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English 4310

November 30, 2011

<u>"…In View of Impending Conflict…"</u>

The Role of Southern Christianity in Sectionalism, Secession, and Southern Defeat

Throughout the antebellum period and into the Civil War, Southern Christianity played a pivotal but poorly explored role in driving the South to secession and shaping the national identity of the Confederacy. It was instrumental in creating the consensus and drive that led the South to leave the Union in an attempt to preserve their "peculiar institution" of slavery. The commonly-held beliefs of the southern church, that Christ was resurrected and that the South were a people chosen by God, formed much of the foundation of nascent Confederate nationalism. However, the South's Christian character was not enough to hold together a nation fracturing under the strain of defeat, let alone lead the Confederacy to victory and independence.

The Role of the Church in Southern Society

Churches played an influential role in Southern society and the development of the Civil War. Before the advent of conflict, the church was already the center – or, at the very least, a strong focus of gravity – for communities in both the North and South. Almost all major life events, including birth (through infant baptism), marriage, and death occurred under the roof of the church, and worship meetings and Bible studies were large forums for interaction (Miller 34). And while the church often claimed to be a "spiritual body" isolated from politics and civil concerns, ministers considered themselves to be justified in speaking on any political matter that

concerned morality and, by extension, the standards necessarily dictated by a Christian sense of morality – slavery, of course, being a foremost topic (Snay 10, 39-41).

While both North and South had strong religious connections, the South more readily identified with their culture as one inspired by faith and piety – an identification that would endure long into their transformation into the Confederacy and form a key tenet of their attempts to construct a national identity (Faust 22-23). The Bible was used as a foundational text for both the moral and legal underpinnings of Southern society, exerting a strong influence over social scientists and jurists alike (Snay 3). As larger conflicts over slavery began to enter (and slowly consume) the national narrative, arguments that the Bible supported slavery as a civil institution formed one of the leading defenses of the South against what they perceived as Northern intrusion on their society and way of life (Snay 77).

A Divided Church Before a Divided Nation

The dispute within theological and denominational circles that the Bible not only condoned slavery, but appeared to consider it a key element of social order would not linger quietly in the wings of the period's religious conversation. It quickly grew to dominate much of the theological discussion of the antebellum period. In fact, long before secession came to pass, theological debate of slavery heralded the division of all three major American denominations at the time; Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists all found the slavery question irreconcilable, and internal dissent over the slavery issue split the churches.

The Presbyterian denomination in 1837 had already been in the midst of a controversy over its own identity in the form of a theological division, the divide between the New and Old Schools of Presbyterian thought. The slavery question did not so much function as the genesis of schism in this case as it acted as the fuse for a powder keg. Mitchell Snay argues in *Gospel of*

Disunion that the Southern church lent their support to excising moderately-abolitionist New School synods from the denomination on the condition that the slavery issue would not be considered during the proceedings of the denomination's General Assembly (Snay 116-117). It is worth noting that the Presbyterian division differs from the similar Methodist and Baptism events in that, at the time, it was primarily seen by both outsiders and members of the denomination as the result of a theological dispute – it is only in the sight of history that historians and scholars recognize the role of slavery.

In comparison, the Baptist and Methodist schisms were almost entirely due to slave concerns, and both denomination members and the general public knew it. In 1844, the Methodist General Conference voted to censure Bishop James Osgood Andrew of Georgia for his ownership of slaves (obtained by inheritance), a motion apparently done against the spirit of a 1824 compromise allowing slaveholders to hold church offices in those states where slavery was allowed by civil law. The motion immediately prompted the Southern delegations to withdraw from the Conference and to found a splinter denomination about a year later (Rable 23; Snay 128-129).

