THOUGH WAR BREAK OUT AGAINST ME: THE COURSE AND EFFECTS OF RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN THE CONFEDERATE ARMIES

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Much of Civil War history in the modern day focuses on the military, political, economic, and social aspects of the costly war. In the last several decades, with vast changes in historiography, historians have focused less on the military aspect and more on the other factors that caused and affected the war.

There is, however, one glaring omission to most discussions on the Civil War; the transformative nature of religious revivals on the northern and southern armies during the conflict.[1] While hardly something new to the American experience, the wartime revivals that swept through the camps of the various armies in 1863 were unprecedented in their breadth and scope. While met with defeat on the field of battle, the religious revivals in the southern armies served to strengthen the resolve of Confederate soldiers and became the lasting legacy for many in the post-war South. For the southern soldier, religion was "of greatest importance . . . [his] life was dramatically altered – if not actually ended – by war's demands."[2] To properly understand the context of these revivals, we shall look to the condition of the armies at the beginning of the war, the contemporary understanding of the nature of salvation, the nature of the revival, and then the effects that this had upon their duty as soldiers.

Although by the end of the conflict a Confederate chaplain could write that the "moral miracles" in the southern armies "were as great as ever appeared among armed men since the dawn of Christianity," at the war's advent this sentiment would not have agreed with reality.[3] At the beginning of the war, the moral state of the southern armies would have shocked and horrified most upstanding citizens.

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[1] Drew Galpin Faust, "Christian Soldiers: The Meaning of Revivalism in the Confederate Army," *The Journal of Southern History* 53, no. 1 (1987): 63.

[2] Samuel J. Watson, "Religion and Combat Motivation in the Confederate Armies," *The Journal of Military History* 58, no. 1 (1994): 30.

[3] William W. Bennet, *A Narrative of The Great Revival which prevailed in the Southern Armies during the late Civil War between the States of the Federal Union* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen & Haffelfinger, 1877), 16.

After the first battle of Manassas, the southern armies and people fell into moral decline. This immorality led a former chaplain reflecting in later days to say, "The vices common to most armies ran riot through our camps."[4] Using blatantly religious languages, the chaplain of the Twenty-Third North Carolina Regiment wrote "I fear that while Lincoln may slay his thousands, the liquor-maker at home will slay his tens of thousands."[5] A Christian soldier wrote back to his family expressing a widespread sentiment, "War is pretty sure to relax the morals of everybody it comes in contact with."[6] Within the southern armies, it was not only drunkenness, but profanity, playing cards, and, although more common to northern armies, prostitution.

Such vices offended the moral sensibilities of the southern chaplains, many of their congregants back home, and some soldiers, Christian and non-Christian alike. Chaplains regularly wrote to the religious journals of the day, encouraging prayer for the soldiers while lamenting the moral turpitude of their own men. Highlighting a lack of chaplains assigned to units in the beginning of the war, Brigadier General R. F. Floyd wrote to Florida's governor on December 18, 1861, requesting that the governor "appoint a chaplain to this regiment."[7] The lack of such a chaplain and the lack of a unified chaplain's command that existed in the Union army caused southern commanders to scramble while their wayward soldiers sinned. Such was the debauched estate of the armies of the Confederacy when the revivals began in 1862 and grew in earnest throughout the course of 1863.

From a religious point of view, the soldiers in this state of sin had the very pressing necessity of being saved by Jesus Christ. However, the understanding of salvation at this time was very different from what is preached in most American churches today, and thus an exploration of this discrepancy is necessary. The revivals that swept the southern armies were evocative of the Second Great Awakening, which had rushed through the South several decades before. That experience, as well as the doctrinal teaching it inspired, held that a man must have a "complete inward assurance" that he had engaged in true repentance and then "genuinely trusted in Christ alone to save him."[8] It was widely expected that this saving grace and the perception of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit would not normally occur at the first occasion of conviction. Salvation then was viewed

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[4] J. William Jones, *Christ in the Camp or Religion in the Confederate Army* (Atlanta: The Martin & Hoyt Co., 1887), 267.
[5] Ibid., 268.
[6] Bennet, 142.
[7] U.S. War Department. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies;* Series 1 – Volume 6, 355.
[8] Steven E. Woodworth, *While God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 211.

more as a process of determination, with those in that process being called "seekers" or "mourners."[9] Thus, hundreds of mourners often approached the mourner's bench for prayer after the service, but this did not always equal the number of professed conversions.

