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5-26-2015

They Both Prayed to the Same God

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Recommended Citation

Culpepper, Scott, "They Both Prayed to the Same God" (2015). *Faculty Work: Comprehensive List*. Paper 232.
http://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/faculty_work/232

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They Both Prayed to the Same God

Abstract

"The influence of faith in the American Civil War was complicated. As Lincoln so astutely observed, both sides prayed to the same God. Both sides believed that God heard them and supported their cause."

Posting about religious views during the American Civil War from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/they-both-prayed-to-the-same-god/>

Keywords

In All Things, Civil War, religious aspects of war, slavery and the church

Disciplines

Christianity | United States History

Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

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Scott Culpepper

This year marks the 150th anniversary of the end of the Civil War of the United States (1861-1865). To polish up on your [Civil War](#) history, we're featuring four articles on the Civil War this week. All four offer different perspectives to this part of the United States' history. Check out [iAt](#) throughout this week to learn more about the Civil War one hundred and fifty years later.

"Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes." Abraham Lincoln, Second Inaugural Address, March 4, 1865.

Abraham Lincoln had pondered the mysteries of divine providence and the nature of human inhumanity throughout four trying years of civil war. He was tasked with leading the United States in the most desperate period of our history. Against the backdrop of national tragedy, Lincoln experienced a number of personal tragedies including the death of his son, Willie, and the emotional struggles of his wife, Mary. His conviction that preserving the Union and ending the scourge of slavery were moral as well as political goals sustained him. Lincoln's address to the nation on the occasion of his second inauguration was intended to convey some sense of meaning and purpose in the midst of a struggle that seemed lacking in both.

One of the central ironies of an American conflict filled with ironies was the fact that it erupted in a nation which was so heavily influenced by faith. The evangelical revivals of the early nineteenth century had strengthened the influence of Protestantism in American culture. The French observer Alexis de Toqueville noted in his famous work *Democracy in America* (1835, 1840) the pervasive influence of faith in American culture. Yet this faith, which was so pervasive, was unable to prevent the country from dividing nor to sufficiently prick the consciences of many Americans about the human rights abuses perpetuated in the form of chattel slavery. The first institutions in America to formally divide were the largest Protestant denominations in the country. The Methodists (1844), Presbyterians (1838, 1861), and the Baptists (1845) all experienced denominational ruptures over a decade before the nation itself was torn asunder. The inability of Christian denominations to resolve the issues troubling the nation did not bode well for any prospect of consensus at the national level. Faith, so important to so many antebellum Americans, would accompany every facet of the coming struggle from framing the opposing worldviews of the combatants to inspiring them to endure the fiery trials of conflict to finally providing an interpretive lens for understanding the war in retrospect.

The American South in the nineteenth century was a region of the country where people tended to celebrate evangelical piety as an integral part of their culture. Southern evangelical revivalism infused new energy into an antebellum culture long dominated by Episcopal and Presbyterian gentry whose faith was as much a part of their identity as their pedigree. Southern culture tended to support a conservative Biblicism that valued the Bible as the infallible word of God with authority to shape public life in society as well as the life of faith. In turn, this conservative Biblicism provided a divine justification to support traditional southern culture.

While conservative Biblicism promoted a degree of healthy moral conservatism in southern culture, it also

became a tool for the protection and promotion of the South's "peculiar institution." Enslavement of Africans had been a troubling reality in American culture since the first slaves were presented for purchase in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619. While slavery had withered in the Northern states, the progress of the Industrial Revolution in Great Britain had provided a mechanized means for refining and producing clothing by the beginning of the nineteenth century for every part of the production process except for the task of picking cotton. The international demand for cotton and rice fueled the economic viability of slavery in the American South. Economic need and social custom met theological justification. Southern ministers actively taught that slavery was not only permissible according to scripture, but that scripture advocated slavery as a social good. They pointed to Paul's instructions to slaves to be obedient to their masters in the household codes of Colossians 3:22-4:1 and Ephesians 6:5-9. Southern ministers often reminded their listeners that Paul had instructed Onesimus to return to his master, Philemon. A number of proof texts seemed to explicitly support their arguments such as Leviticus 25:44-45 which states, "Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession." (KJV) In the minds of most southerners, they were fighting a war to protect their homeland and preserve a social order they believed to be perfectly compatible with scripture. It was the North, with its "unsettled" social order and radical freethinkers, which Southerners viewed as the morally corrupt section of the country.