In the same year, the Baptist Home Missionary Society rejected the appointment of a Georgia slaveholder to an Indian mission on the basis of his slave ownership, a position with which the Board of Foreign Missions agreed with the following year in response to an inquiry by the Alabama convention (Rable 24; Snay 135-136). Again, the dissenters formed a splinter group about a year later – the Southern Baptist Convention. Unlike the resultant Methodist and Presbyterian bodies, which eventually reunited with their parent denominations after a prolonged series of mergers and reunifications, the Southern Baptist Conference remains wholly independent.

These divisions, despite happening over 15 years before the Civil War, were seen as harbingers of things to come. Henry Clay, an elder statesman of Kentucky, wrote that "scarcely any public occurrence has happened for a long time that gave me so much real concern and pain as the menaced separation of the Church, by a line throwing all the Free States on one side, and all the Slave States on the other" (Clay 525). South Carolina's John C. Calhoun said before the Senate that "The strong ties which held each denomination together, formed a strong cord to hold the whole Union together; but as powerful as they were, they have not been able to resist the explosive effect of slavery agitation." (Calhoun 7). These schisms and the conflicts and attitudes they released in the nation's divided Christians would set the tone for the eventual division of the nation (Religion and the American Civil War 395). Snay also argues that, in holding ideological purity higher than organizational unity, clergymen gave credence to the concept of disunion and provided rhetorical strategies for their counterparts in the political world (Snay 115, 126).

The Election of Lincoln and Secession

As the march towards the Civil War continued, churches were not so visible in large monumental movements towards compromise or war, but continued to serve their respective roles as either denouncing or defending the causes of slavery and, soon, secession. A definite and sharp increase in the tempo of drums calling for the South to withdraw from the Union came with the election of Abraham Lincoln to the presidency in 1860.

The Republican Party in general and Lincoln in particular were seen as existential threats to Southern society. The Republican Party had been founded with, if not an explicit goal of the defeat of slavery, then a strong belief in favor of free men and the end of slavery in the Union that attracted many abolitionists inside and outside the church – a position that was considered completely insane and untenable in the South (Rable 29). In 1863, the *Richmond Examiner*

looked back at the beginnings of the war and described the Republican Party as being formed

"for the purpose of overthrowing the Government of the United States" (69).

The election of Lincoln to the presidency was seen as, in the words of the *Mississippi Baptist,* "the culmination of a series of aggressive acts which have been perpetuated against the South by the same party for years past" (qtd. in Snay 151). News of the election was the catalyst for a change in the nature of Southern preaching; before, ministers would discuss slavery and the ethical and moral duties of individuals, but after the threat of Lincoln became real, even the most stubbornly apolitical preachers began to consider and discuss direct political action (Religion and the American Civil War 321).

Of particular note and wide dissemination was a sermon by Benjamin Palmer, a Presbyterian minister in New Orleans, in November of 1860. He mounted a long defense of slavery and concluded, in one of the significant occurrences of its proposal from the pulpit, that only secession was available as a defense from the threat of abolitionism embodied in Abraham Lincoln's election – a position that instantly attracted the nation's attention and was widely distributed, with some 90,000 copies being circulated and reprints published in many Southern newspapers (Religion and the American Civil War 100-101; Rable 35-36). He also declared that the South had been charged with the defense of "the cause of God and religion," and explicitly compared the cause of abolitionism to atheism, saying that it "blasphemously invades the prerogatives of God" – and in doing so, he transformed the conflict from a debate over slavery into a struggle for the fate of a nation in the eyes of God (Snay 178).

The following January, after the secession of South Carolina, Presbyterian minister James Henry Thornwell – a theologian of some renown and a major proponent of slavery's acceptance by the Bible – wrote a long diatribe defending the status of slavery and the Southern states and

the threat presented to them by Lincoln's election, and concluded with a strong defense of South

Carolina's secession and encouragement for the other states considering the measure. (Rable 45)

It is not a cause and effect relationship, but three additional states seceded in a week's time, and

a total of six would leave the Union by the end of January (Texas left the first of February).