Therefore, rather than being based on one emotional experience, the conversions that took place and those decisions of rededication to the Gospel were often accompanied with a great resolve to reform one's life that they might with their whole heart sing the hymn, "I am a Soldier of the Cross."[10] In a culture already deeply imbued with the ideals of duty, the converted soldiers expressed a resolve to do their Christian duty, to glorify Jesus, whether in life or in death. Seeing themselves as "soldiers of the Cross" was reinforced by the fact that the Gospel and their Christian duty that was presented to them by chaplains in military language they could readily identify with and understand.

For these soldiers who received the gift of salvation, it was not merely a conversion; it was an act of enlistment. Each of them reported for duty as a soldier in the Army of the Lord. A narrative published by the Evangelical Tract Society of Petersburg, Virginia and written by the Reverend Hugh Roy Scott represented the language and sentiments of that time. Therein, an officer was commended for never forgetting he was "a soldier of Christ."[11] When discussing the salvation of a group of six men, they were said to come forward "to enlist under the banner of the great Captain," and "to enlist zealously in the service of the Redeemer."[12] In the rite of baptism, they were said to have "put on the Christian armor."[13] Thus, although the intention was to "know nothing but Jesus Christ and Him crucified," there was a distinctly military presentation and explanation of the Gospel, although one not unique to this period.[14]

The Great Revival, as it came to be known, was distinctly military in nature, and while reminiscent of previous awakenings and revivals in the South, the contemporary revival was characterized by much more solemnity than previously associated with revivals. Reports written by chaplains often declared that, "The most perfect decorum is observed during divine service, and the most perfect respect is manifested for those who serve God."[15] This solemnity was a stark contrast to the apathy or outright mockery which would have been expected at the

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[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid., 210.
[11] Jones, 287.
[12] Ibid., 288.
[13] Ibid., 289.
[14] Reid Mitchell, "Christian Soldiers? Perfecting the Confederacy," in *Religion and the American Civil War,* Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 306.
[15] Woodworth, 211.

beginning of the war. However, confronted with the likelihood of death, and the possibility of defeat, southern soldiers almost reflexively turned to religion for protection.

God as protector featured prominently in various personal accounts testifying to salvation. Alabama Lieutenant Albert T. Goodloe, fighting in the Western theater, admitted: "Death was staring us in the face all the time, a perpetual reminder of the final judgement in the presence of God."[16] The prospect of death or injury in battle often caused many to be "serious and thoughtful," as a chaplain observed.[17] Furthermore, a soldier testified that, "There is something irresistible in the appeal which the Almighty makes when he strikes from your side, in the twinkling of an eye, your friend and comrade."[18] Thus, when confronted with the reality of the carnage around them, many soldiers sought the assurance of salvation so that even if killed, they might die expecting the joys of heaven.

Often, a soldier's reaction to the carnage of the battlefield not only included the fear of death itself, but also relief and gratitude for getting out of the fighting alive. Soldiers gave thanks, praising the sovereignty of Almighty God for securing their deliverance. They were thus compelled to turn to God, whom they had previously ignored. They came with such testimonies as: "But for God I would have been slain;" "God preached to us as all the preachers on earth could not do;" "After the battle at Malvern Hill, I was enabled to give my soul to Christ – this war has made me a believer in religion, sir."[19] Thus, surrounded by the offensive reality of death and destruction, they came quickly and convincingly to the Gospel that offered assurance of eternal rest.

