

POETIC SIDESHADOWINGS OF FUNDAMENTALISM IN SOUTHERN METHODISM, 1865-1866¹

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The Civil War was a holy war. Soldiers and political leaders from both the Union and Confederacy had claimed that God was on their side. But what happens when you lose a holy war? How is that interpreted theologically?

In the North, Union sympathizers could claim, as Horace Bushnell did, that the casualties of war were “the price and purchase-money of our triumph.”² But in the South there was no such solace. In the case of the Confederacy, the theological trauma of defeat in the war was reinforced by material and psychological damage, economic ruin, and political oppression. Hundreds of thousands of Confederate soldiers had died in the course of the war. Many of the war dead were hastily buried in mass graves near battlefields or camps. Southern families had little chance to mourn their dead in the ways to which they were accustomed. The infrastructure of the South had been left in shambles and cotton production so disrupted that recovery seemed a far off prospect. Churches had been destroyed, or in other cases defiled by their transformation into hospitals, warehouses, and stables. Moreover, “Yankee carpetbaggers” began to arrive shortly after Appomattox to ensure the proper installation of a new political order that chafed hard against Southern society and culture. The end of the war seemed to signal not just military defeat, but the beginning of the total eradication of the Southern way of life. “Beneath the realities of poverty, social disruption, and political readjustment,” two historians of the South have noted, “there was something far more difficult to reconcile. This was the awful prospect that God had turned his back upon the Confederacy.”³

Southerners were faced most basically with the question of theodicy—why were the righteous suffering? Why had God allowed God’s chosen ones to lose? Was the death and destruction of the war all in vain? If God had turned his back on the Confederacy, were its fallen soldiers condemned to

¹ I credit Professor James Moorhead for the term “sideshadowings,” used in a class on “American Protestantism After Darwin” at Princeton Theological Seminary on November 8, 2006. The idea that history can show us alternative paths that might have been followed is central to this article. Rather than focusing solely on the antecedents of a *known* outcome, we can also learn by looking at the array of options that were seriously considered but ultimately discarded by the historical actors in question.

² Horace Bushnell, “Our Obligations to the Dead,” in Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 190.

³ Thomas L. Connelly and Barbara L. Bellows, *God and General Longstreet: The Lost Cause and the Southern Mind* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1982), 15.

perdition? Throughout the war, in response to defeats on the battlefield, both sides had engaged in nationwide fast days. These were times of humiliation and prayer in search of God's favor. Since the Confederate cause itself was holy—and clergy assured parishioners repeatedly that it *was* holy—battle reverses were interpreted as God's way of chastening the South. The proper response to divine chastening was to humble oneself and attempt to discern the nature of God's disfavor. With fasting and penitence perhaps God would put aside wrath and reward the pious with victory once again.

In the aftermath of Appomattox, the rationale of divine chastening persisted. The proper thing to do, many Southerners reasoned, was to submit to the Northerners because they were agents of God's will. The Bible certainly recounted many instances of God using apostate peoples to humble his chosen ones. This case was essentially no different. Moreover, a war-weariness permeated the country. Though the outcome was not as congenial as the Confederates would have liked, at least the killing was over and that in itself was a blessing.

Yet, as hopes for a restoration of the Confederacy faded, Southern convictions of the righteousness of their cause were not erased. Their chastening, after all, came from the holy hand of God, not from the Northerners. Rather than waning in the years following the war, the theological certitude of the Confederacy would ultimately be sublimated into a civil religion of the "Lost Cause."⁴ Charles Reagan Wilson, chief chronicler of the Lost Cause, has outlined in detail its structure and religious significance. According to Wilson, it had its own priests, many of whom had been chaplains to the Confederate soldiers during the war and witnessed the carnage of the battlefield, trying day by day to sort out the theological ramifications of the war. The Lost Cause had its own holy days in the form of Confederate Memorial Days and the annual celebration of Jefferson Davis' Birthday. The Lost Cause also had its own martyrs in the guise of Robert E. Lee, Stonewall Jackson, J.E.B. Stuart and Jefferson Davis. The hagiographic myths that developed around these men took on reverential tones that verged on the religious. Even the soldiers of the rank and file, whatever their standing with God before the war, were believed to be sanctified by their participation in a righteous cause. They were in essence "baptized in blood."⁵

More recently, historian Drew Gilpin Faust has argued that the massive extent of the carnage forced Americans to confront the question of theodicy in a new way, and to alter their views of death and the afterlife. Victorian notions of the "Good Death" and the *ars moriandi*, or art of dying, were strained as hundreds of thousands of soldiers faced death without dignity. Their names were not recorded. Their bodies were hastily piled into mass

⁴ The term "Lost Cause" can be traced to a newspaper editor, Edwin Pollard, author of a book by the name *The Lost Cause* in 1866. It is significant, however, that the work was not popularized until much later.

