was given to contrasting the ministrations of

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[72] On the 1866 *Declaration* signed by 28 bishops, see DeMille, *The Catholic Movement in the Episcopal Church,* 113. Atkinson explained his own position on ritualism in his 1867 address to the North Carolina diocesan convention, including his own reasons for not signing the *Declaration*: *NCDJ 51ˢᵗ* (1867): 25-27. Atkinson's anti-Roman sentiments are clearly on display in his 1870 convention address: *NCDJ 54ᵗʰ* (1870): 28, 29, and in his 1874 "Charge to the Clergy on the subject of Sacramental Confession." *NCDJ 58ᵗʰ* (1874): Appendix C (printed with the Journal but separately paginated).

the Episcopal Church with the "ignorant teachers of their own race" which African Americans evidently preferred, comments which reflect a persistent paternalistic and patronizing bias.[73]

Nevertheless, the abiding value of Atkinson's appeal to the Church's catholicity can be seen in an incident which occurred at the close of the Bishop's life. Atkinson died in early January 1881. Shortly thereafter, the vestry of St. Paul's, Winston, North Carolina, became the first predominantly white congregation to elect a black man as part of its delegation to diocesan convention. An editorial ran in the diocesan newspaper, *The Church Messenger,* entitled "A good Catholic example."

> A case worthy of record and of high commendation has just occurred in St. Paul's Parish, Winston, NC showing the triumph of true Church principles over social prejudice. The vestry, in electing delegates to represent the parish in the approaching Convention of the Church in the diocese, unanimously chose a *colored man* of the congregation among the delegates, especially requesting that he would attend. The sight of colored men as delegates on the floor of the Convention is and has been for years familiar enough to us all in this diocese—thanks to the lofty Catholic position taken by Bishop Atkinson . . . . But these men have been representatives of congregations composed of people of their own race. This instance is the first on record, we are sure, in this diocese or in any southern diocese, perhaps in the whole country, in which a congregation composed almost exclusively of whites, and with a white vestry entirely, have offered to send a colored man to represent them in a Convention of the Church . . . .

The editorial went on to praise the vestry for "breaking loose from the thralldom of social pressure" and concluded by reminding readers that "Catholic Truth" demands that "no difference

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[73] T. Felder Dorn has aptly characterized Atkinson's report to the General Convention of 1871 in which the quoted remarks appear: "The 1871 report to General Convention acknowledged the reality that the freed people in North Carolina generally were not responding to overtures from the Episcopal Church. The harsh language, however, seemed to reflect disappointment, if not some bitterness, at being rejected by the bulk of the black population. Attributing the rejection largely to the 'guidance of ignorant teachers' was a generalization that ignored the complex reasons for that rejection, including both white paternalism and the variety of religious options being chosen by black individuals." *Challenges on the Emmaus Road: Episcopal Bishops Confront Slavery, Civil War, and Emancipation,* 412, 413.

[be] recognized in race, age, color, condition or circumstances. We are all one in Christ and the Church."[74]

That editorial found its way to the editorial desk of the Raleigh *Observer*, where it met with the scornful opinion that electing black delegates was not the way for the Episcopal denomination to promote itself among the white people of North Carolina. This, in turn, prompted the deacon in charge of the Winston congregation, William Shipp Bynum, to make the following rebuttal:

> In electing a Negro there was no thought of antagonizing anybody, nor any object beyond paying a just tribute to a thoroughly informed, zealous and faithful communicant, whose worth and gentlemanly bearing the entire community is able to appreciate. . . . Speaking now for myself [Bynum continued] permit me to add that while your editorial may voice the opinions of those calling a branch of the Living Church 'that denomination' and wishing it to be 'run' on lines of caste and color, there are not a few who stand for a larger-hearted Christianity than that, and many who believe, without reserve, that at the foot of the Cross all men are equal.[75]

The clear continuity between Bishop Atkinson's teachings and the actions of Bynum and the vestry of St. Paul's, Winston was especially poignant in light of the bishop's death in early 1881. And it serves as a fitting capstone for a life devoted to articulating and applying with considerable consistency, energy, moral conviction, and pastoral sensitivity the "cohesive principles" of the Church.

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[74] *Church Messenger* 2, no. 50 (May 5, 1881).
[75] *Church Messenger* 3 no. 1 (May 19, 1881).