By the beginning of the Civil War, the land of the South was already a land of religion. This religion was primarily evangelical in nature which included most Methodists as well as Baptists and Presbyterians. Evangelicals emphasized the sinfulness of human nature, personal relationship with God, salvation through faith, and the need for conversion through inward grace. During the Civil War, as well as before and after, southern Methodists were more evangelical than their counterparts in the North. Thus Methodism, especially in the form of revivals, left its mark on the Confederate soldiers much more than on their northern counterparts. Indeed, Methodists considered the revivals to be the work of God. The *North Carolina Christian Advocate* regarded the revivals as coming at an inappropriate time, but there was no time favorable for “getting up a revival, for God sends it.”

The differences distinguishing northern and southern Methodists were not merely sectional as they were also separated by contrasting understanding of their function in society and the scope of their responsibility. The northern Methodists generally broadened their concept of Christian responsibility from evangelism to the belief that Christians must do battle for what was right. One northern conference resolved, “In our patriotic efforts . . . to sustain the government . . . we are not justly liable to the charges of political teaching, and in the inculcation of loyal principles and sentiments we recognize the pulpit and the press as legitimate instrumentalities.” Southern Methodists held to what they regarded as the “strictly Scriptural mission for the church.” Southern editors urged their churches to “preach repentance and faith and holiness” and “allow the people who are competent to attend to the affairs of the Nation and the State.”

Bishop Hubbard H. Kavanaugh, who also served as chaplain in the Sixth Kentucky Regiment, stated that he deemed his duty as a minister of the

---

1 *North Carolina Christian Advocate*, May 13, 1863.
3 *Christian Advocate and Journal*, March 13, 1862.
5 William W. Sweet, *The Methodist Episcopal Church and the Civil War* (Cincinnati: Methodist Book Concern, 1912), 65.

240
Gospel, "not only to abstain from participating in political affairs, but on the contrary to mitigate as far as practicable the asperity of feeling which prevails so widely."6

Over 209 chaplains and 32 missionaries were provided by the Methodists to serve in the Confederate Army.7 Methodist churches provided a vast array of religious literature. Methodist Advocates from several cities were sent to the southern troops. The Methodist Evangelical Tract Society published and distributed tracts and published the Soldier's Paper and the Army and Navy Herald. William W. Bennett was superintendent of the tract association and S. M. Cherry was responsible for the Soldier's Tract Association in the Army of Tennessee.8

The aim of many tracts was to lead soldiers to Christ, not to make them sectarians. It was alleged that Methodists distributed tracts teaching their views on baptism, but William Bennett, agent of the Soldier's Tract Society, denied such claims. It was true, Bennett said, that overzealous men of different churches might, on their own responsibility, circulate old tracts bearing on these subjects, but the tracts during the war avoided disputed points and taught the great cardinal doctrines and duties of religion.9 Bennett realized that "spiritual awakening" in the army was greatly promoted by the free circulation of religious material among the soldiers.10 To some chaplains it was so important that they resigned to do colportage work, which was to distribute religious literature.11

One of the outstanding features of the revivals was the interdenominational effort by the Methodists in bringing soldiers to Christ. In particular, the Baptists and Presbyterians worked closely with the Methodists. Even an Episcopal minister baptized Baptists by immersion.12 In the army, little was known of sects. The Christian association and army churches were non-denominational; their major objective was to lead soldiers to Christ. For J. B. McFerrin, in charge of Methodist missionary work in the Army of Tennessee, the question was, "Does he fight under the

---

7Sweet, 133-41, 219-22.
8Bennett later became president of Randolph-Macon College.
9William A. Bennett, 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, Remson, and Haffelfinger, 1877), 179. Many tracts also focused on the evils of cursing, drinking, and gambling.
10Ibid., 262. Typical of many soldiers' response was a boy in an Atlanta hospital who refused to accept a Testament but took a tract called "A Mother's Parting Words to Her Soldier Boy." Upon reading it he was deeply moved and became a true penitent who died as a believer in Christ. Bennett, 80. From Virginia there were over one hundred professed conversions from reading this same tract. Christian Index, March 23, 1863, quoting A. E. Dickenson.
11Army and Navy Herald, December 1, 1863.
12Newton Davis to wife Bettie, August 3, 1863. Davis Letters, Alabama Department of Archives and History, Montgomery.
banner of Christ? Does he love the Lord Jesus? If so, he is my brother, and we are bound together . . . and expect to live together in heaven."18 In his opinion the war did much to harmonize Christians and to destroy sectarian feelings.14 Another veteran chaplain stated that it was almost impossible for a chaplain to do denominational work in camp. A few tried and were unsuccessful. The soldiers would not tolerate any man who undertook sectarian work among them. As one participant wrote, "no other work of the church, not even missions to the heathen, has ever been more efficient in breaking down sectarian feelings."15

