**The Christian Revival of the American Civil War**

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by

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The Christian Revival of the American Civil War was a religious revival to spread the gospel among the fighting men. This was important to the soldiers at a time when they could easily have strayed into sinful activities. This was a significant time-period in the history of our country, where the North and South battled for four years. We won’t discuss the causes of the war, or the political maneuvering during this time, but focus on the souls that died and survived during this prolonged blood bath where the United States of America and the Confederate States of America lost a combined 600,000 men.

Religion was important to the men during the war, but religion had been important before the war. Let me start with a statement that gives us a snapshot of religion before the war: “Nearly four times as many attended church every Sunday in 1860 as voted in that year’s critical presidential election.”[[1]](#footnote-1) “Historian Richard Carwardine has concluded that by midcentury ‘over 10 million Americans, or about 40 percent of the population, appear… to have been in close sympathy with evangelical Christianity. This was the largest, and most formidable, subculture in American Society.’ ”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Why was religion important to the men during the war and why were concerned citizens so interested in providing religion to them? Remember that there was a lot of *down time* where the men could easily be tempted to join in sinful activities. There was “gambling, profanity, drunkenness, and other kindred vices”[[3]](#footnote-3) tempting the men at an alarming rate. I won’t describe the other kindred vices, but you can imagine what happens when a large group of men is followed around by a group of working girls.

The temptation to drink was a big problem with an ample supply of available ‘spirits.’ Distilleries were a big business during the war. “A gentleman in North Carolina said he could count from one hill-top the smoke of 14 distilleries. One of the Richmond papers declared that a single distiller in that city made at one period of the war a profit of $4,000 a day.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Moreover, in August County, Virginia, “it was estimated that 50,000 bushels of grain were consumed monthly by the distilleries in operation there.”[[5]](#footnote-5)

These men were mostly young and possibly away from home for the first time. They missed their parents, wives, girlfriends, and brothers and sisters. While they missed their families, they were also “freed from the restraints of home, and the influence of pious relatives, thousands of them gave way to the seductive influences of sin.”[[6]](#footnote-6)

“Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.”[[7]](#footnote-7) If one sinner destroys much good then what about “a large body of ungodly soldiers in close and constant contact, where one may….consider them inoculating each other daily with the new infection of every debauch through which they pass.”[[8]](#footnote-8) We have certainly laid the groundwork they would need a revival.

While religion was spread on both sides of the battle line, this paper will focus on the Southern men, and more specifically the men of the Army of Northern Virginia, as there are two first-hand accounts written about those men. The one is by William W. Bennett, D.D. in 1876, and entitled *A Narrative of The Great Revival Which Prevailed in The Southern Armies during the Late Civil War Between the states of the Federal Union.* Bennett was a Chaplain during the war and was the Superintendent of the Soldiers’ Tract Association, and after the war was the President of Randolph-Macon College. The other, *Christ in the Camp or Religion in the Confederate Army*, by J. William Jones, D.D. in 1887. Jones was a Southern Baptist preacher who served during the war as a Confederate Chaplain and after the war was the Chaplain for the United Confederate Veterans, and a Chaplain for Washington College (now Washington & Lee University) where he came into daily contact with Robert E. Lee for about five years post-war.

With that said, before we go any further let us look at two aspects of the Confederacy. One, the Constitution of the Confederacy; and, two, the motto of the Confederacy. The Confederacy started as a God believing organization as they wrote in the preamble to their Constitution “in order to form a permanent federal government … and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity -- invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God.”[[9]](#footnote-9) Their motto was “Deo Vindice” or “With God as our Defender/Protector” and as Drew Faust, historian and 28th President of Harvard, explains:

Yet as the Confederate choice of national motto clearly indicated, the new nation consistently sought profounder justification. Beneath George Washington’s image on the national seal appears the words “Deo Vindice,” an epigram selected by the Confederate Congress to express “the religious sentiments of the nation.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

The revival during the war was very similar to The Second Great Awakening in one way – organizations created to provide religious services/materials. During the Second Great Awakening, we saw the formation of the American Bible Society (1816) and the American Tract Society (1825). Both of those organizations were still in existence at the start of the war and both provided bibles and tracts to the soldiers.