⁵ Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause, 1865-1920* (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1980).

unmarked graves. Deaths no longer took place at home with loved ones gathered around the deathbed, witnessing the last words of the dying and testifying to the state of the soul as it passed into eternity. Without witnesses there was no firm assurance of a “Good Death” or the salvation of a loved one, and Civil War mourners had to seek consolation and meaning elsewhere. Again, the Northerners could console themselves that the war deaths had in some sense been redemptive by restoring the Union and ending slavery. The Confederates had no such theological recourse. Some lost their faith in a Providential God altogether. But Faust writes that

most former Confederates would suppress their doubts and return to religious belief and observance. Churches grew dramatically in the South in the years after the Civil War . . . [b]ut many white southerners remained bewildered . . . by God’s mysterious ways in subjecting them to the anguishing losses of war. The cult of the Lost Cause and the celebration of Confederate memory that emerged in the ensuing decades were in no small part an effort to affirm that the hundreds of thousands of young southern lives had not, in fact been given in vain.⁶

The Lost Cause, however, is generally recognized to have taken its fullest shape only at the end of Reconstruction, as federal troops were removed from the South and the political space for such a movement opened. What was happening to those sublimated aspirations, to that need to find meaning in defeat, between Appomattox and 1876?

If we turn to the religious publications of the period, we can see at least one alternate future for mainstream white Protestant Southern religion in this period. Premillennialism, though it did not become popular in the South until the 1920s, began to find expression there in the years immediately after the Civil War. Even among Methodists, the major denomination *least* associated with premillennialism and proto-fundamentalism, some early strains of premillennialism were present.

In this article, I will examine the surprising prevalence of premillennial eschatology in one Southern Methodist periodical in the first year following Lee’s surrender at Appomattox. The *Southern Christian Advocate*, read in South Carolina and across the South, was based in Augusta, Georgia, and moved to Macon as Sherman’s forces approached. It was one of the only Southern Methodist papers not to cease publication during the war. The central publishing house of the denomination in Nashville had been seized in 1862 and was being used as a United States printing office. The presses of all of the other Annual Conferences had shut down due to lack of subscriptions, difficulty of distribution, or the seizure of their property during the war. The Richmond *Christian Advocate*, which rivaled the *Southern Christian Advocate* (SCA) in influence, had met this latter fate in 1864 and did not resume publication until 1866. The SCA, then, gives us a unique window on Southern Methodist sentiment during a critical period in Southern theological development.

⁶ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage, 2008), 193.

When examining the immediate postwar issues of the *SCA*, we can see that in many ways its editors and contributors felt a need to focus on the crises of the present rather than the meaning of the past. Many of the stories were about re-establishing contact with publishing houses in other parts of the South, about re-establishing the itinerancy, and most especially about discerning the true intentions of the Northern Methodist church. The Methodist Episcopal Church (MEC), or the Northern Methodists, had forged close ties with the Lincoln Administration during the war. As the largest denomination in the United States, it understandably commanded a lot of attention from the political elite. Lincoln himself proved to be very sensitive to pronouncements from the pulpit as a bellwether of public opinion. The ties between the MEC and the Lincoln Administration had become so close that Bishop Ames of the MEC was able to secure a proviso from the War Department that every MECS church captured during the war would be turned over to the MEC. The MEC would then appoint an Northern or pro-MEC missionary to fill the pulpit. At the end of the war, this standard was preserved and an onslaught of Northern missionaries came down to occupy Southern pulpits.

The *SCA* bristled at this affront, calling these religious carpetbaggers "Bishop Ames' ecclesiastical cormorants." They balked at the assumption that political union should also mean denominational re-unification. Shortly after the war, fearing such strong-arming tactics, the surviving Southern Bishops gathered in Savannah to restore order to their denomination and assure pastors and laity that the denomination was not defunct, contrary to popular opinion. Due to the war, some meetings of the Annual Conferences had been suspended. No MECS General Conference had been held since 1858. Many pastors had not received new commissions or any communication at all from the episcopacy. While some simply stayed in their posts for the duration of the war, others abandoned their churches or switched denominational affiliation.⁷

With such pressing concerns about the survival of the denomination and the resumption of itinerant ministry, it is understandable that dealing with the wounds of the past might not be prioritized. Indeed, it is true that very few stories in the first postbellum issues of the *SCA* explicitly focused on the theological crisis surrounding the loss of the war and the eternal fate of the war dead.

