

“We Are a Spectacle to God”: The Phenomenon of Confederate Revivalism
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Article Abstract

Beginning in 1862 and continuing until the end of the Civil War, a massive revivalism movement swept through the Confederate ranks. Confederate revivalism was profoundly influenced by the personal nature of Southern Christianity, and as a result its origins and momentum lay primarily with the common soldiers. Although the High Command and Confederate elite played a role in fostering revivalism, the impetus for the revivals was mostly with the chaplains and the common soldiers of the army. Revivalism aroused sentiments among Confederate soldiers which resonated throughout the army in a powerful manner, uniting them across denominational and social lines. The Confederate revivals served a variety of purposes; they provided Confederates with a sense of personal consolation and certainty and served as a powerful coping mechanism for the difficulties of combat and campaigning. Revivalism in the Confederate armies occurred most strongly when things were going badly for the Confederacy and the intensity of the revivals tended to climax after defeats. The personal nature of Confederate revivalism ensured its survival even in the face of Southern discouragement and defeat.

“We Are a Spectacle to God”: The Phenomenon of Confederate Revivalism

In August of 1863, General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia was engaged in a slow retreat south after its disastrous Gettysburg campaign. Reeling from defeat in Pennsylvania and news of the surrender of Vicksburg, Lee’s weary soldiers settled into quarters at Montpelier, Virginia, home of former President James Madison, for a much-needed rest. “It was at Montpelier that the great religious revival commenced, which spread so rapidly over the entire army,” wrote John H. Worsham, a soldier in Stonewall Jackson’s division. “The interest manifested was so great that the seats were taken in the afternoon by such men as were not on duty; and when night relieved from duty those who had been drilling, etc., the men stood up in immense numbers around those who were seated.”¹

The effect of the religious meetings at Montpelier was electrifying to the troops. “The gathering, each night, of the bronzed and grizzly warriors, devoutly worshiping, was a wonderful picture in the army,” Worsham recalled, “and when some old familiar hymn was given out, those thousands of warriors would make hill and dell ring.” In Virginia campsites like Montpelier, Winchester, Drewry’s Bluff, Fredericksburg, and Orange Court House, the revivals along the Rapidan grew in intensity and fervor with each passing day, drawing large crowds of men eager to participate in the services. “[T]he converts were so numerous,” recalled Worsham, “that they were numbered not by tens and hundreds, but by thousands.”² Troops from every Confederate state were swept up in the movement, and so powerful was this revival impulse by 1863 that the Rev. J.M. Stokes, Chaplain of the Army of Northern

Virginia's Third Georgia Regiment, was moved to confidently assert, "Zion is flourishing again in this army."³

Indeed, beginning a year earlier in 1862 near Fredericksburg, Virginia and continuing until the end of the war, scenes like that in Montpelier played out across the South as a tide of Christian revivalism swept throughout the army. The phenomenon was not confined to the Eastern theater of operations; 1863 also saw simultaneous revivals in the Army of Tennessee's quarters at Dalton, Georgia, and the Army of the Trans-Mississippi in the West. Rev. J. William Jones, a prominent contemporary minister who chronicled the Great Revivals in his account *Christ In The Camp*, estimated that up to 150,000 Confederate soldiers made professions of faith, and up to one-third of all Confederate soldiers were "praying men" and Christians. Historian Stephen E. Woodworth has revised Rev. Jones' estimate somewhat to approximately 100,000 conversions, or around 10 percent of all Confederate forces.⁴

Though most general histories of the Civil War neglect the topic, the Great Revivals did occur in the Confederate armies and their effect upon the soldiers was profound. But what were these revivals, and why did they transpire? Much of the historical literature written about Confederate revivalism and Civil War religion in general concurs that religion was important to soldiers in the Confederate armies. However, historians disagree about the actual nature of religion and of revivalism during the war, and why these religious awakenings took place. Some historians like Reid Mitchell claim that Confederate religion has been given greater influence and status than it deserves due to the efforts of Lost Cause historians, who sought to portray Southern soldiers as morally and spiritually superior to Northerners after the war.⁵ Others, such as Bell Irvin Wiley and Drew Gilpin Faust, give excellent overviews of the subject of Confederate revivalism, but take for granted that Southern soldiers were an inherently religious group and that revivalism was a natural byproduct of their culture, environment, or leadership. Few scholars seem to place much emphasis on the highly personal nature of revivalism and religion among the Confederate troops.⁶ Failure to examine Confederate revivalism's fundamentally personal nature is an important oversight in any serious attempt to come to grips with the causes and character of this important spiritual movement.

Many historians suppose that Confederate soldiers were susceptible to revivalism because of the intrinsically religious nature of Southern society. For example, it is assumed that revivalism was so pervasive in the Confederate armies due to the nature of the Southern soldier; Southerners, after all, were a religious people. "Most wearers of the gray came from communities where the church was fervid, aggressive, and influential, and where revivals were common," Wiley asserts in his classic study of the common Confederate soldier.⁷ However, examination of the evidence requires reassessment of some basic assumptions about Southern soldiers and religion. If it were truly the case that Confederates were more religious at the outset of war, how then are we to explain the 150,000 conversions that occurred during wartime revivals? As Reid Mitchell properly points out, "[t]he emphasis of revivalism is conversion, which suggests that the war might have helped Christianize southern men, but also suggest that they had to be Christianized."⁸ It may be the case that many of these Confederate converts were merely unchurched before the war, and had not been exposed to or convinced by

the message of the Gospel disseminated by Southern churches. If so, this indicates that the influence of religion in antebellum Southern culture might not have been as pervasive as previously assumed. Whatever the case, the Great Revivals represent a profound influence upon the spiritual and social experiences of Confederate soldiers during the war.