One multi-denominational organization formed in Petersburg, Virginia in 1861 – The Evangelical Tract Society. “More than a hundred different tracts were issued; and in less than one year after the organization of the society, it had sent amount the soldiers more than a million pages of these little messengers of truth.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

Many denominations created their own organization and the Confederates even solicited the help from overseas. There was the Virginia Episcopal Mission Committee, the Presbyterian Board of Publication, the Sunday-School and Publication Board of the Baptist Church, the Bible Society of the City of Memphis, the Christian Association in Fredericksburg, the Soldiers Tract Association, the Southern Methodist Episcopal Soldiers’ Tract Association, the Virginia Baptist Colportage Board, and others. “The British and Foreign Bible Society gave to the Confederate Bible Society unlimited credit in the purchase of supplies, and made liberal donations of Bibles and Testaments for our soldiers.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

Why would the Confederate States have to reach out to a European organization? When the war began, almost all printing plants were in the North. The North treated Bibles and tracts as contraband as they did not want the Confederates to be able to obtain such literature. With a blockade on such materials, the Confederates had to find an immediate source until production could be maintained in the South.

To what extent did these organizations actually provide assistance in the way of bibles, tracts, and other handouts? According to the General Association of the Baptist Church’s annual report (keep in mind this is just one organization) after the first year:

We have collected $24,000, with which forty tracts have been published, 6,187,000 pages of which have been distributed, besides 6,095 Testaments, 13,845 copies of the little volume called “Camp Hymns,” and a large number of religious books. How pleasant to think of the thousands who, far from their loved ones, are, every hour in the day, in the loneliness and gloom of the hospital, and in the bustle and mirth of the camp, reading some of these millions of pages which have been distributed, and thus have been led to turn unto the Lord.[[13]](#footnote-13)

NOTE: According to the [www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/](http://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/) website, $24,000 in 1861 would be equivalent to $699,256.36 today.

The Southern Methodist Episcopal Soldiers’ Tract Association was also very busy and in 1863 their records “shows a receipt during the year of $95, 456.71, and a disbursement of $64,470.60. The association has issued for circulation 7,000,000 pages of tracts, 45,000 soldiers’ hymn books, 15,000 soldiers’ almanacs, 15,000 Bible readings for soldiers; and his circulated 15,000 copies of the Holy Scriptures – Bibles, Testaments and Gospels separately bound.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

The revival started at the top. While the army had Chaplains assigned to fill the religious needs of the soldiers, and local organizations contributed, the religious revival started at the top – Generals Robert E. Lee and Thomas Jonathan “Stonewall” Jackson. Regarding Stonewall Jackson it was said “Stonewall Jackson set a high religious standard for the men who served under him,”[[15]](#footnote-15) and that “General Jackson never enters a fight without first invoking God’s blessing and protection.”[[16]](#footnote-16) General Lee saw the importance of religion and early in the war, he issued this general order to the army: “Habitually all duties except those of inspection will be suspended during Sunday, to afford the troops rest and to enable them to attend religious services.”[[17]](#footnote-17) “General Lee too spoke easily and frequently of God in the Confederate encampment.”[[18]](#footnote-18) Later in the war, in February of 1864, General Lee issued General Order No. 15, which read in part:

The attention of the army has already been called to the obligation of a proper observance of the Sabbath; … in many brigades convenient houses of worship have been erected; … none but duties strictly necessary shall be required to be performed on Sunday;… officers will require the usual inspections on Sunday to be held at such time as not to interfere with the attendance of the men on divine service at the customary hour in the morning.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

Stonewall Jackson was a Presbyterian. One night a member of his staff tried to deliver a message and found him on his knees in prayer. He left him alone and came back later to find him still at prayer and the staff member suggested that Jackson’s Aid check on him since he may have fallen asleep. The Aid said, “O no, you know the General is an Old Presbyterian, and they all make long prayers.”[[20]](#footnote-20) He also took to prayer after a battle: “After a battle has been fought the same rigid remembrances of divine power is observed. The army is drawn up in line, the General dismounts his horse, and …. is heard subdued and calm, as if overcome by the presence of the Supreme Being, in holy appeal to the ‘sapphire throne.’ ”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Once Chaplains were assigned, and men were provided with religious materials, the prayer meetings and revivals were constant. “One of the conspicuous features of camp life was frequent revival meetings.”[[22]](#footnote-22) We have to remember that fighting was not constant. During the winter months, they may camp for weeks and weeks without any military skirmishes. Other than the routine inspections the men may have nothing to do, so filling their time with reading materials and prayer meetings was essential.