What ought to be of interest to the keen observer, however, is the fact that the theological crisis is addressed very frequently in the *poetry* of each edition. Each *SCA* (they averaged eight pages per issue) published approximately three poems, some original to the *Southern Christian Advocate*, others plucked from popular journals of the day. Often these poems would frame the news, feature, or opinion piece that followed. To wit, the March 16, 1865, edition ran an article in the top left column of page one entitled "The

⁷ Hunter Dickinson Farish, *The Circuit Rider Dismounts: A Social History of Southern Methodism, 1865-1900* (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 1938), 28.

Victor's Song." The unsigned article begins with an unsigned poem:

Who are these in bright array,
This innumerable throng
Round the altar night and day,
Tuning their triumphant song?

These through fiery trials trod,
These from great affliction came;
Now, before the throne of God,
Seal'd with his eternal name.

Clad in raiment pure and white,
Victor-palms in every hand,
Through their great Redeemer's might
More than conquerors they stand.

Hush'd all sadness and all sighs,
Perfect love dispels their fears.
And forever from their eyes
God has wiped away their tears.⁸

The poem is followed by the quotation of Revelation 5:11-12, which of course is a book favored by exponents of premillennial doctrine. The military imagery of the poem is unmistakable, and so even though the article that follows is a general appeal for repentance ("Reader! prepare for this lofty society, . . ."), readers would likely have approached this within the frame of reference of the war. Who are the victors in "The Victor's Song"? They are not found on the battlefield. They are the dead who stand before the throne of God, who suffered great affliction on behalf of God's cause.

Directly following this article is a second poem entitled "Sad Heart Be Still," reprinted from the *Christian Observer*, which indicates that the victors are beckoning their loved ones to join them:

Sad heart be still,
The rod is in a Father's hand,
And given in love
To guide thee to that better land/Prepared above.
Those loved ones --
Who are not dead but gone before --
Have reached that home;
And standing on the "shining shore,"
Are calling -- "Come."

Earth's trials o'er,
Their pure and happy spirits dwell
In God's own light, --
No sin, no fear of death to quell --
And there's no night.⁹

The victors, the loved ones, are not suffering. They are pure and happy

⁸ "The Victor's Song," *Southern Christian Advocate* 28.10 (Augusta, GA) (March 16, 1865): 1.

⁹ "Sad Heart Be Still," *Southern Christian Advocate* 28.10 (Augusta, GA) (March 16, 1865): 1.

spirits dwelling in the presence of God. The affliction experienced on earth (defeat at the hands of the Yankees, perhaps?) is loving correction meted out by God to guide Christian readers to heaven.

Who wrote these unsigned poems? Presumably the editor of the *SCA* wrote the first, though the important point here is not authorship, but the editorial decision to run this particular poem and to place it so prominently. These kinds of decisions help set the tone of a newspaper and determine, in part, how it is read. Since we know that the *SCA* had the widest distribution of any denominational paper in the MECS at this time, we may presume that it had a disproportionate impact on the development of the Southern Methodist mindset during a very critical period. James Moorhead has written that,

Most [average] persons probably had not sorted out their views clearly but lived with a mental hodgepodge of images of the last things, which they had not ordered into a distinct or coherent theory. They might alternately hope for the gradual conquest of the world to Christ and the sudden return of the Lord¹⁰

If so, these poems may have fueled some of that hope for the sudden return of the Lord as a solution to the theological crisis of defeat. Whether the poems were penned by the theological elite or by average persons, we can expect that the readers of this widely distributed journal might be susceptible to its theological allure.

I see these poems as expressions of the desire to mourn the dead in a religiously-meaningful way. In the process of mourning, I believe that we can see the framework of a premillennial eschatology. For one thing, the poems exhibit a very short time horizon for the expected Second Coming—a hallmark of premillennial thought. The catastrophe of defeat is, in more or less explicit language, interpreted as a “sign of the times.” There is a yearning on the part of the living to join the dead soon, because the world and its cares had such a corrupting influence. This is usually expressed as weariness with the world, presumably tinged with pessimism about its future prospects. Finally, the hagiographic treatment of the war dead in these poems foreshadowed their central importance in the Lost Cause ideology that began to flourish ten years later.