Other southern Methodist chaplains and missionaries noted with approval the harmonious relations among denominations. William H. Browning wrote from Tennessee, "We know no distinctions here, Baptists, Cumberlands, Old (School) Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Methodists, work together, and rejoice together at the success of our cause."16 Atticus G. Haygood, missionary to Bryan's Brigade, wrote: "Anything looking like controversy would be considered an intolerable impertinence in the army. I think the unity and brotherly love among the Christians of our noble army will . . . rebuke the intolerant bigotry that has so often reared its foul crest by the altars of God."17

The only prejudice by Methodists during the war seemed to have been aimed toward Roman Catholics, the most obvious religious group that took little interest and placed little faith in revivals. J. B. McFerrin stated that except for Roman Catholics, who never fraternized with Protestants, there was a great unanimity and harmony of feeling and action.18 A Presbyterian minister went even farther in his attack. William G. Mills reported a revival in a hospital which, considering the insidious effect that the Roman Catholics were making through priests and nuns "who are using every effort to inculcate their pernicious teaching, was indeed remarkable."19

Methodist chaplains seldom preached war sermons. One editor stated that too many people thought a clergyman in a military organization was a militarist. He added:

Chaplains had one reason for existence, and that was to witness by work and action to the power and law of God. . . . His life was dedicated to service guided by God and ex-

19Ibid.
18B. W. McDonnell, History of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church (Nashville: Board of Publications of Cumberland Presbyterian Church, 1888), 423.
16Bennett, 315.
17J. William Jones, Christ in the Camp or Religion in Lee's Army (Altanta: The Martin and Hoyle Co., 1887), 618.
18William T. Hall, "Religion in the Army of Tennessee," The Land We Love, IV, (December 1867), 129.
19North Carolina Presbyterian, October 18, 1862, report from Reverend William G. Miller.
Chaplain Hugh R. Scott observed from the meetings he attended that the preacher always delivered a plain practical sermon in which the "great doctrines of justification by faith, evangelical repentance, and the new birth were set forth by the simplest language." Chaplain John B. McFerrin told his men they must be born again for, "He that believeth shall be saved." A soldier in Virginia wrote to his wife that he had heard a wonderful sermon from the words "you must be born again." Captain Gary Whitaker commented on a chaplain's sermon: "It was nothing but a dissertation on government. When I go to church (I go) to hear the gospel and nothing else."

John C. Granberry, superintendent of Methodist missionaries in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, asserted:

I would add my testimony ... on the evangelical tone of the preaching and worship in our army. Chaplains ... determined not to know anything among them save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified ... the grounds of the war were not discussed; constitutional and historical questions were passed by, except a certain local coloring, such as illustrations drawn from active military life and appeals based on the perils of war. The sermons in the camp would have suited any congregation in city and country, and with even less change might have been preached to the Union armies. Eternal things, the claims of God, the worth of the soul, the wages of sin which is death, and the gift of God which is eternal life through Jesus Christ our God—these were the matter of preaching. The marrow and fatness of the gospel were set forth. The style was not controversial, speculative or curious, but eminently practical and direct; hortatory, yet also instructive. There were pathos and urgency of appeal. The hearers were besought to immediate and uncompromising action, for the time was short. ... There was no stirring up of bad blood; no inflaming of malice and revenge. The man of God lifted up, not the Bar and Star, but the Cross, and pressed the urgency, 'Who among you are on the Lord's side?'

In a similar vein the Baptist chaplain-historian, J. William Jones, wrote of the chaplain and his sermons:

Whoever it is, he preaches the Gospel. He does not discuss the 'relations of science to religion,' or the slavery question, or the causes which led to the war itself. He does not indulge in abusive epithets of the invaders of our soil, or seek to fire his hearers with hatred or vindictiveness toward the enemy. He is looking in the eyes of Heroes of many a battle, and knows that the 'long roll may beat in the midst of his sermon and summon the men to battle and to death, and therefore he speaks as a dying man to dying men,' talking with great earnestness 'the old, old story of salvation.'