Since there always seemed to be a shortage of Chaplains, established churches and the local ministers, and other evangelists, would pick up the slack when they could. “Evangelists, missionaries, and regular pastors whenever they could leave their charges, joined in the noble task of preaching Christ to the struggling sons of the South. The religious wants of the army, and the best methods for supplying them, were among the chief topics of discussion in all the large Church assemblies.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

Soldiers often received pocket Bibles, which had excerpts of verses appropriate for different topics that would be relevant to the soldier, but most likely they also carried tracts. Handing out of tracts, short papers on religious topics, became a popular way to spread religion during the war. This is evidenced in Miller’s book *Both Prayed to the Same God*:

*Colporteurs* were missionaries who chief job was to carry and distribute religious literature to soldiers; and tracts such as the famous *A Mother’s Parting Words to Her Soldier Boy* were deeply uplifting to many Southern soldiers. …. When their tracts stirred up the soldiers reading them, some colporteurs would up drawn into deeper ministry. “A notice of a few moments will give me a large congregation,” wrote one colporteur, who reported handing out 41,000 page of tracts and preaching nearly daily in one month of ministry alone.[[24]](#footnote-24)

During the war there were countless prayer meetings on both sides of the battle line. If possible, sometimes the local town’s folk would join the meetings. One such Confederate prayer group took place in Leesburg:

Among the troops that were stationed near Leesburg, Virginia, there was a fine state of religious feeling. In the 17th Mississippi regiment, one of the most gallant in the army, there was a deep concern. Prayer meetings were held in their camp every evening, a number professed conversion, and the good work increased in depth and power. The Christians in the vicinity of the camp were urged to join the soldiers in their meetings. Many did so, and the people learned that the Lord of Hosts was in the midst of their brave defenders.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Soldiers were involved in a war where they witnessed brutal events almost every day that fighting occurred. Fighting was a dangerous lifestyle with possible death at any moment. Some soldiers turned to religion as a coping device:

Confederate soldiers struggling with the traumatic experience of combat often turned to religion as an effective self-therapy. … The faith in such a God to bring order out of chaos and make the irrational rational, became self-fulfilling prophecy—and effective therapy to minimize the stress of psychological breakdown.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Some soldiers were religious, since they were before the war, and then some looked at it as a chance to heal their own mental wounds.

The distribution of Bibles and tracts was on both sides of the battle line, with the Union army also receiving materials. “These books (referring to the New Testament) have been distributed among over 100,000 men, comprising 139 regiments and batteries, holding every grade of rank from the general officer to the drummer boy.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

There are countless stories of soldiers asking for religious reading materials; or, expressing thanks for what they did receive; or, accepting Jesus; or, accepting their death; and, revivals after revivals, often of large numbers or for days long, where men came to Christ. Here are but a few:

One pastor wrote, “The soldiers received the books with great eagerness. I never in all my life saw such a desire to get Bibles.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

When the preacher asked a dying soldier if he would like him to write to his mother, the soldier replied, “O yes! I do, you will write to her, won’t you? Tell my mother I have read my Testament and put all my trust in the Lord. Tell her to meet me in heaven, and my brother Charlie too. I am not afraid to die.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

Tell my father and mother not to grieve for me, for I am going to a better world than this.[[30]](#footnote-30)

One minister writing of his trip through the regiments stationed near Fredericksburg said, “The soldiers are eager for religious reading; and frequently, when they have seen me coding, they have even run to meet me, exclaiming, ‘Have you any Testaments?’ ”[[31]](#footnote-31)

One minister writing about a lengthy revival in Ashland, Virginia, wrote, “Scenes like the following became more frequent every week: For more than a week a revival has been in progress among the soldiers stationed at Ashland. Services are held every night in the Baptist church, and the seats set apart for the anxious are frequently well nigh filled by the soldiers, who are asking for the prayers of God’s people.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

At a North Carolina camp there was a 7:00 AM prayer meeting every day and at night they would march to the house of the Lord. After two weeks an eye-witness stated “one hundred and forty were converted in two weeks.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

According to another eyewitness account, “Devotions are held as often as three times a day. In the space of six weeks one hundred and sixty professed religion in Barksdale’s brigade, while scores of others were earnestly seeking salvation.”[[34]](#footnote-34)

Revival work was not confined to the camps during the periods of non-fighting. A writer with the Army of Northern Virginia once wrote:

