

Rebel Preachers: Confederate Chaplains in the Civil War
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One of the most devastating eras of American history occurred during the Civil War (1861-1865). During this time America was splintered into Northern and Southern factions, each with its own military bent upon defeating the other. At the end of the war more human life had been lost than in any other conflict that the United States has been involved in to date. With the death of over 600,000 individuals, the landscape of America was changed forever.¹

Involved in this war were men on either side who had the distinction of being the religious and spiritual leaders of the military. For many of these chaplains the division between North and South had begun before the first shots were fired upon Fort Sumter in 1861. During the prewar years of the 19th century there were several factors that affected the mindset of the southern clergy that necessitated this division, factors that they carried with them during the war.

The first of these was a great revival that spread throughout the southern Protestant churches.² As a result of this revival many of the southern denominations including the Baptist and the Methodist grew numerically and achieved a dominant status in the South. Even the Presbyterians and Episcopalians saw a great rise in interest for evangelism during this time. “By the outbreak of the Civil War, the evangelical tradition, with its emphasis on strict morality, individual salvation, and emotional worship, had influenced most of Southern Protestantism.”³

Along with this great religious revival was an inclination toward Calvinism and its emphasis on predestination.⁴ While the aspect of predestination was not the end, it helped to reinforce the belief in Providence and the favor granted on their region. It was believed that their way of life would be sustained, a belief that many in the South clung to until the surrender at Appomattox.

A third factor that influenced Southern Clergy was politics, specifically the rights of individual states.⁵ It was commonly believed that orthodox religion could only flourish in an environment of “stable social order.”⁶ The southern clergy did insist upon the separation of church and state, but at the same time defended the rights of those states in areas such as slavery and individual states rights. With

¹ <http://www.civilwarhome.com/casualties.htm>

² Curry, Henry Lee III. God's Rebels. Confederate Clergy In The Civil War. Huntington House, Lafayette, LA: 1990. 2

³ Ibid., 2

⁴ Ibid., 3

⁵ Ibid., 3

⁶ Ibid., 3

this mindset the clergy and their churches were able to defend the right of the Confederate States from their pulpits during the war. “These clergymen expressed their confidence in the act of secession, exhorted their members to pray for and participate in the war effort, and frequently proclaimed that God was on the side of the South.”⁷

It should be noted however that there was not unanimity among the clergy of the South. There were some that spoke out against secession and the war, and called for unity. The fate of these ministers was not always a pleasant one, with some being arrested, and some even hanged.⁸

It is against this backdrop that we find the fledgling Confederate Army in 1861. From the very start there were clergy with the troops in the field, not as officially recognized chaplains, but only as volunteers ministering as best they could. Some of the clergy of the South enlisted in the army as soldiers and worked from within. It was obvious however that more needed to be done for the spiritual welfare of the troops so the congress of the Confederate States of America passed bill 102 on 3 May 1861.

There shall be appointed by the President such number of chaplains, to serve with the armies of the Confederate States during the existing war, as he may deem expedient; and the President shall assign them to such regiments, brigades, or posts as he may deem necessary; and the appointments made as aforesaid shall expire whenever the existing war shall terminate. The monthly pay of said chaplains shall be eighty-five dollars; and said pay shall be in full of all allowances whatever.⁹

Even with this official congressional declaration, the appointment of chaplains to the army was slow at best. Many times disputes arose over the chaplain that was appointed because he did not represent the denominational majority of the regiment. According to the *Religious Herald*, one post was assigned a papal priest while there was only six of his denomination in a regiment of 600, and in another two Episcopal clergymen were appointed to a regiment that was almost equally split between Baptist and Methodist.¹⁰ As a result of problems like this the appointment of chaplains to a regiment were usually only after recommendation by the commanding Colonel. His recommendation was based almost entirely on the requests that he received from his men desiring a chaplain to serve with them. This led most men that desired to be chaplains in the Confederate Army to preach to a specific regiment

⁷ Robinson-Durso, Pamela. Chaplains in the Confederate Army. *Journal of Church & State*. Autumn 91. 747-764