This turn to premillennialism, incipient as it is, holds quite a bit of significance. George Marsden holds that “[f]undamentalism in the 1920s was a broad coalition drawn from many denominations and traditions. The most dedicated core of this many-faceted movement was made up of dispensational premillennialists”¹¹ Students of fundamentalism including Marsden have tended to describe its origins primarily in the North following the Civil War. Yet by the 1920s the South had become one of the

¹⁰ James H. Moorhead, *World without End: Mainstream American Protestant Visions of the Last Things, 1880-1925* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1999), 17.

¹¹ George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), 232-233. This second edition of his classic includes a section on “Fundamentalism Yesterday and Today (2005)” which is very helpful in tracking the shifting meaning of the term. I follow Marsden’s understanding of the term “fundamentalism” in this article.

greatest strongholds of fundamentalism. To explain the slow advent in the South, many have resorted to the argument that the South was too wedded to notions of religious orthodoxy, rooted in the code of honor that characterized Southern gentility, and galvanized by the influence of religious revivals.

These poems, published right after the Civil War in a theologically volatile atmosphere, provide evidence that Southerners entertained some sympathy toward a heterodox eschatology much earlier. Whereas Southern religion (and Southern Methodism in particular) has also been characterized as anti-intellectual because of its revivalist origins, the use of these poems indicates an intellectual and theological dexterity in coping with their new situation. Though these glimmers of fundamentalism ultimately took fifty years to flower, I believe that they “sideshadow” an alternate future for the South after Appomattox.

Immanent Eschatology

Perhaps the best example of the immanent eschatology found in these poems comes from the September 28, 1865, edition of the *SCA*. As with the “Victor’s Song”, this one was printed in the top-left column of the front page. It is entitled “A Little While.” Due to its length, I will only quote portions of the text:

... When shall this night of weeping
Be turned to song?

... Oh when wilt Thou array me
In glorious body, no more weak and vile?
Come quickly! Thou didst promise but to tarry
A little while.

... Surely the sound of that swift driven chariot
At length I hear!

O earth, earth, earth arouse thee!
Wake from thy tears, put on thy glory smile!
Surely He cometh: and He will but tarry
A little while!¹²

Although, there is no specific dating for the Second Coming, the time horizon is short here. Date-setting had fallen out of favor with the discredited Millerite movement of the 1840s. William Miller, one of the first ardent premillennialists in the United States, foretold that the Second Coming would happen in 1843. When it did not occur, he revised his prediction and pushed the date back. But the damage from overconfidence had already been done. This poem demonstrates very clearly the hesitancy to fix a date, yet it maintains faith in Christ’s promise to return soon.

Up through the Civil War, the majority of those who expressed any millennial views at all were postmillennialists. This, according to George Marsden, entailed an optimism toward spiritual and cultural progress.

¹² “A Little While,” *Southern Christian Advocate* 28.20 (Macon, GA) (September 28, 1865): 1.

“[Postmillennialists] saw human history as reflecting an ongoing struggle between the cosmic forces of God and Satan, each well represented by various earthly powers, but with the victory of righteousness ensured,” he writes.¹³ Marsden continues by noting that in the early part of the nineteenth century many postmillennialists believed the eschaton to be immanent as well:

In America before the Civil War premillennialism . . . did not differ greatly from postmillennialism of the same era. Both saw history as controlled by a cosmic struggle, both allowed for interpreting some Biblical prophecies literally, and both thought that some prophecies about the time immediately preceding the millennium were already being fulfilled in current events.¹⁴

Before the war, then, American Protestants could uniformly read progress toward the kingdom of God off the face of their history and current events.

But it is reasonable to believe that the Civil War itself would have caused a sectional rupture in this interpretive *détente*. For Union sympathizers, the war may have appeared a vindication of the spiritual and cultural progress of humanity, while Confederate sympathizers surely would have seen the war as proof of the failure of human progress. Therefore, while postmillennialists were slowly gathering force behind the idea of “ushering in the kingdom of God” through human advancement in the post-Civil War period, one sees a different cast to the views expressed in the poetry of the *SCA*. Christ’s return would not be predicated on the advancement of human society, but on its failure to produce righteousness. This was the kernel of dispensational premillennialism, which posited a Rapture of the faithful before the judgment of the world at Christ’s Second Coming. Interestingly, Marsden sees the movement towards premillennial doctrine in the 1860s best expressed in the hymns written at that time.¹⁵ With that in mind, it should be no surprise that we see premillennial doctrine arising also in the poetry of 1865 and 1866.

