

**Westminster Presbyterian Church + 533 S. Walnut St. + Springfield, IL 62704**

**Dr. Lonnie H. Lee**

5/23/10

175<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sunday

**Faith of Our Founders:  
Albert Hale's Discourse on War  
Acts 2:17**

There is a tradition in this church that on major anniversary celebrations the pastor is to preach a historical sermon. On the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1885 the pastor, D. S. Johnson, gave a sermon which summarized the history of the congregation up to that point.<sup>1</sup> He used Psalm 48:12-13 as his launching pad; "Walk about Zion, go all around it, count its towers, consider well its ramparts, go through its citadels, that you may tell the next generation." Johnson must have done a lot of walking because his manuscript rolls on for 65 typewritten pages. If he preached three minutes per page, which would be a very fast clip, the sermon would have taken three hours and fifteen minutes. At the rate of three hours for fifty years, I could cover 175 years in about 11 hours. Does anyone have anything else to do today? Let me put you at ease by saying I have no intention of covering 175 years of history in this sermon. You can spend eleven hours with the timeline. Instead I want to take you to a defining moment in the early history of this church which provides a fascinating window into the faith of our founders.

Let me say first that I am haunted by the faith of our founders. They were in touch with the message of Pentecost in ways we cannot begin to fathom. They came to Illinois with visions and dreams of a world made whole. They set out to create a society which would reflect God's dream for a human family where no one is enslaved and no one is excluded. They refused to settle for anything less. They believed that anything was possible because God had called them into a community of faith that was infused with the Spirit of God.

In 1847 this nation was at war with Mexico. The Presbyterian General Assembly called for a day of humiliation and prayer in the churches on the second Sunday of July. When Albert Hale climbed into the pulpit of Second Presbyterian Church on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July he was in the ninth year of a twenty-seven year pastorate. In the morning service he offered a reasoned presentation of just war theory and why the Mexican War did not meet that standard. In the evening service his sermon was more of an emotional appeal for the church and the nation to repent.

On this particular Sunday there were an unusually large number of visitors in worship at Second Presbyterian. A Constitutional Convention was in session in Springfield. Delegates were in town from all across the state. At least one of these visitors was offended by Albert Hale's preaching. On the following day G. W. Akin, delegate from Franklin County, introduced a motion censuring Albert Hale for sermons denouncing "the existing war with Mexico." The motion directed that Mr. Hale be excused from "holding prayers in this convention," and suggested that Hale was a bad influence on the "younger generation." The motion was debated at length and then tabled by a vote of 82 to 36.

Hale's turn to open the convention with prayer came a week later on July 19. As he began to pray he was interrupted by the sound of Mr. Akin hissing and clapping his hands. Akin then stormed out of the hall and was waiting outside when Hale finished his prayer and came out of the building.

The sources are not specific about who physically assaulted Albert Hale that day. But Akin was quoted as telling Hale, “If he did not wish to be hurt, he must not come there again.”<sup>2</sup>

Newspapers around the country ran the story of this controversy. The sermons were subsequently published by Hale’s friends in the hope that he could be judged by his own words and not by what others were saying about him.<sup>3</sup> These are the only sermons of Albert Hale which have down to us. I now want to share with you a *Reader’s Digest* style condensation of Hale’s evening sermon. Listen to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the words of Albert Hale.

“I have no pleasure in speaking of the war between the United States and Mexico. I have ever avoided all public mention of it, only as duty has seemed to demand it. The whole subject, in all its bearing and relations, is fraught with the deepest sorrow and woe.

I am quite aware, too, of the prejudice against a minister of Christ, who, fearlessly and honestly speaks the truth. But the feelings of men, and the tone and spirit of the press, can be no rule of speech or action for the servant of Christ. I am not here as a politician ... but as the humble servant of Him who was hated of the world, because He testified that its works were evil.

In seeking the occasions of humiliation before God, on account of the war between this Republic and Mexico, let us...notice,

1. The waste. The cost of the war with Mexico, and
2. The reason why it is waged, and
3. The occasion for humiliation and prayer to the God of peace...

We have sunk fifty—one hundred—perhaps, two hundred millions of dollars; the gift of God through the productive industry of the nation. We have, by this war, occasioned enormous sufferings, and inhuman cruelties. Thousands of families we have robbed of their chief solace and support; we have filled thousands of dwellings with mourning, and tens of thousands of hearts with unutterable anguish and woe...We have robbed the land of some of her choicest sons...We have already sent to the grave fifteen thousand human beings. By the ruthless hand of war, they have been torn from the tender ties of domestic and social affinity and love; and led up, in solemn procession to the great bloody altar; the human sacrifices to the relentless and insatiable god of war!

And will it justify us; will conscience—will heaven—justify us, in doing these deeds, directly or indirectly, *because* Mexico owed us \$3,000,000 and would not pay it?—or, that she insulted us, and we had not grace to bear it? Will it justify us in such deeds, to say we wanted Texas, and endeavored to think we had a claim to it and were determined to have it? Or, will it answer to say that the war was the fruit of a rash act of the president, in ordering the armed occupation of the disputed territory, and the country thus involved in war without our fault, we go for the country *right or wrong*? Will conscience, will God justify us, in these deeds of darkness, for such a reason? Or will it do, in view of the well-known facts of the case, to pretend that Mexico provoked the war, by acts of aggression and hostility? Who will believe it?