---

26Army and Navy Messenger, May 1, 1863, Editorial.
21Jones, 206-07.
23Thomas Boatwright to "wife," March 20, 1864. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Hereafter cited as Boatwright Papers, SHC.
24Gary Whitaker's Diary, May 16, 1863. Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Hereafter cited as Whitaker's Diary, SHC.
25Jones, 14.
26Ibid., 751.
Surrounded by the hardships of camp and the possibilities of death, soldiers tended to take their religion and their salvation seriously. A correspondent to the *Christian Advocate* wrote that revivals were not characterized by boisterous or extravagant excitement, but appeared to be deep and spiritual contemplation.27 A Methodist preacher, writing to the *North Carolina Christian Advocate*, noted that revivals in the army differed in external indications from the revivals at home. There was little noise or sobbing or even tears. “The men were deeply moved but . . . they march up to the cross as to serious important duty.”28 A veteran Methodist chaplain’s letter to his son seemed indicative of the feeling of many of his comrades in gray. He wrote, “true religion is adapted to all men, but if emotional feeling is the essential element of religion, it badly fails in adapting to all. If religion is sure excitement of the emotions it is adapted to but a small layer of society.”29 It was only natural that religion touched the soldiers in many different ways. As an editorial in the *Army and Navy Messenger* explained:

> Although the principles involved in every genuine conversion are the same in all cases, the outward expressions are as varied as those of human faces. These depend upon temperament, education, and many other causes. But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, meekness, temperance, and faith.30

More typical of the emotion displayed by the soldiers were such comments as, “I saw the large drops coursing down scores of upturned faces around me. . . .” About one hundred came forward with “tears even sobs.”31 Another soldier wrote home after hearing a sermon that he, like many soldiers, gave way to his feeling in a flood of tears.32 Chaplains’ reports on results of their revivals repeatedly mentioned a flow of tears but little else in terms of emotional outbursts. At one meeting, typical of the protracted meetings in the army, a number of men were reported “weepingly converted.”33 One chaplain could recall but one instance of excitement where a soldier fainted in his arms. He believed this condition was a genuine product of deep conviction. Yet for all others, the work was “silent, quiet, and deep.”34

Only a small number of ministers to the army attempted to work up an extreme emotionalism among their hearers unlike many of their earlier counterparts. Most chaplains apparently were like J. Monroe Anderson,
Twelfth South Carolina Volunteers, who reported that he had "studiously avoided anything which might seem like getting up an excitement." J. A. Stradly reported that Christians spent very little effort in the way of excited preaching and praying and that there was less animal excitement on the part of the anxious than he had ever witnessed. The very individuals who composed the congregation, Jones believed, were a safeguard against undue animal excitement. "We had not women and children, but men to deal with men ... who could not have been 'scared into religion'. . . ." In addition there were ministers in every denomination and with different temperaments cooperating together, and "if one were disposed to get up undue excitement, or to use improper machinery, another would have restrained him." 

The large number of Confederate revivals should not give the impression that the southern soldiers always had the opportunity to enjoy religion. Indeed, during the first eighteen months of the war the opposite seemed to be true. The letters of two Methodist ministers showed the lack of any kind of religious interest and the improvement of this interest as the war progressed. One soldier wrote to Adolph W. Mangum that he would face a task which would require all the energies of his body and soul. A. S. Webb wrote that the army was more demoralizing than he ever dreamed as most men "had forgotten there is such as religion." A North Carolinian reported soldiers in his brigade who formerly were consistent members of the church, "now place themselves among the unbelievers, and declare there is no eternal punishment for a Confederate soldier."

The first major outbreak of revivals in the Army of Northern Virginia occurred at Fredericksburg. William Owen reported the revival beginning on February 15, 1863, with meeting every day and night. By the end of March, Owen reported over one hundred conversions in his regiment alone. Converts numbered by the thousands as thousands gathered nightly for several months. By May 30, 1863, A. E. Dickinson wrote of the revivals from the Army of Northern Virginia. In almost every regiment, he observed protracted meetings in progress and souls being born

---

35Southern Presbyterian, December 4, 1862.
36Ibid., 392.
37B. W. Arnold to A. W. Mangum, October 7, 1861, Mangum Family Papers, Southern Historical Collection.
38A. S. Webb to sister, February 6, 18, 1862, Webb Family Papers, North Carolina State Archives.
40Christian Advocate, March 12, 1863.
41Religious Herald, March 26, 1863.
43Jones, 309-10.
into the kingdom. The chaplain of the Second Georgia Battalion wrote to the *Southern Christian Advocate* “that the glorious work is going on throughout the entire brigade.”