Lincoln and his presidency were not trying to do what was right, or what was necessary

to hold together a fragile union; but to the South he was, in the words of Benjamin Palmer, the

Egyptian Pharaoh refusing to allow the eleven tribes of the slave states to depart (the irony went

unnoticed) (Rable73).The tribes of Israel, after all, had perpetrated the first secession under

David; they would perform their second secession under Davis (Faust 28). In line with

Thornwell and Palmer, many members of the Southern clergy believed that they were "giving a

witness to the Christian faith by supporting the political rebellion of their states" (Shattuck 36).

Christianity, Slaveholding, and a Fragile Southern Identity

The church continued to play a pivotal role in the formation and mobilization of Southern

nationalism. Before the secession crisis, it had crafted the Southern agreement on the slavery

issue; as secession began, it continued to draw on Biblical (particularly, Old Testament)

justification for the actions of states. It provided comfort to the doubting and the grieving in the

wake of war's numerous losses and casualities, and it worked to continue to unify the Southern

spirit and sense of nationalism with a unique appeal that spoke to both the wealthy elite of the

South and more evangelical yeomen (Rable 359; Snay 216). The church would continue to

nurture Southern unity and both civilian and military morale throughout the war to come (Rable

363).

At the same time, however, the church began to be a dangerous friction to the

Confederate cause. Even as it justified slavery and equipped its practitioners to defend it, it

began to form a powerful critique against the practices of the South's specific and peculiar institution of slavery. Voices of discontent begin to question if the South's culture had treated slaves as they should biblically have be treated. They were denied literacy and, consequently, access to the word of God, and their treatment was recognized as often being harsh and at odds to scriptural standards by influential personalities within the Confederacy (Faust 76).

As the war began to tilt against the South, the belief in the sovereignty of Providence led the clergy to suggest that both acceptance by the world at large and, more importantly, victory would come when Southern slavery reflected its description in the Bible and, consequently, God's desire (Faust 77). That the slave population was wholly uneducated in the Christian religion led some to believe that God's anger had been stirred against them, and that the circumstances would not change until slavery was made right (Rable 283). It was suggested, even in the houses of state legislatures, that it would be better to abolish slavery than to continue it at the expense of slaves' spiritual well-being and the duties of ministry and evangelism (Faust 81).

Because of the pivotal role that churches had in the generation of Southern nationalism, these criticisms could not be ignored; this ultimately lead to more instability in the already shaky moral grounding of the Confederate cause in the hearts of the South (Faust 81; Snay 217-218). Some Southerners and Southern slaveholders even began to wonder, privately, if the victory of the Union over the South would free them from relying on the "curse of slavery" for their prosperity and clear their guilty consciences (Shattuck 9-10).

The Fast Day: A Microcosm

The Confederate tradition of days of fasting and humiliation (as proclaimed by an assortment of groups, primarily and most notably states and the overarching Confederate

government) is an example of the intersection of many of these trends in the Southern consciousness, particularly where the aforementioned belief of Providence's influence and responsiveness to sin and repentance was concerned. The idea that God would honor the self-humiliation and prayer of a people – and, accordingly, stop their chastisement – was an explicit hope and purpose of the Confederate fast day (Snay 165).

They also served as a powerful means of more closely uniting the secular government of the South with the sacred beliefs of Christianity that formed the foundation of the Confederate self-image (Faust 26). It formed a fusion of the church and state that was revolutionary and entirely unlike anything that had been known to the South in the antebellum period. The war also truly revealed that the church did not exist separate from politics, despite doctrine proclaiming the "spirituality of the church." (Religion and the American Civil War 319). The new forms of preaching about political and patriotic matters practiced at their finest during fast days also quickly became the most published and circulated form of religious materials in the South and reached audiences far beyond the pulpits they were spoken from (Religion and the American Civil War 323).