Contrast the poetry sampled above, then, to some verses that appeared in the *Christian Advocate and Journal*, a Northern Methodist weekly based in New York. It was by far the most influential of the denominational papers in the North at this time. On May 11, 1865, the *Christian Advocate and Journal (CAJ)* printed “He Doeth All Things Well,” a poem by Charles W. Reed, specifically for the *CAJ*:

The church bells swing above our heads, the heroes’ cause is won;
We’ll praise our God with joyful shouts for what his hand hath done;
He built us walls on either side: the dark Red Sea of blood
Daunts us no more, for Treason lies engulfed within its flood.

. . . Weep not, O Nation, for thy loss; God doeth all things right;
We do not need the cloud of fire when he has banished night;
. . . . Give praise to God, his chosen saints, the land is pure and free!
O may his grace now stir the earth as tempest shakes the sea!

¹³ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 49.

¹⁴ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 51.

¹⁵ Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 51 n.12.

His hand hath held our banner up, hath saved each stripe and star;
 O let us cluster round his cross, his watchmen call to war!
 With hands outstretched, on Zion's hill we marshal for the fray;
 Give now, O God, the strength of steel to feeble tools of clay;
 Let Satan's walls fall in the dust, as in thy name we come,
 And when our toil is finished here, take *all* thy workmen home.¹⁶

The triumphalism is obvious. God's hand protected the Union and delivered it much as God had when leading the Israelites out of Egypt. Even though the "heroes' cause is won," the poet is asking God for strength in the toil ahead. God's intervention was needed in the war, but the toil ahead is left to humans alone. Only when that work is done will God take his "workmen" home. The change from heroes to workmen is significant here because it indicates a much longer time horizon for the eschaton and an optimism for the future of human society. Clearly this is a difference between the Southern theological predisposition and the Northern.

War-Weariness and Resignation

In the May 25, 1866, issue of the *SCA*, two pieces of original poetry appeared, penned by different authors. The first was titled, "There is Rest for the Weary." The second was simply "Weary." This puts in broad relief a second theme in the poems of the *Southern Christian Advocate*—that of simple exhaustion and pleading to God for deliverance from a world filled with humiliation and woe. The tenor of these writings is similar to that of the Israelites in exile. Indeed, much of the apocalyptic thought in the book of Daniel (an important premillennial text) comes in response to domination by a foreign power. When the Israelites' temporal power had been crushed and they were exiled from their homeland, it was natural to expect that God would vindicate his chosen people, after an appropriate period of chastening, by intervening on a cosmic scale to disrupt human history. Likewise, we can see this sort of Israel-in-Exile hope for apocalyptic deliverance in the poetry of 1865-1866.

In an article picked up from the *North Carolina Advocate* for the June 29, 1865 issue of the *SCA*, the author begins:

The calamities which surround us and the agitations of the world, afford but little that is comfortable or profitable to the spirit of the Christian. The prevalence of vice, the demoralization of the times and the suffering and want which pervade the land, make the truly pious often rejoice that this earth is not their home.¹⁷

This sentiment of pessimistic resignation to the depravity of the world is not uncommon in the pages of the *SCA* at the close of the war. The author sees these signs as a further call for humility and repentance. "Are these calamities producing their legitimate and proper effect upon us?" he wonders. The article is followed by moralistic story about conversion late in life entitled

¹⁶ Charles W. Reed, "He Doeth All Things Well," *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York) (May 11, 1865): 150.

¹⁷ "How Do the Times Affect Us?," *Southern Christian Advocate* ns 168 (June 29, 1865): 1.

“What Will You Do In Heaven?”

The rigors of the war produced a desire in the Southern mind, to avoid the misery of the present and focus ever more fixedly on the world to come. In the Fall of 1865, the *Advocate* published the lyrics to a popular German hymn usually sung as a recessional. The hymn is entitled simply “Home,” which begins:

Oh, where shall the soul find her rest and her Home?
 . . . Does not the world offer one city of peace?
 . . . No, No, No, No! Far out of sight,
 Beyond is our Home in the kingdom of Light.

The final stanza reiterates the theme of rest after warfare:

Then courage, our souls! For the warfare is short,
 Our army is strong, and secure is our Fort;
 And when we have triumphed and each has his crown,
 At the feet of the Lord we will cast them all down.
 Joy, Joy, Joy, Joy! Safe home at last--
 The battle is over – the peril is past.¹⁸

Mixed in with the general weariness and the desire for God to break into history and deliver the faithful South there is another tendency toward wishing to *join* the dead in heaven before the eschaton. Rest will only be found in death, in other words. The October 5, 1865, issue gave the poem “The Christian Mourner’s Prospect” pride of place. While its eschatology is not as imminent as the poetry cited in the last section, this is perhaps the closest we get to a focus on the Rapture. The body never finds rest in this world, but at the end of time our souls find repose:

The hour, the hour, the parting hour,
 That takes from this dark world its power,
 And lays at once its thorn and flower,
 On the same withering bier, my soul!