⁸ Robinson-Durso

⁹ Pitts, Charles F. *Chaplain in Gray. The Confederate Chaplains Story*. Broadman Press, Nashville: 1957. 40

¹⁰ Robinson-Durso

several times, meet with the officers and enlisted men and then have them request that the commanding Colonel secure a commission for him.¹¹

Initially in the South, chaplains were only appointed to the regiments. However, there were no restrictions placed on a chaplain's age, physical condition, or ecclesiastical affiliation.¹² While some chaplains had many credentials, some chaplains entered the service with few, if any, ministry qualifications. The amount and quality of formal religious education, pastoral experience, and moral character varied widely among the chaplains. The issue was that without a set of guidelines, the door was wide open to persons desiring to serve as a military chaplain. A problem resulted in that some undesirables became chaplains. Furthermore, the problem included some ministers who were unable to get a commission despite many solid efforts, while some units advertised chaplain vacancies. These problems needed an answer.

In the middle of the War, a solution was born to address the problem of recruiting and monitoring chaplains. Thus, religious "clearinghouses" became involved to smooth out the process of becoming a chaplain.¹³ These clearinghouses had representatives from America's various religious denominational headquarters that screened and processed desirable applicants. Additionally, these agencies helped clear out undesirable chaplains from military service. Thus was the beginning of religious denominations' active involvement in the recruitment and monitoring of military chaplains. This became a part of Army regulations for chaplains to acquire and maintain a current ecclesiastical endorsement from a religious denomination. To this day, the U.S. military continues to collaborate with religious denominational endorsing agencies to help applicants become chaplains and to monitor the military service of chaplains. This Civil War-born solution continues to do this important work.

Although chaplains in the south were officially recognized by congress in 1861, and commissioned, many problems existed. Many in the South viewed chaplains in disdain, and rightly so after reviewing the conduct of some. The chaplain of Mosby's brigade was seen often dancing to popular tunes of the day, "Sugar in the Gourd", and "All Around the Chicken Roost" as well as placing bets on horse racing from time to time. Another chaplain was court-martialed for deserting to the enemy, while others drank whiskey "for their health."¹⁴ A Mississippi correspondent is quoted as saying that "some of the largest

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Honeywell, Roy. Struggling For Recognition, The United States Army Chaplaincy, 1791-1865 Vol II. Office of the Chief of Chaplains, Department of the Army. Washington D.C.: 1977. 132

¹³ Ibid., 137

¹⁴ Norton, Herman. Rebel Religion. The Story of Confederate Chaplains. Bethany Press, St Louis: (no date). 25

extortioners on a small scale he ever saw were army chaplains going over the country buying up eatables at low figures and peddling them out at famine prices.”¹⁵ Another chaplain, in response to not being given forage if he did not have a horse, appropriated a steed from a Virginia farmer. His justification for such an act was Jesus Christ who “took an ass from his owner, whereon to ride to Jerusalem.”¹⁶ When his actions were found out an officer reprimanded him by pointing out, “You are not Jesus Christ, this is not an ass; you are not on your way to Jerusalem; and the sooner you restore that horse to its owner, the better it will be for you.”¹⁷

Another problem that chaplains faced in the south was that of rank. With the establishment of the chaplaincy in 1861 no rank or command was given. The law stated that chaplains were to be appointed, but only implied that they were to be commissioned officers. By congressional act on 23 August 1861 chaplains were to be given only one ration a day, the same amount that was given to privates in the army. By implication then congress had virtually relegated the status of chaplains to that of a private.¹⁸ Their monthly pay and housing however were initially midway between the pay of a first and second lieutenant.¹⁹ This was to change however. After a bitter fight in the Confederate congress it was decided to reduce the pay of chaplains from \$85 to \$50 per month. Mississippi congressman Wiley P. Harris argued in favor of the pay cut saying that Chaplains were not entitled to the \$85 dollars a month since they only preached once a week and had the rest of the time free.²⁰ Others argued in favor of the pay cut on the premise that as a matter of principle preachers should not be paid.²¹ Whatever the reason for the reduction in monthly pay it did accomplish one major thing. Those men who had pursued the chaplaincy for purely financial gain resigned their positions leaving the Confederate army with men who honestly desired to serve God and their new country. Approximately one year later the legislators in Richmond, under pressure from churches, ministers, and the chaplains themselves raised the pay to \$80 monthly.²²