Northern abolitionists were equally convinced that the Bible taught that slavery was a sinful abomination which deprived human beings of their God-given dignity. They believed that the very roots and foundation of the southern cultural hierarchy was rotten. Notre Dame Historian Mark Noll notes in *The Civil War as Theological Crisis* that while Southerners could easily identify proof texts to support their views on slavery, abolitionists in both the North and South relied on the overall spirit of the text to make their case.¹ They pointed to texts such as Galatians 3:28 where Paul proclaims that "all are one in Christ." Paul included in his list of those united in Christ the phrase "neither slave nor free." Examples in the Old Testament such as the Exodus and the provisions in ancient Israel for a "year of Jubilee" (Leviticus 25: 8-13) supported the case for abolition. Above all, the Biblical account of human creation in the image of God and the unrealized ideal of the equality of all men included in the Declaration of Independence spurred Northerners to embrace the emancipation of slaves as well as the preservation of the Union as moral imperatives.

The language and imagery of faith motivated each side to endure in the struggle as well. Abolitionist and Women's Suffrage Activist Julia Ward Howe published the words to the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" in February 1862. Howe's new lyrics turned the popular tune of "John Brown's Body" into an anthem fit for a holy crusade against the evils of slavery:

In the beauty of the lilies Christ was born across the sea,
With a glory in his bosom that transfigures you and me,
As he died to make men holy, let us die to make men free²

Union bands were soon playing the catchy tune, and soldiers were singing the lyrics with passion as they marched into a hail of bullets. Abraham Lincoln increasingly made use of religious imagery in his public addresses. Historians Robert Linder and Richard Pierard labeled Abraham Lincoln the "high priest" of American civil religion because he used the language of redemption and atonement more than any other president in American history.³ Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation of 1863 elevated the Union cause to a moral dimension beyond federalism and the preservation of the Union by making the emancipation of slaves in the rebellious states a primary war aim.

Those who served the Confederate States of America were also motivated by the belief that God was on their side. While the United States Constitution only explicitly mentions religion once in the body of the

document, the Confederacy adopted a constitution that included the words “invoking the guidance and favor of Almighty God,” in its preamble.⁴ In many ways, the Confederacy was much closer to the mythical vision of an officially legislated “Christian America” embraced by many contemporary evangelicals than the United States ever was. They were explicit with their assertions of the official connection between Christian faith and the Confederate government because those assertions played well in the South and also possibly because they hoped to capture the moral high ground despite the glaring speck of slavery in their eyes.

On or off the battlefield, there was no better example of Southern piety in action than General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. Jackson was a committed Presbyterian whose stern Calvinism governed every aspect of his life. He became a veritable legend in his own time due to his battlefield prowess as well as the tremendous respect he received from both his soldiers and his superiors. Jackson’s legend was cemented by his martyrdom at Chancellorsville, VA, in 1863. For a man who believed so deeply in the mysteries of God’s providence, it was a tragic irony that his death occurred due to a careless mistake on the part of his own troops rather than on the many battlefields which he had left unscathed. Jackson prayed with his troops before leading them into battle and was more than once heard to ask that God direct their ammunition to its intended destination.⁵)

Religious revivals in the camps of both sides occurred frequently throughout the war. Men so close to death encountered many occasions to reflect on their eternal destiny. Chaplains of all denominations endured the horrors and hardships of war alongside the troops they served. Women motivated by both patriotism and faith served in a variety of roles from nurses to camp cooks. As in any time of social upheaval, people on the front and on the home front found comfort in the words of scripture and the presence of God.⁶

The faith that carried Americans through four years of war also provided the lens through which they could reconcile themselves to its result. For Northerners, their cause appeared to be vindicated by God. Victory in the war led to the liberation of slaves and the restoration of the Union. Their greatest theological challenges were dealing with the costs of the war and determining how to deal with the defeated Southern states. The price of the war had been immeasurably high in terms of loss of life, permanent physical handicaps, emotional trauma, and growing bitterness. Spiritual resources were needed to address all of these issues. Lincoln sought to address the spirit of bitterness among his countrymen in his Second Inaugural Address.