. . . The hour, the hour, so pure and calm,
 That bathes the wounded soul in balm,
 And round the pale brow binds the palm
 That shuns this wintry clime, my soul!

The hour that draws o’er earth and all
 Its briars, and blooms, the mortal pall --
 How soft, how sweet that evening fall,
 Of fear, and grief, and time, my soul!¹⁹

It is interesting that in this poem only the soul of the Christian mourner ascends to heaven. There is little reference to a “glorified body.” This is consonant, however, with the general trend following the Civil War to remove death from the public eye and focus on death as a spiritual experience rather

¹⁸ “Home,” *Southern Christian Advocate* 28.17 (Macon, GA) (September 7, 1865): 1.

¹⁹ “The Christian Mourner’s Prospect,” *Southern Christian Advocate* 28.21 (Macon, GA) (October 5, 1865): 1.

than a bodily experience.²⁰

Not only rest, but reunion will be found in the afterlife with those who have gone before. “Over the River they beckon to me,/Loved ones who’ve passed to the other side; . . .” are the opening lines to the poem “Over the River” in the December 21, 1865, issue.²¹ For those who had lost loved ones in the Civil War, as nearly every family did, this is a powerful image. The desire to be reunited with the dead, especially when there was no body for the family to mourn over, is especially strong. The sentiment in this poem then, glorifies death as an escape not only *from* the harsh and corrupt world filled with mourning and weariness, but also as an escape *to* rest with loved ones.

Perhaps most interesting, though, is the fact that the escape is also from the distaste of having to kowtow to the Northerners. In heaven there would be no more fighting over the issues of slavery and secession. There would be no more humiliation. Jane T. H. Cross’s poem “Two Pictures” is emblematic of this seething resentment:

. . . . When the battle is over,
Which we did not gain,
When the red-blossomed clover
Hides the graves of our slain,
When the spirit down leaning,
Down unto the dust,
Comprehends the whole meaning
Of the cruel “ye *must*,”
When our flag is no longer,
When men make the heart sick,
Bowing low to the stronger,
With smile and with trick,
’Twere sweet – meekly turning
To God up on high,
With a true loving yearning --
With one’s country to die!²²

It seems that the reprieve from earth still retains the Southern nationalism of the Confederacy. There is a promise not only of rejoining loved ones in the afterlife, but also rejoining the Confederacy itself. It is not only soldiers who have died, but the country and all of the ideals of Southern culture that went with it. In this we see the emergence of the Lost Cause mentality.

Sanctification of the War Dead

Father Abram Ryan, a Catholic priest in Augusta, Georgia, was known as the “Poet-Priest of the Lost Cause.” He had been a chaplain in the

²⁰ I find Gary Laderman’s work on the development of American deathways and the symbolic power of the dead body to be the best treatment of this subject (Gary Laderman, *The Sacred Remains: American Attitudes Toward Death, 1799-1883* [New Haven: Yale UP, 1996]).

²¹ “Over the River,” *Southern Christian Advocate* 28.30 (Macon, GA) (December 21, 1865): 1.

²² Jane T. H. Cross, “Two Pictures,” *Southern Christian Advocate* 29.9 (Macon, GA) (March 2, 1866): 1.

Confederate army and only re-dedicated himself to the Confederacy in its defeat. His poetry exhibited a fierce loyalty to the memory of the Confederacy and its heroes and did a great deal to lay the groundwork for the structure of symbol and myth that became the Lost Cause. Charles Reagan Wilson has described him as a “poet of the dead, the Confederate dead. . . . If the plantation nurtured prewar romanticism, the graveyard nourished that of the postwar generation.”²³ Certainly, the best-known of Ryan’s poems, which exemplifies this preoccupation with death is “The Conquered Banner,” written when Ryan received news of the surrender at Appomattox in April of 1865. “The Conquered Banner” ran in the *SCA* of January 26, 1866. Oddly enough, the *SCA* had picked it up from the *New York Freedman’s Journal* even though Ryan was living and editing his own newspaper a few miles away in Augusta, where the *SCA* had until recently been published:

Furl that Banner! for ‘tis weary,
Round its staff ‘tis drooping dreary;
Furl it, fold it, it is best;
For there’s not a man to wave it,
And there’s not one left to lave it,
In the blood which heroes gave it;
And its foes now scorn and brave it;
Furl it, hide it, let it rest.