Along with the problem of rank and status in the Confederate Army came the issue of what chaplains were to wear. Throughout the Civil War there were no set standards regarding the wearing of rank, insignia, or uniform for the chaplains. Therefore, chaplains created their own versions of their

¹⁵ Honeywell, 139

¹⁶ Ibid., 26

¹⁷ Ibid., 26

¹⁸ Robinson-Durso

¹⁹ Honeywell, 131

²⁰ Robinson-Durso

²¹ Honeywell, 133

²² Ibid., 134

uniform, which led to problems. Because their uniforms varied so much, many amusing stories circulated among the troops. For example, some Southern chaplains wore dark blue coats that made them look like Yankees. Chaplains wearing clerical robes were harassed for dressing like women. Another chaplain who wore a beaver hat received disrespectful comments such as; “come down out of that hat”, “See your legs hanging out” and “Take that camp kettle home.”²³ Some in the Army did not appreciate chaplains in military uniform. At the Second Battle of Manassas General Holmes was approached by a chaplain in what was considered to be too military of a uniform. Holmes rebuke to the chaplain was, “Go back sir, take off that sash, retire to the grove and besiege a throne of Grace.”²⁴

Some chaplains in the south designed specific insignia that would designate them as such. The only thing that could be agreed upon by the Confederate chaplains however was that the insignia was to be worn on both sides of their coat collars. The chaplains of the Second and Third Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia designed a badge with “the letter C, with a half wreath of olive leaves worked in gold bullion, on a ground of black velvet, the whole about 2 ½ inches wide.”²⁵ Later the chaplains of the Army of Tennessee chose a “simple Maltese cross.”²⁶ There is no record of any other chaplains or organizations adopting any official insignia.

Another problem that arose during the Civil War for the Confederate chaplain was that of his duties. Because the Confederate Congress failed to legislate their activities many times this was left up to the individual chaplains. As ministers they were expected to hold religious services, however it was never delineated how often and where this was to take place.

The primary focus of the Confederate Chaplain was providing spiritual leadership for his men. For the chaplain this involved leading worship services, prayer services, communion, baptisms, revival meetings, funeral services, distribution of Christian literature and corresponding to the home churches of the soldiers.²⁷

The worship services conducted by the chaplains were done whenever the conditions permitted with the central focus being the preaching of God’s word.²⁸ Many of the Southern leadership felt this was to be the primary job of chaplains but none put it quite so eloquently as General Stonewall Jackson. In a letter addressed to the Southern Presbyterian General Assembly he stated:

²³ Ibid., 133

²⁴ Jones, William J. Christ In The Camp. The Martin & Hoyt Company, Atlanta: 1887. 36

²⁵ Pitts, 44

²⁶ Ibid., 44

²⁷ Robinson-Durso

²⁸ Ibid.

Every branch of the Christian Church should send into the army some of its most prominent ministers who are distinguished for their piety, talents, and zeal; and such ministers should labor to produce concert of action among chaplains and Christians in the army. These ministers should give special attention to preaching to regiments which are without chaplains, and induce them to take steps to get chaplains, to let the regiments name the denominations from which they desire chaplains selected, and then to see that suitable chaplains are secured.

A bad selection of a chaplain may prove a curse instead of a blessing. If a few prominent ministers thus connected with each army would cordially co-operate, I believe that glorious fruits would be the result. Denominational distinctions should be kept out of view, and not touched upon. And, as a general rule, I do not think that a chaplain who would preach denominational sermons should be in the army. His congregation is his regiment, and it is composed of various denominations. I would like to see no question asked in the army of what denomination a chaplain belongs to; but let the question be, does he preach the gospel?²⁹