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan—to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.⁷

Lincoln never had the opportunity to implement his vision for reconstructing the reunited country. His assassination on April 14, 1865 left the reconstruction of the southern states in the hands of a congress less predisposed than Lincoln to deal gently with the defeated South.

In the South, faith became part of an emerging philosophy that baptized the “lost cause” of the Confederacy as a heroic defeat by corrupt powers. Southern culture after the Civil War became as much a minority subculture in America as those of newly arrived immigrant groups around the country. Unwilling or unable to process the idea that the Confederate cause had been misguided, many people in the South associated their situation with that of ancient Judah after the Babylonian conquest. Rather than acknowledge that the southern economy and cause had rested on an immoral institution, they instead saw the Union victory and subsequent reconstruction period as a continuing trial of their faith. This conviction fueled resistance to Reconstruction and enabled cultural gatekeepers to reassert their influence in the

South after Reconstruction ended in 1877. Segregation replaced slavery as the means of preserving the old order. White dominance in the South continued to be insured for another century with few white pulpits presenting a challenge to the status quo. In fact, most white preachers continued to support the system of segregation well after the civil rights movement began in the mid 1950's. There were definitely exceptions, but the exceptions were more noteworthy because of their rarity. Martin Luther King, Jr's eloquent *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* was written in 1963 to address the continued apathy of white ministers in the face of inequalities in the South. Many leaders of the new religious right who became involved in political activism for the first time in the late seventies had to address embarrassing reminders of their segregationist past. White supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan adopted Christian symbols and language to promote their cause. A favorite Klan hymn was "The Church's One Foundation," which they sang at most of their public gatherings.⁸⁾

This bleak picture of the use of faith to support segregation must be balanced with the fact that it was faith that ultimately provided activists, both black and white, with the courage to challenge the oppressive status quo. And it was confidence in the provision of God that enabled southerners of all races to rebuild the shattered infrastructure of the region in the wake of the war's devastation. Faith provided comfort, and religious institutions fostered community among a people seeking to come to terms with death, defeat, and destruction.

The influence of faith in the American Civil War was complicated. As Lincoln so astutely observed, both sides prayed to the same God. Both sides believed that God heard them and supported their cause. Lincoln and many others adopted a more complex view, acknowledging that there was both righteousness and unrighteousness on both sides. They believed that in the end, though they might catch glimpses of the divine purpose, the ways and will of God are ultimately inscrutable in human affairs. A survey of religious views during the American Civil War provides a healthy reminder that separating the will of God from man's will and the ways of God from man's cultural assumptions is no easy task.

Footnotes

1. Mark Noll, [The Civil War as Theological Crisis](#) (University of North Carolina Press, 2006) 31-50. ←
2. Julia Ward Howe, "The Battle Hymn of the Republic or Mine Eyes Have Seen the Glory," *The Atlantic Monthly*, February 1862. ←
3. Richard V. Pierard and Robert Linder, [Civil Religion and the Presidency](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervon Publishing House, 1988) 87-113. ←
4. [Congress of the Confederate States of America](#), Constitution of the Confederate States of America, March 11, 1861, Accessed May 9, 2015. ←
5. Noll, 83-90. Daniel W. Stowell, "Stonewall Jackson and the Providence of God," [Religion and the American Civil War](#), Ed. Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1998). ←
6. Phillip Shaw Palludan, "Religion and the American Civil War," [Religion and the American Civil War](#), 21-42. ←
7. Abraham Lincoln, [Second Inaugural Address](#), March 4, 1865, Accessed May 11, 2015. ←

8. Charles Regan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause*, 1865-1920 (Athens, GA: The University of Georgia Press, 1980. [↔](#)