. . . . Furl it! for the hands that grasped it,
And the hearts that fondly clasped it,
Cold and dead are lying low;
And that Banner it is trailing
While around it sounds the wailing
Of its people in their woe;
For though conquered they adore it,
Love the cold dead hands that bore it,
Weep for those who fell before it,
Pardon those who trailed and tore it,
And oh! Wildly they deplore it, Now to furl and fold it so

. . . . Furl that Banner! softly, slowly;
Treat it gently – it is holy –
For it droops above the dead,
Touch it not – unfold it never,
Let it droop there *furled* forever,
For its people’s *hopes* are dead.²⁴

The banner referred to in the poem refers to the flag of the Confederacy, but more broadly it refers to the shattered hopes of the Confederacy. Notice how, in this poem, the banner itself is holy. By holding up the banner, Southern hands touched holiness as well as fabric, and now those who preserve its memory of the sacred banner are sanctified.

Ryan’s sanctification theme is echoed elsewhere. The verses of Benjamin Gough, a British poet appear in the *Advocate* of September 14, 1865, under

²³ Wilson, *Baptized in Blood*, 59.

²⁴ Abram J. Ryan, “The Conquered Banner,” *Southern Christian Advocate* (January 26, 1866).

the title “Christian Fidelity.” The Christian life is equated with battle, and a sacrifice of blood wins the crown of salvation. Revelation 2:10 is used as an epigraph to the poem—“Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of Life.” Though the poem does not specifically mention the Confederacy, its placement in the *SCA* at this time certainly leads the reader to associate its meaning to their own situation. Gough writes:

Be thou faithful unto death,
 Maintain the glorious strife,
 Battle to thy latest breath
 To win the crown of life.
 Jesus holds the glittering prize
 For all who to the end endure
 Onward, upward, tow’rd the skies,
 And victory is sure!²⁵

Faithfulness in this context is somewhat ambiguous. Is it faithfulness to Christ or to the Confederacy that wins the crown? For many that question would not make sense. The two were inextricably linked by the holiness of the cause. Therefore, those who fell on behalf of the Confederacy were in heaven, regardless of their standing with God. We can see a curious mixture of theology in these two poems. While white Protestantism in the South was still based on individual piety in the revivalist tradition of making a personal commitment to God, salvation seems to be cast as a communal enterprise.²⁶

To be sure, there was a rhetoric of glorifying the war dead in the North as well, though it is less clear that participation in the fighting resulted in a “baptism of blood” for Union soldiers. A representative piece from the *Christian Advocate and Journal* of New York was “Peace Autumn,” which ran appropriately in the autumn of 1865. The poem was originally published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. It is primarily a song of praise to God for victory and peace. But halfway through, the author writes:

Build up an altar to the Lord,
 O grateful hearts of ours!

 There let our banners droop and flow,
 The stars uprise and fall;
 Our roll of martyrs, sad and slow,
 Let sighing breezes call.

 Their names let hands of horn and tan
 And rough-shod feet applaud,
 Who died to make the slave a man,
 And link with toil reward.²⁷

Whose toil is being referenced here? The soldier’s? The slave’s? Perhaps the ambiguity is intentional, but the context of other writings in the *CAJ*

²⁵ Benjamin Gough, “Christian Fidelity,” *Southern Christian Advocate* (September 14, 1865).

²⁶ Connelly and Bellows, *God and General Longstreet*, 17-18.

²⁷ “The Peace Autumn,” *Christian Advocate and Journal* (New York) (November 9, 1865).

seems to indicate that the toil rewarded is the slave's. The martyrs died in the cause of freedom for the slave, and their own reward is to live victorious in human memory. But there seems to be no automatic linking of death in battle to eternal life.

Compare this, finally, to the poem "The Pious Dead" from the *Southern Christian Advocate* issue of the same date. Here the treatment of the war dead takes on a lot more significance. Moreover, it brings together in one place the three themes we have explored thus far—immanent eschatology, weariness with a war-torn and corrupt world, and sanctification of those who died fighting for the Confederacy:

Within the narrow grave they sleep,
Our silent dead;
Above the stars their vigils keep,
while stricken friends in anguish weep
For loved ones fled.

Mankind's most stern, relentless foe,
Hath struck them down --
Amid the dust hath laid them low,
And yet, sometimes, full well we know
They'll wear a crown.