Chaplain J. J. D. Renfroe faithfully preached throughout his brigade during the entire summer of 1863. However, it was not until his regiment, the Tenth Alabama, was camped at Orange Court House that he saw any signs of a revival. There, wrote Renfroe, they established arbors in various regiments and God blessed their efforts. Renfroe often preached to a solid acre of men with between five and six hundred manifesting a desire for prayers. “I have never seen such a time before or since. There were as many evidences of genuine penitence as I ever noted at home—yes more.” Almost every day there were a dozen conversions, and in six weeks his brigade experienced not less than five hundred who professed conversion. Prayer meetings, Bible classes, and preaching were successfully kept up through the winter in spite of Renfroe’s absence. After evening roll-call, large numbers of men would retire for prayer. Walking out from camp in any direction, one found groups of two, three, or a dozen in a place, “all bowed in the dark, earnestly praying for themselves and the conversion of their comrades, they nearly always took some unconverted ones with them.”

By the end of fall, the *Richmond Christian Advocate* published:

Not for years has such a revival prevailed in the Confederate States. Its records gladden the columns of every religious journal. Its progress in the army is a spectacle of moral sublimity over which men and angels can rejoice. Such *camp-meetings* were never seen before in America. The bivouac of the soldier never witnessed such nights of glory and days of splendor. The Pentecostal fire lights the camp, and the hosts of armed men sleep beneath the wings of angels rejoicing over many sinners that have repented.

At Dalton, Georgia, a revival went uninterrupted for four months in the spring of 1864. McFerrin had never witnessed more displays of God’s power in the awakening and conversion of sinners. Bennett described the revival at Dalton as almost without parallel with hundreds of penitents nightly being brought to sorrow and tears as “Dalton was the spiritual birthplace of thousands.” During March of 1865, even R. S. Webb could report that the soldiers were in better spirit and were enjoying a “refreshing shower of grace from the presence of the Lord,” with thirty or more joining the church. The chaplain’s association observed that the

---

44 *Southern Christian Advocate*, June 12, 1863.
45 Jones, 510-11.
46 Ibid., 323.
48 Bennett, 366.
49 R. S. Webb to cousin, March 23, 1865. Webb Family Papers, SHC.
50 Jones, 353-54.
“good Lord has graciously poured out His Holy Spirit upon a large portion of this army and many brigades are now enjoying a gracious revival.”

Thus on all army fronts, revivals were in progress down to the final days of defeat and collapse. Jones was convinced that the revivals during the winter of 1864-65 were as general and as powerful as before, and only ceased when the army was disbanded. “Really they did not cease then, for in the great revivals with which our churches in Virginia and the South were blessed during the summer and autumn of 1865 a very large proportion of the converts were from among our returned soldiers.”

The number of conversions was impossible to calculate as estimates varied. The Baptist Religious Herald estimated the number of conversions at one hundred forty-two thousand. B. W. McDonald of the Presbyterian Church estimated there were over one hundred thousand converts, while Bennett placed the number of conversions at one hundred fifty thousand. While one can only speculate at the number of conversions, Methodist leaders realized that the simplest way to convert a nation was to convert its army.

Chaplains reported that in addition to the actual number of conversions, there was a marked improvement in moral conditions. The Methodist minister, T. D. Davenport, remarked of his unit that it was impossible to give the number of conversions but it brought about a complete moral revolution in the brigade. During the long campaigns following, “scarcely an oath was heard, or a deck of cards seen... There were many who did not go to the altar, or make a public profession of religion, who were, nevertheless, changed in feeling and in life.” In the early stages of the evangelistic endeavor, one chaplain wrote: “When the war began the church was praying for the army. But a great change has taken place. Many in the church have lost the spirit of prayer, and the army is now praying for the church.” An Alabama chaplain added, “Talk about the army demoralizing the church—I don’t know any church that wouldn’t demoralize my regiment!” One chaplain acknowledged that the bringing back of backsliders, and the quickening of the zeal, and faith, and general consecration of God’s people, the comfort, the joy, the peace, the strength for hardships, privations, sufferings, trials, temptations—these cannot be counted, but are really of far more value than mere numbers of professed converts.