“The sermon topics used most frequently stressed the Christian virtues; warned about the temptations of alcohol, gambling, and profanity; proclaimed the transforming power of divine grace; emphasized the uncertainty of life and reminded sinners of the possibility of eternal punishment.”³⁰ From diaries, personal recollections and religious publications we are able to see the various themes of the Confederate chaplains as evidenced in their sermon titles, “The Lord God Omnipotent Reigneth”, “Unbelief”, “The First and Great Commandment”, “Retribution”, “Be Ye Men of Good Courage”, and “The Love of God.”³¹ One chaplain, Abner Hopkins, of the famed Stonewall Brigade, held a special service for those using profanity. “One bright young man told the chaplain he should have a full house.”³² This young man was correct. Hopkins had so many in attendance some even stood outside in the rain. It was not unusual for these worship services of the Confederate Army to last up to three hours.³³

Along with preaching during these worship services, great singing took place. The singing was enjoyed by all but as one soldier put it there were those “who could not discern the notes of a pipe organ from the sound of a grist mill, and who would as soon hear a pig squeal as to hear a violin serenade.”³⁴

²⁹ Jones, 94

³⁰ Robinson-Durso

³¹ Pitts, 110

³² Schildt, John W. Jackson And The Preachers. McClain Printing, Parsons, WV: 1982. 138

³³ Norton, 49

³⁴ Pitts, 111

Some of the more popular hymns for the Confederate soldiers included “All Hail The Power”, “Amazing Grace”, “How Firm A Foundation”, “Jesus, Lover Of My Soul”, “Nearer, My God, To Thee”, “Rock Of Ages”, “There Is A Fountain”, and “When I Can Read My Title Clear.”³⁵ It is through these songs that we can gauge the religious fervor of the Confederate army.

One of the greatest events that took place during the Civil War was the revival that swept through the Army of Northern Virginia, beginning in the fall of 1863. This revival was described by William Bennet, a minister who in 1877 headed the Methodist’s Soldiers’ Tract Association.

In the army of General Lee, while it lay on the upper Rappahannock, the revival flame swept through every corps, division, brigade, and regiment. [One chaplain explained]: ‘The whole army is a vast field, ready and ripe to the harvest...The susceptibility of the soldiery to the gospel is wonderful, and, doubtful, as the remark may appear, the military camp is most favorable to the work of revival. The soldiers, with the simplicity of little children, listen to and embrace the truth. Already over two thousand have professed conversion, and two thousand more are penitent...Oh, it is affecting to see the soldiers crowd and press about the preacher for what of tracts, etc., he has to distribute, and it is sad to see hundreds retiring without being supplied!’³⁶

The great revival was not contained to the ranks of the enlisted soldiers. It spread among the officers and others that were associated with the Confederate Army. The chaplain of the Twelfth Tennessee Regiment states

That the lieutenant colonel, adjutant, surgeon, seven captains, and thirteen lieutenants are professors of religion; that not a single officer was addicted to profane swearing, card-playing or drunkenness; that a very large proportion of the men as well as officers pray in public, and heartily second any efforts for good; that the regiment has in it the largest Sabbath-school he ever saw; that the number of the faithful has been greatly multiplied and that there are almost daily accessions to their number.³⁷

Before the revival was ended by General Grants attack in May of 1864, and combined with the results of another great revival in Georgia it is estimated that about 150,000 soldiers were converted.³⁸ As a result of this great revival and others like it, many of the Confederate leadership were eternally affected.

³⁵ Ibid., 111

³⁶ Shattuck, Gardener H. Christianity & The Civil War. www.christianitytoday.com/holidays/memorial/features

³⁷ Jones, 329

³⁸ The actual number of converts is difficult to calculate due to lost and destroyed records. Alan Farley, a Civil War Chaplain Re-enactor who has done great research on the chaplains of the Civil War, gave this number in an interview. www.rmjc.org

General's Braxton Bragg, R.S. Ewell, John Bell Hood, Joseph Johnston and President Jefferson Davis all entered the church at this time.³⁹

Just as chaplains were able to dictate what their duties were to be as ministers, they were also free to choose what role they were to take during time of battle. The official policy of the Confederate government was that chaplains were not to be involved in combat, a policy that was not strictly enforced. Because of this many chaplains followed their own conscience as well as the direction of their regiment as to their responsibilities during battle.

