
The Baptist Church and the Confederate Cause

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In April 1861, when the Civil War became a reality, the Southern Baptist Church was among those institutions of the South which rallied to give enthusiastic support to the war effort of the newly formed Confederate States of America. Why did the overwhelming majority of the Protestant churches, and especially the Southern Baptist Church, feel such a strong commitment to the cause of the Confederacy? The answer to this question may be partly answered by briefly examining the background of this church.

For approximately two decades prior to the outbreak of the war, the Baptist Church, having split with its Northern counterpart in 1845, became a major component of a distinctly Southern society. Within this society, Southern religious thought crystallized into rigid conservatism and orthodoxy. The Great Revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the recurrent revivals which followed thereafter throughout the South, helped foster the growth of religious orthodoxy and the decline of previous Jeffersonian liberalism.

In any event, by 1860, the Baptist Church occupied a prominent position in Southern society, being the second largest Protestant religious body, with almost two million members. If any group of this size took a definite stand on any issue or committed itself to any cause, it seems reasonable to assume it could exert considerable influence, if for no other reason than by force of numbers. And yet, there was much more involved than mere numbers. For over a decade prior to the war, the Baptist Church had strongly defended Southern institutions,

including slavery, as reflecting the divine will of God. Southern Baptist, noted for their intense piety and a willingness to acquiesce to the will of God, generally looked to their ministers to guide their lives. Evidence suggests that their clergy, which was both highly patriotic and dogmatic, was most willing to oblige insofar as the Confederate cause was concerned. Thus, Baptist religious fervor and Southern patriotism became so closely interwoven as to be almost indistinguishable. Baptist Churches, headed by a militant clergy, spontaneously became agents to enlist support for the Southern cause and for sustaining the morale of their people. The term "spontaneous" seems valid because there is no evidence of any organized effort to coordinate a propaganda campaign to equate loyalty to the Confederacy and loyalty to God.

Baptist clergymen, however, formed a climate of opinion by calling attention to what they felt were the dangers confronting the South. In 1861, the Southern Baptist Convention resorted to a fear technique and sought support for the war because "the United States government insists 'upon letting loose hordes of armed soldiers to pillage and desolate the entire South,' and . . . the northern churches and pastors . . . are 'breathing out slaughter . . .'"¹¹ In another instance, the Baptist Convention of Georgia in 1861 condemned activities of mobs and terrorists in the North and "threats to wage upon the South a war of ruthless barbarity, to devastate our homes and hearths with hordes of ruffians and felons, burning with lust and rapine . . ."¹² A short time later the Virginia General Baptist Association declared that "our sons are valiant and would rather die than bend to oppression." The Association then expressed a willingness to utilize "all lawful and Christian means in the support of the government."¹³ Baptists also utilized their literature in seeking support for the Confederate cause. In 1864, a Baptist periodical, *The Child's Index*, in an article entitled, "The Landing of the Pilgrims," declared, "that from the Pilgrims of 1620 had descended the Yankee nation, which is now trying to deprive us not only of our religious liberty, but of every kind of liberty."¹⁴ The periodical resorted to somewhat stronger language and further stated:

They refuse to let us have Bibles . . . They drag our preachers from the pulpits, and send them to prison. They deprive us of our churches and burn them or use them as stables or storehouses. They send preachers of their own to preach wherever they have taken . . . our towns, and if they conquer us they will take away all our churches . . . and not even let us pray in our families as we wish . . . They are blinded by fanaticism and infidelity.¹⁵

Coinciding with propaganda designed to arouse fear and hatred of the Union, the Baptists made an effort to portray the war as a holy struggle. In one instance a Baptist group declared that the Jefferson Davis administration of the Confederacy was "contributing to the transcendent Kingdom of our Lord Jesus Christ . . ."¹⁶ Davis, himself, took this position and one of the first messages he sent to the people of the Confederacy declared, "We feel that our cause is just and holy."¹⁷ Although he further indicated that the South was fighting for its independence, the cause of a holy war concept was readily accepted by the Baptists because, like other denominations, they tended to think of themselves as God's chosen people. Therefore, it was easy for them to combine politics, patriotism, and religion. Thus, if one were to serve the Lord in the proper manner, he must also serve the state in like manner because the state was acting in God's behalf, especially if it was leading a just and holy war. As a practical matter, this meant that one had the obligation to support the government headed by Jefferson Davis with both prayer and material aid. In one case a Virginia Baptist congregation officially went on record that it was not only a Christian duty to obey the agents of the Confederate government "but to aid and encourage them in every effort to secure our social and religious freedom."¹⁸ Viewing the cause as a holy and just war, the Middle District Baptist Association of Virginia in 1862, declared, "if a people drew the sword in behalf of a just cause, we are that people."¹⁹ Another Baptist congregation passed the following resolution:

Be it Resolved: That the war which the U.S. government has forced upon us, involving as it does, our social and religious freedom, must be met with unflinching determination and earnest cooperation of every Christian.²⁰

In another instance, a Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Savannah, Georgia, in May, 1861, passed a resolution as follows, ". . . we most cordially

approve of the formation of the Government of the Confederate States of America, and admire and applaud the noble course of that Government up to this present time . . .¹¹ Thus, with resolutions of support coming from various gatherings of their leaders during the wartime period, the Baptists, as a group, heartily and willingly supported the war effort both at home and among the fighting forces. When asked why there were so many Baptists in the Confederate army, one minister proudly declared that it was because "they were patriotic."¹²