Frequent prayer-meetings have been held in the trenches; and even on the skirmish line, within easy musket range of the enemy, the song of praise and the voice of supplication have been heard. Sermons have also been preached in the trenches – albeit, they have sometimes been cut short by the bursting of the shell or the whistling of the Minnie.[[35]](#footnote-35)

And, an army Chaplain said, “that during the battle of Fredericksburg, he saw many soldiers reading their Testaments with the deepest attention while lying in the trenches awaiting orders.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

As the revival was working to provide religion to men, and some of them were saved, there were still others that succumbed to the available sins. As reflected in this observation the new recruits made up the majority of those following sinful ways: “Another brother mentioned a fact, confirmed by others, that the gambling and profanity in his brigade was almost entirely confined to the *new recruits* fresh from home.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

How did this revival period compare to other countries? According to Bennett: “There have been revivals in the midst of wars in other countries, and in other times; but history records none so deep, so pervasive, so well marked by all the characteristic of a divine work as that which shed its blessed light on the armies of the South in their struggle for independence.”[[38]](#footnote-38)

Before wrapping this up let me provide you with a good summary as written by a Roman Catholic priest who has written numerous books on religion:

*War-times effects of revivalism.*  America had just emerged from the Second Great Awakening. As the war grew longer and deadlier, religious revival came to play an enormous role for both troops and armies. While Southern revivals perhaps lengthened the war, many prominent leaders were touched by faith during the war years.[[39]](#footnote-39)

I will end with two stories as told by General Gordon. Another first-hand or second-hand account of the war as seen by one of Lee’s most trusted generals who wrote his memoir years after the war. After the war, he was active in politics where he was elected a U.S. Senator from Georgia and even the Governor of Georgia.

Gordon writes about a soldier from Pennsylvania who “was attracted by the songs in a Confederate prayer-meeting, and, without the slightest fear of being detained or held as prisoner, attempted .... to cross over and join the Confederates in their worship. He was ordered back by his own pickets.”[[40]](#footnote-40) His superiors did not punish him but, “in a European army he would most likely have been shot for attempted desertion.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

“The broadening of this Christian fellowship was plainly seen as the war progressed. The best illustration of this fact…” was the example above and the Confederate soldier who prayed at his comrade’s grave, “For we are taught to believe that thy true followers shall come from the East and West as well as from the South: and we cannot help hoping, Lord, that a few will come even from the *North*.”[[42]](#footnote-42)

The Christian Revival of the American Civil War gave comfort and guidance to many soldiers, especially the Confederate soldiers of the Army of Northern Virginia, and allowed many to die in peace. The Sons of Confederate Veterans (“SCV”) has continued the spread of the gospel by the publication of a recent handbook designed for use by Camp Chaplains (many of which are not ministers). There is one telling story by a Chaplain who was on his way to Gettysburg and was asked by a Northern woman why he joined the army, to which he replied:

“I told her I could not have taken the oath of office as a Chaplain if I had not been in full sympathy with the Confederate cause, but I did not think it so weak as to need my help. I told her my love for souls led me into the work.”[[43]](#footnote-43)

Maybe this country needs another Christian revival and the Chaplains of the SCV could lead it. Deo Vindice.

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2. Ibid., 311. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. William W. Bennett, D.D., *A Narrative of The Great Revival Which Prevailed in The Southern Armies during the Late Civil War Between the States of the Federal Union* (Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publications, 1976), 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid., 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Eccles. 9:18 RSV [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Bennett, *A Narrative of The Great Revival,* 31. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
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11. J. William Jones, D.D., *Christ in the Camp or Religion in the Confederate Army* (1887, Reprint, Harrisonburg, Virginia: Sprinkle Publication, 1986), 158*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid., 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid., 157. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid., 161. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Edward L. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies – The Civil War in the Heart of America 1859 – 1863* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 353.

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17. Ibid., 49*.* [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Ayers, *In the Presence of Mine Enemies*, 353. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Jones, *Christ in the Camp*, 50. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Bennett, *A Narrative of The Great Revival,* 67. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 68. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Page Smith, *Trial by Fire: A People’s History of the Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1982), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bennett, *A Narrative of The Great Revival,* 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
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29. Bennett, *A Narrative of The Great Revival,* 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Jones, *Christ in the Camp*, 417. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Bennett, *A Narrative of The Great Revival,* 100. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid., 103 - 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Ibid., 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Ibid. 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Jones, *Christ in the Camp*, 386. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Bennett, *A Narrative of The Great Revival,* 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
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