For O, the day is coming fast,
Is nigh at hand,
When we shall hear a trumpet blast
Proclaim that Time itself hath past
From sea and land;

And in the heavens shall be seen
A wondrous sign;
And grander than the grandest dream
Shall banners wave, and helmets gleam
On brows divine.

. . . . Lo! in that hour the Crucified
Our dead restores;
Those lowly mounds, ranged side by side,
At his command shall open wide
Their prison doors

In immortality arrayed
Our friends shall be;

.....

O, that the hours would swifter flee!
For we have seen
Signs that proclaim we soon shall see
On David's throne, in majesty,
The Nazarene.²⁸

If the significance of "The Pious Dead" were not obvious enough, it is followed by an article titled "Death Beautified" by Jane T. H. Cross, the

²⁸ "The Pious Dead," *Southern Christian Advocate* (Macon, GA) (November 9, 1865).

same writer who penned “Two Pictures” quoted above. In death the failings of the dead are erased. In memory the deceased are beautified and entwined in the myth of the golden age now past. Death is not to be feared: it is a release and a reunion. Moreover, it is a rapturous gathering of the chosen ones into God’s presence where Northerners annoy no more.

Conclusion

William Glass has argued that “premillennialism, particularly of the dispensational variety, was an important stumbling block to fundamentalist recruiting efforts among Southern Protestants” after the Civil War.²⁹ To the contrary, this paper has endeavored to prove that even among Southern Methodists, whose Arminian theology of Christian perfection stands at odds with premillennial doctrine, a flirtation with the idea can be seen in the immediate post-Civil War period. Premillennial eschatology was certainly not full-fledged in the pages of the *Southern Christian Advocate*, but the mere fact of its presence is significant in demonstrating a “sideshadowing” of the fundamentalism that would grip the South so tightly in the twentieth century.

The fact that these sentiments are showing up primarily in the poetry is significant as well. For as much as the South wanted to move on, stop mourning, and begin to return to normalcy, the wounds of the war were too deep. And it is in poetry, hymns, and literature that our deepest wounds find articulation.

In large part, the premillennial impulse was a way of dealing with the psychological and theological trauma of defeat in a holy war. In the near term, the trauma was dealt with most comprehensively by the Lost Cause theology that held sway through the end of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century. The unity of the political and the religious that characterized the Civil War could be maintained most easily through such a civil religion. But as the last of the Confederate veterans began to die off, the memory of the war was less visceral and the seeds of premillennial eschatology and fundamentalism planted so long ago began to flower under new conditions.³⁰ The conservative character of Southern religion, having lost its roots in the political cause, laid them down instead in a religious cause against the forces of Northern liberalism. The new front in the war would be ideological and theological rather than military in nature.

Based on my survey of the secondary literature, there is a real need for study of Southern Protestant theology during Reconstruction. Much of the literature focuses either on the North or on the role of the Southern churches

²⁹ William R. Glass, *Strangers in Zion: Fundamentalists in the South, 1900-1950* (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2001), xvii.

³⁰ Charles Reagan Wilson has made the argument that the Lost Cause waned because it failed to make the transition to denominational status as veterans died off (Charles Reagan Wilson, *Judgment and Grace in Dixie: Southern Faiths from Faulkner to Elvis* [Athens: U of Georgia P, 1995], 21).

in the development of a civil religion rather than theological articulation within the church. One notable exception to this tendency is an essay by Kurt Berends. In "Confederate Sacrifice and the 'Redemption' of the South" he questions the whole concept of civil religion. "Where does the civil end and the religious begin?" Berends asks. He calls for historians to investigate how "the Christian faith, as molded during the conflict, contribute[d] to the 'rhetoric of white religious and cultural separatism' that continued throughout the rest of the nineteenth century."³¹ A second notable exception is W. Scott Poole, who has argued that immanent eschatology was the basis for much of the violence against African-Americans during Reconstruction.³² Granted, sources are scarce in this period thanks to the destruction of Southern printing presses and lines of communication, but it is a critical period of transformation for Southern churches.

³¹ Kurt O. Berends, "Confederate Sacrifice and the 'Redemption' of the South," in *Religion in the American South: Protestants and Others in History and Culture*, eds. Beth Barton Schweiger and Donald G. Mathews (Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2004), 115.

³² W. Scott Poole, "Confederate Apocalypse: Theology and Violence in the White Reconstruction South," in *Vale of Tears: New Essays on Religion and Reconstruction*, eds. Edward J. Blum and W. Scott Poole (Macon, GA: Mercer UP, 2005), 36-52.