It was in the practice of the fast day that a potent national tradition was founded, and it was also in the fast day that the strain placed upon the Confederate national identity began to be revealed. As the war continued, fast days began to be ill-observed by a public that had lost both faith and patience in the ways of God after depressing defeats and the horrors of bread riots and civil strife, and the secular press began to almost entirely exclude religious affairs from their narrative of events whenever it was possible (Religion and the American Civil War 334). Fast days were still well observed by leaders and seen as a solution to the challenges of war, however, and many observed the inadequacy of the fast day as a solution to the nation's problems.

Providence and Defeat

The very concept of Providence that was, in many ways, a key tenet of the South's evangelicalism and national identity (and an underlying justification of fast days) would also prove to be a stumbling block for the Confederate psyche. It is difficult, in general, to invest heavily in a pursuit (here, war) when the dictates of religion tell you that the property and achievement of this world is worthless in comparison to the treasures to be earned in Heaven with the same time and effort. It is likewise difficult when those same dictates also argue that salvation and God's grace is an intimate, personal experience experienced by individuals – and not communities or nations (Shattuck 9-12).

Clergy specifically believed that victory came as a result of God rewarding those who kept his commands and faith (Shattuck 39). The casting of worldly outcomes being determined by God created separation between the application of intelligence and effort and the results that it would bring; the winning side would not be the one with the greater strength of arms or the best strategic planning, but the one upon whom God's favor shined (Rable 8, 159). The political world agreed; in multiple fast day proclamations, Jefferson Davis noted that "not unto us, but unto him, belongeth [credit for] the victory." (Richardson 135).

The outcome could also reflect victory being given to someone else – the side in a position to chasten and discipline God's people through their defeat (Faust 41). The South did not necessarily believe that God was punishing the Confederacy for their cause when defeat was handed to them, however, but they thought he was punishing them for their sins; it was believed in the South that the Confederacy was chosen not only for victory, but victory preceded by the purification of faith through the crucible of war and loss (Religion and the American Civil War 252). In the proclamation of a February 1862 fast day, Jefferson Davis said that God had

"prescribed affliction as the discipline of nations as well as individuals," and that the

Confederate "faith and perseverance must be tested, and the chastening […] will, if rightly

received, bring forth its appropriate fruit" (Richardson 218).

This also made military defeats and reversals acceptable results for the men responsible

for them – which a not-inconsequential number of scholars describe as a key reason for the

ultimate defeat of the South (Shattuck 10). A prominent example of these beliefs can be found in

the person of Thomas R. R. Cobb, a brigadier general of the Confederate army. He was known

for interrupting patriotic moments with (uninspiring) appeals to God and for the purity of the

Confederate people, and he strongly believed that the only assistance the South would receive in

prosecuting the war would be from the Lord (Shattuck 106).

Generals and the leadership of the Confederacy thus had a strong belief that God's

influence would be the deciding factor in the contest between North and South, and they spent

much of their focus and energies on appeasing God – as compared to efforts which might have

better helped them win the war (Rable 8). The *Richmond Examiner*, for example, noted in

August 1863 that the North "do not seem to rely on fasts and humiliation" when they are

defeated, but rather that "their panacea for defeat seems to be fresh levies of men, more

ironclads, and additional fifteen-inch guns" (Daniel 113).

Conclusion

The South's self-identity as a Christian nation was what drove a wedge between the

South and the North. It created both sectionalism and, after much time and festering, an

independent and angry Confederate nationalism. In the end, however, that identity wasn't strong

enough to maintain morale or lead the South to victory, independence, or even the preservation

of slavery. The belief they had in their particular, curious flavor of evangelical Christianity

equipped them well enough to build a strong sense of unity and destiny, as well as the tools to stand pulpit-for-pulpit with their Northern counterparts in the battle for moral superiority; but perpetual fasting, humiliation, and a trust in the Almighty would not be enough to win the war. With loss after loss, the hope of victory slowly left the collective mind of the Confederacy – and with that emotional surrender came the physical surrender at Appomattox over four years after the start of hostilities. Christianity would continue to play a pivotal role in the development of Southern culture long after the Civil War; but for now, it had only built up a delusion of grandeur to be torn down by a militarily superior North.

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