---

62 Religious Herald, December 1, 1864.
63 South Western Baptist, November 24, 1864.
64 McDonnald, 431.
65 North Carolina Christian Advocate, Dr. Stiles to newspaper, August 19, 1863.
66 McFerrin, 283.
67 Religious Herald, September 24, 1863.
68 Ibid., October 29, 1863.
69 Jones, 391.
One clergyman found that of the twenty-seven members of his church who returned at the close of the war, "all save two came back more earnest Christians and more efficient church members than they had ever been."\(^{60}\)

Many other civilian ministers bore like testimony. William H. Browning, writing to the *Southern Christian Advocate*, confirmed that the "morals of the army were far ahead of those of the country."\(^{61}\)

Even Jones admitted that many of the professors of religion in the army were spurious.\(^{62}\) This was true in every revival, he added, and it was not to be expected that the revivals in the army would prove an exception. Jones was convinced that the revivals in camp were as genuine as any which occurred in the South. For Bennett, religion in the army approached more nearly the primitive Christianity than at any other time in history.\(^{63}\) Horace Jewell was convinced that a much larger number of the converts in the army remained more faithful than was usual in ordinary revival meetings.\(^{64}\)

Many devout Methodists felt God would bless their army and help them gain their independence.\(^{65}\) Even forty years later, many southern Methodists could not believe that God had let them lose the war. In a prayer to students at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Jones exemplified the belief of many veteran soldiers:

> Lord we acknowledge Thee as the all-wise author of every good and perfect gift. We recognize Thy presence and wisdom in the healing shower. We acknowledge Thou had a divine plan when Thou made the rattle-snake, as well as the song bird, and this was without help from Charles Darwin. But we believe Thou will admit the grave mistake in giving the decision to the wrong side in eighteen hundred and sixty-five.\(^{66}\)

Bennett closed his narrative of the revivals with the question—"Were the fruits of the army revivals enduring?" To this question, he replied that thousands, in 1877, could give an affirmative response. "In all the churches of the South there are earnest, devout, and active Christians, who date their spiritual birth from some revival in Virginia, in the West, or in the far South."\(^{67}\) In glowing terms, he spoke of the effect of revivals:

> Strange as it may seem to many readers, the call to preach the gospel of Christ came to the hearts of the men of war on the tented field; and no sooner were their carnal

\(^{60}\)Ibid., 396.
\(^{61}\)Ibid., 392.
\(^{62}\)Ibid., 392.
\(^{63}\)Bennett, 386.
\(^{64}\)Horace Jewell, *History of Methodism in Arkansas* (Little Rock: Press Printing Co., 1892), 179. Jewell like other Methodist ministers such as Jones, Bennett, and McFerrin left written accounts of the revivals.
\(^{66}\)United Confederate Veterans Minutes of the Eleventh Annual Meeting and Reunion of the United Confederate Veterans ... 1901 (New Orleans, n.d.), 23. Prayer was quoted in Thad Stem J. and Alan Butler's *Senator Sam Ervin's Best Stories* (Durham, N. C., 1977), 86.
\(^{67}\)Bennett, 426.
weapons laid aside than they buckled on the Divine armor, and, seizing the sword of the Spirit, entered the battle against the powers of darkness. In this we find one of the strongest proofs of the genuineness of the Army Revival. Truly, its fruits are still enduring. Thousands who were participants in that glorious and, to some, strange work, have passed the gloom of death and are seen no more among men, but the seed they sowed in trench and camp and hospital, in the bivouac, and on the weary march, was watered from above and has borne a rich harvest. And may we not hope that the full fruition of this work is to be realized in that era of peace and good will which is even now descending upon our common country?68

If nothing else the evangelical revival sharpened the contrast between the religious and cultural orientation of northern and southern Methodism. It also helped pave the way for the phenomenal growth of southern Methodism after the Civil War.69 By supporting the war perhaps Methodist piety lengthened the war, as it certainly deepened the scar and left an enduring impact on the region’s approach to Christianity.

The evangelical Christianity of southern Methodism with its rigid theology, emotionalism and its emphasis upon individual salvation helped divert attention from the ills of southern society after the war. Southerners followed the exhortation of a Mississippi Methodist preacher during the final days of the war: “If we cannot gain our political, let us establish our mental independence.”70 Thus the Civil War, far from collapsing the South’s religious tradition, actually rejuvenated their form of evangelical Christianity and established the real distinctiveness of a southern Methodist heritage.71

68Ibid., 427.