And when these wrongs to humanity are to be accounted for; when the voice of bereaved homes, and bereaved hearts, and the voice of blood, cries from 15,000 graves, to heaven against us, will it do to reply that we needed more territory to make new slave states, to preserve the balance of power between the north and the south; or to perpetuate and extend slavery! Is that institution so fraught with blessings to the country, and the race, so beneficial to either master or slave, to the

oppressor or the oppressed; is it in such excellent odor among civilized nations, and so approved by a just and benevolent God, that to foster and protect it, we may be justified in squandering hundreds of millions of dollars, in producing the enormous and wide-spread miseries, and in the offering of 15,000 human sacrifices? If this language seem severe, it is because the facts themselves are severe.

But the question returns; are we justified—or, are we, as a nation, guilty, and bound by every consideration of truth and right, to humble ourselves before God and seek his forgiveness, and ask his interposition, to enable us to retrace our steps, and thus “bring forth fruits meet for repentance?”

Reflect, too, what ends—worthy of humanity, and approved of heaven—might have been attained, by the proper use of the treasure we have ingloriously wasted.

Our gifts to the starving population of Ireland have astonished the civilized world. But the whole amount of our charities, to the famishing millions of other lands, would scarcely equal the expenditure for the Mexican war a *single week*. And the cost of all...institutions, in the whole land...for the relief of the poor and the suffering...the hospitals, the asylums, the retreats, the homes; by means of which, comfort and happiness are freely provided for thousands, would be consumed by this war in a very few days!

The entire cost of all the benevolent and philanthropic institutions, and societies, in the land; the cost of all the means of education of every description; the cost of sustaining all the churches...would equal the expense of the war but for a few short weeks! So wide is the difference between the cost of virtue and vice; between the means to destroy life, and the means of its preservation. And is it right to waste the treasures which a beneficent God has provided and entrusted to us, as his stewards...in such an unhallowed enterprise as the Mexican war?

Look at the law of God; seeking, by the use of his authority to bind all his intelligent creatures, made of one blood, in one harmonious and blissful brotherhood—“a consecrated channel for his love to flow in” – look seriously, at that law and ask, is it right for the American nation—a nation exalted to heaven in intellectual and moral advantages—to employ her mighty energies in such an enterprise of blood, of woe and death; as the Mexican war?

Look to Calvary—where the Son of God is dying amid the agonies of the Cross for the redemption of men—and as you gaze on that scene, read, from the word of Him who cannot lie, “Ye are bought with a price.” Remember that the ransom price is there freely paid, and the door of hope freely opened to all. And can we, a Christian nation, be guiltless, when we send to the battlefield; and to premature death, thousands for whom the Savior died, and to whom we are commanded to bear the message of his mercy, that they may live?

Nor let it be forgotten that there is a reckoning day. As a nation, God will deal with us in due time. He requires of us justice, mercy, and good will, to the vast brotherhood of nations. No nation on earth ever was placed in circumstances better to understand and appreciate her duty, and her true glory, in these respects, than our own. We owe it to ourselves—we owe it to the human family, so long torn and distracted, and enfeebled by wars; we owe it to God, the author of all our privileges, to set before all nations an example of forbearance, of peace, of love, in all our national intercourse and relations. He that created us—He that sustains us—against whom we have sinned... requires us to

humble ourselves before Him for our sins, in warring against our feeble sister Republic; and to retrace our steps, and thus avert His righteous judgments.

Let the Church of God—His acknowledged servants and children—cease not to confess their sins, and the sins of the people, and seek the return of peace; that His name may be glorified...”<sup>4</sup>

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#### Endnotes

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1. D. S. Johnson, “50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Sermon,” at Second Presbyterian Church in 1885 from Clinton Conkling *Historical Data*, Vol. I, pages 119-187.

2. G. W. Akins’ role in this controversy is described in an appended statement published with Albert Hale’s sermons.

3. The following statement is attached to the published version of Albert Hale’s sermons:

Rev. Mr. Hale,

Dear Sir,—The sermons delivered by you on the 11<sup>th</sup> July, in pursuance of the recommendation of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, on the existing war between this country and Mexico, having been made the subject of extraordinary debate and action in the Constitutional Convention, now in session in this city, we request of you a copy of said sermons for publication; that all who feel an interest in the matter may be able to form a correct opinion.

Silas W. Robbins,  
Joseph Thayer,  
Benjamin Edwards,  
E. B. Pease,  
E. B. Wiley,  
J. L. Lamb,  
W. Dillard

Springfield, August 10, 1847

4. This sermon of Albert Hale was published by the *Sangamo Journal* in August of 1847 under the title, “Two Discourses on the Subject of The War Between the United States and Mexico, Preached in the Second Presbyterian Church, in Springfield on Sabbath, 11 July 1847, by Albert Hale, Pastor of the Church.” I am indebted to Becky Martin for finding this publication in the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and securing a copy for me.