Separately, the existence of a doctrine of salvation emphasizing one's duty to God and demanding complete surrender, the direct confrontation with the likelihood of death, and the gratitude from those who survived fearsome battles, each had powerful effects upon the Confederate soldiers. Combined, they represented a complete transformation of the southern soldier's identity. It was often the example of these Christian soldiers, both the consistently pious and those recently converted, that made a profound impression upon their fellow soldiers, causing them to likewise become converted.

In his *Narrative*, the Rev. Doctor Bennett related the story of a soldier who lay mortally wounded, surrounded by his comrades. Rather than express fear, or cry out in pain, this soldier sang hymns, testified of the joy of his salvation, and

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[16] Albert Theodore Goodloe, *Confederate Echoes: A Soldier's Personal Story of Life in the Confederate Army from Mississippi to the Carolinas* (1897; Washington, DC: Zenger Publishing Co., 1983), 236.
[17] Woodworth, 192.
[18] Bennett, 172.
[19] Woodworth, 192; Bennett, 172-174.

asked that the chaplain tell his father "that Christ is now all my hope . . . that I am not afraid to die – all is calm." With his dying breath, he uttered his last words: "Father, I'm coming to thee!" The effect upon the twenty-four soldiers who witnessed the young soldier's resolve was "very marked." One expressed the sentiment that, "I never want to die happier than that man." Yet another, "I never prayed until last night; but when I saw that man die so happy, I determined to seek religion too."[20] This story is one of the many in which the living or dying of a soldier convinced comrades of their need for salvation.

An interesting result of the revival was the effect it had upon soldiers' military performance. During the war the consensus formed within the military that to be a good Christian was to be a good soldier.[21] In the winter of 1861, Bob Gibbs, a soldier in the Ninth Tennessee, was holding an evening prayer meeting with members of his company. All others present were older than Gibbs and none professed to be believing Christians. His commander was so impressed upon discovering this, that he made Gibbs regimental color-bearer on the spot.[22] Beginning with the experience of the revival during the Civil War, the definition of southern manhood appropriately revolved more around his Christianity, for to be a good soldier, to be a good man, was to be a good Christian.

Similarly, within the revival common soldiers exercised leadership through its propagation, expressing concern for the spiritual well-being of their comrades. The story of Gibbs shows that this proclivity among enlisted soldiers to take initiative in leadership stood out to officers, proving advantageous at times. Captain Richard H. Powell observed that his regiment "held prayer meetings regularly . . . three times a week" and further noted that most often, these meetings occurred "in the absence of a chaplain."[23] Even when chaplains and missionaries were present, they would often remark that as they left to go to another meeting, the soldiers would continue to pray and sing well past midnight.[24] This characteristic of active laity harkened back to previous revivals. Yet, more than that, it also served to solidify units, bring cohesion, and make men into moral, effective soldiers.

Historians have estimated that over 100,000 Confederate soldiers received salvation during the last three years of the American Civil War. While some, like Ried Mitchell, attack the representation of this Great Revival as merely another tool of manipulation within the arsenal of the Lost Cause, the profound effect it had upon individual southern soldiers, and by extension their armies, cannot be

[20] Bennett, 182-183.
[21] Woodworth, 217; Mitchell, 300.
[22] Woodworth, 189.
[23] Ibid., 207.
[24] Ibid.

denied. Not only did units experience cohesion due to physical hardships and spiritual raptures, this proclivity towards religion liberated the Confederate armies from the effects of drunkenness and debauchery. The countless southern soldiers, believing in the doctrine of God's sovereignty and their eternal rest, fought gallantly and died peacefully, serving as an example to their comrades. Thus, the spiritual unity of the soldiers solidified their commitment to each other, their duty as soldiers, and to their God. This legacy of the Christian soldier then, would be the legacy of the South, true not only for those who found saving grace amidst battle, but for the posterity to which they would defend their cause.