Baptist patriotism exhibited itself in other ways besides convention resolutions and a willingness of ministers to enlist in the army. Later, as desertions became a problem to the Confederacy, some Baptist churches discouraged this practice by excommunicating those who took this action. The churches also made other areas their concern in seeking support for the Confederate cause. One Baptist group "denounced speculators and people who sought financial gain from the war as 'soulless bipeds, worse enemies than Yankee abolitionists.'¹³

Pronouncements of this nature became more common during the course of the war as consumer goods became more scarce and inflation threatened. In the face of adversity, the government's cause inevitably became the church's cause. When Confederate authorities became concerned over civilians caught between the lines who willingly took the oath of allegiance to the United States, some Baptists took the position that "no citizen between the lines could take the oath without incurring the guilt of treason and perjury," and expressed the hope that "no one would bring so foul a blot on his character."¹⁴

In addition to their taking a strong stand against desertion, speculation, and civilian defection to the Union, Baptist churches were noted for their intense loyalty to Jefferson Davis. In the course of the war, and especially after 1863, Davis was subjected to severe attacks from many quarters of Southern society, including the secular press. It is perhaps significant that there was a complete absence of criticism of Davis from the Baptist religious press throughout the entire war. This is understandable because of the Baptist view of the nature of the war. If the struggle is a holy war, then the leader of the cause is under divine guidance and should not be subjected to criticism. Davis, in effect, became the representative of God and was, therefore, immune from criticism from the Baptist press. It is probably correct to say that the Baptist religious press became the handmaiden of the state. The Baptist Church, more than any other religious body in the South, generally retained its intense loyalty to the Confederacy throughout the war and to the bitter end.

Baptist activity in behalf of the Confederate cause was also manifested by their participation in a series of revivals which involved both the civilian population and the Confederate armies. These revivals reached a climax during the winter of 1863-1864 and were obviously conducted primarily for religious reasons. And yet, these revivals were a major factor in bolstering Confederate morale in a cause which by this time was growing dim. These revivals definitely encouraged the Confederate armies to endure the great hardships encountered during the final year of the war.

Baptist chaplains performed heroically in ministering to the troops. Many Baptist clergymen, motivated by intense patriotism, joined the Confederate army, not as chaplains, but as laymen. This caused a severe shortage of ministers in several areas. The Baptist Church also made a strong effort to supply Bibles to troops, despite the scarcity of Southern printing facilities. A Baptist newspaper, *The Soldier's Friend*, was published in Atlanta expressly for Confederate troops. The purpose of this paper was twofold; first, to bolster the army morale by providing reading material, and second, to warn soldiers of the evils which accompany army life. Also, the South Carolina Baptists, like other religious groups, distributed thousands of hymnals, religious tracts, and copies of the Bible among Confederate troops to the extent their resources would permit.¹⁵

Like other denominations, Baptist churches strongly believed in the efficacy of prayer and of God's providence. The Southern Baptist Convention, meeting in Augusta, Georgia, in May of 1863, issued the following statement:

We gratefully acknowledge the hand of God in the preservation of our government against the power and rage of our enemies, and in the signal victories with which he has crowned our arms . . . and . . . we confidently anticipate ultimate success.¹⁶

Baptist confidence of eventual victory was destined to be shattered as the growing military power of the Union was turned against the Confederacy. The war also brought severe devastation and disrupted virtually all Southern civilian life, including religious activities. Baptist churches were burned and their people scattered. Mounting inflation and poverty also spread throughout the South. By 1865 money was so short that the South Carolina Baptists were unable to print the minutes of their annual meeting.¹⁷

By 1864, despite mounting war weariness, special prayer services for victory were held periodically. An example of this occurred when Jefferson Davis declared April 8, 1864, a national day of prayer. Later, several thousand people crowded into a Richmond theater to hear a Baptist minister, J. S. Burrows, preach a sermon in which he expressed the hope that God would help the South find the means to defeat the Union and bring peace.

A Southern victory was not to be, however, as the following year brought defeat and the end to the Confederate cause. This defeat was accepted by religious people as the will of God although many Southerners could not understand how God had failed them. Baptists generally accepted the outcome somewhat like the Appomattox Baptist Association who met in August, 1865, and viewed the defeat as the "determination of an inscrutable Providence."¹⁸

One might well ask, was all Baptist and other religious denominational effort in behalf of the Confederacy of any real value. The support of the Churches was certainly welcomed by the Richmond government and constituted the major resource of the Confederacy in the building and maintenance of civilian morale. The churches were also instrumental in bolstering morale within the armies. The effectiveness of the numerous activities in behalf of the Confederate States of America in the South was indirectly acknowledged by the efforts of Union military leaders to control religious activity in the occupied territory of the Confederacy.

The Baptist Church thus became an important though unofficial agent for enlisting support for the Confederate cause. The militant character of its ministers and the vitality of the Church assured positive action once it had taken the position that the destiny of the Church depended upon the outcome of the current struggle. Fear of the consequences of defeat drove the Baptists into the ranks of those who gave wholehearted support to the government.

Baptists were fully convinced that a Union victory would jeopardize their religious as well as their political freedom. They held frequent conventions and meetings at which ministers, who exercised considerable influence with their congregations, publicly expressed strong support for the Confederate cause. One may logically assume that their subsequent sermons also reflected these sentiments.

Although any accurate measurement of the influence of the Baptist Church is, of course, impossible to obtain, it seems that on the basis of the existing evidence, the Baptist Church rendered great help to the Confederate cause. Primarily intangible, this help was carried out through their publications, their official pronouncements, their chaplains, and especially their sermons. Yet, as the fortunes of war turned against the Confederacy, their efforts were in vain as Southern resistance collapsed in the face of invading Union armies.

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