For some chaplains this meant that they were to be near the front lines so that they could inspire the men who were doing the fighting. If the chaplain was a coward and shirked in fear during the time of battle then his words would not have any affect on his men. If, however, he faced the same dangers that his men faced, and did so bravely, then he would retain the respect of the troops that he ministered to. General J.E.B. Stuart stated his desires for a chaplain in this manner

I do not want a man who is not both able and willing to endure hardness as a good soldier. The man who cannot endure the fatigues, hardships and privations of our rough riding and hard service and be in place when needed, would be of no earthly use to us, and is not wanted at my headquarters.⁴⁰

Some chaplains in the south took it upon themselves to go beyond being a simple inspiration to the men. Their view of the war was that they were there to preach *and* to fight just like the other soldiers. One of the most famous of these fighting preachers was Chaplain Isaac T. Tichenor of the 17th Alabama Regiment. During the Battle of Shiloh he fought and killed a colonel, a major, and four privates.⁴¹ During another situation he found himself under fire from a sharpshooter. Taking cover behind a tree stump he shot and killed the Union soldier at a distance of over 100 yards!⁴² An unnamed chaplain took charge of his Virginia regiment after the Colonel was killed, the lieutenant colonel wounded, and the major taken prisoner. The chaplain then led the men against an enemy attack with the rallying cry, "May God have mercy on their souls; give 'em hell, boys! give 'em hell!"⁴³

There were other chaplains who fought as well. A.A. Lomax, 16th Mississippi Regiment who said his rightful place was on the firing line. Thomas Duke, 19th Mississippi, fought on the line and helped to direct some of the skirmishes. John Sinclair, 5th North Carolina, acted as a lieutenant colonel at Manassas, led a number of charges, and was commended by General Longstreet. Thomas Witherspoon,

³⁹ Robinson-Durso

⁴⁰ Pitts, 94

⁴¹ Norton, 81

⁴² Ibid., 82

⁴³ Robinson-Durso

42nd Mississippi, accepted his chaplaincy commission only on the condition that he was allowed to carry a gun. John Andrews, 3rd North Carolina, raised a company of volunteers to avenge the capture of his brother.

For the most part chaplains served in time of battle rendering medical aid and spiritual comfort to the wounded soldiers. Chaplain James McNeilly of Quarles Brigade wrote, “I carried my canteen of whisky, my bottle of morphia and rolls of bandages, and on the field I could relieve pain, start reaction, and bind up minor wound (sic) until the surgeon could attend it.”⁴⁴ Other chaplains served as litter bearers, took charge of ambulances, and worked in the infirmaries.⁴⁵ Although considered noncombatants there was a great risk involved being on any battlefield during the Civil War. Many chaplains were wounded while performing their chaplain duties and some such as B.F. Ellison, 6th Virginia Calvary and William Vanderhurst, 6th Texas Calvary, paid the ultimate price.⁴⁶

When the guns fell silent and the peace was once again restored the chaplains of the Confederacy went back to their towns and villages where many continued their pulpit ministry. It has been estimated that between 1200 and 1500 men served as chaplains for the southern army during the Civil War.⁴⁷ These chaplains provided more for the morale and spiritual welfare of the southern army than any other organization. Frank Hieronymus, a leading writer on the subject of Civil War chaplains says

They had a doubly difficult task – to bolster the morale of a losing army. Some way in the midst of it all they found the grace to give, to serve, to keep primary the eternal verities of life...[and to] divert men’s attention to the straight and narrow gate that leads to life eternal, paradoxically through the valley of the shadow of death.⁴⁸

When you view the lives and ministries of the Confederate chaplains one must come away with a great deal of respect and admiration for these brave men who lived and died for their cause, the Confederacy and Jesus Christ!

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Jones, 522

⁴⁶ Norton, 84

⁴⁷ Factual records are hard to find when researching this number due to lost and destroyed records over the years.

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⁴⁸ Wiatt, Alex. Confederate Chaplain William Edward Wiatt, An Annotated Diary. H.E. Howard, Lynchburg: 1994. 244