Revival services in the Confederate Armies mainly consisted of preaching on Sundays and prayer meetings at any other convenient time when the weather and the demands of campaigning permitted. During services the preacher would usually stand in an open space with his congregation gathered around him to listen. Worsham provides a detailed description of a typical Confederate chapel from the revivals of 1863 in which large services were conducted:

The ground was slightly inclined; trees were cut from the adjoining woods, rolled to this spot, and arranged for seating at least two thousand people. At the lower end, a platform was raised with logs, rough boards were placed on them, and a bench was made at the far side for the seating of the preachers. In front was a pulpit or desk, made of a box. Around this platform and around the seats, stakes or poles were driven in the ground about ten or fifteen feet apart, on top of which were baskets made of iron wire, iron hoops, etc. In these baskets chunks of lightwood were placed, and at night they were lighted, throwing a red glare far beyond the confines of the place of worship.⁹

Chapels like Worsham's were less common when an army was on the move, as was often the case in the western Army of Tennessee. In those instances, services and prayer meetings were usually held at night, after the day's marching had concluded. Men made shift with seating arrangements, using logs, stumps, or the ground, and relied on the light of the moon or of campfires to illuminate the proceedings.¹⁰ As the war turned against the Confederacy, services increased in frequency; during the war's final months, most commands had daily worship services.¹¹

Inspirational hymns proved popular with the men. One preacher enthused about the sight of a musical service near Orange Court House, Virginia, describing "[t]he sea of upturned, earnest faces, and the songs swelling from hundreds of manly voices and making the forests resound..."¹² Popular hymns such as "Amazing Grace, How Sweet The Sound," "Rock of Ages," "Just As I Am, Without One Plea," and "All Hail The Power Of Jesus' Name" were sung before, during, and after the sermon. Though Southern publishers churned out numerous patriotic hymn books designed to stiffen the men's fighting spirit along with their religious zeal, the most popular hymns among Confederate soldiers did not contain overt messages of patriotism. Favorite hymns evoked sentimental memories of home and of childhood, or contained simple themes of blessed assurance and eternal salvation.¹³

After singing the men were usually called to prayer by the leaders of the worship service. Meetings devoted entirely to prayer or testimony were more common than sermons in

the Confederate armies. Since prayer meetings did not require an ordained minister or a chaplain to conduct them, soldiers were free to meet and pray with great flexibility during the rigors of campaigning. Virginia soldier Robert Stiles reported an instance when one of these impromptu prayer meetings became the target of enemy fire during the Seven Days' campaign. When Yankee shells began to land nearby, "[t]he simple-hearted worshipers felt that it would be sacrilegious for them either to open their eyes or to get up while prayer was in progress.... [T]herefore, they began to crawl about on hands and knees with eyes still closed, groping for trees, stumps, or any other available cover."¹⁴ This sort of incident was typical of the nature of revivalism in wartime, and reports of such incidents are common in soldiers' dairies and letters. While such pious dedication among the soldiers is admirable, it was also undoubtedly hazardous to their health, and most took a more practical approach to worship and prayer.

Experience meetings were also common in the Confederate armies. Experience meetings involved gatherings of soldiers who would share their spiritual testimonies and experiences. These testimonies usually consisted of a narrative of the events and factors which led to the soldier's profession of faith, followed by a description of how the soldier's life had changed as a result. Very often the testimonies were given with the intent of serving as examples to non-believers who were also in attendance at the meetings.¹⁵ These meetings were usually led by common soldiers on a spontaneous basis, and served as powerful bonding experiences for the men.

By far the most popular form of service involved the preaching of a sermon. Sermons and invitations comprised the heart of most camp worship services. When the preacher delivered his sermon to the congregation, the men were usually completely silent. After the sermon, which consisted mainly of a call to repentance and salvation, the preacher would offer an invitation to the men. "Mourners" or "seekers" as they were known came forward during the invitation to pray and ask for guidance in obtaining salvation.¹⁶ Confederate soldier Alfred Tyler Fielder described the moment of invitation as a time when the preacher "gave an opportunity [sic] for those who felt convicted for having sined [sic] and were inquiring what they must do to be saved to designate it by coming forward."¹⁷ Invitations often involved powerfully emotional scenes of spiritual awakening. Rev. Jones records the account of A.D. Cohen, chaplain of the Forty-sixth North Carolina Regiment, who described an invitation of particular intensity:

[O]h how my heart burned when men (almost every man) came up with the big tears coursing down their cheeks, and their manly bosoms heaving with sobs of true repentance, I trust, and grasped our hands. And then the sobs were audible as a man of God poured forth his fervent prayers for their conversion and reunion in heaven.¹⁸

The outpouring of emotions during the invitation had a cathartic effect upon the men. Soldiers were far from their homes and facing loneliness, hunger, illness, or desperate peril, and found an outlet for pent-up feelings in the sermons and invitations. These experiences also encouraged a sense of camaraderie with fellow soldiers facing similar tribulations and experiencing related emotions.

The Great Revivals in the Confederate armies were, while evangelical and Christian in nature, remarkably ecumenical in their execution. “The intercourse and communion of Christian brethren in the army is as intimate and precious as anywhere upon earth,” remembered Rev. Jones. “It is an interesting fact, that by this work ministers of the different denominations are brought into closer and more harmonious co-operation, thus promoting the unity and charity of the whole Church, and Greatly encouraging each other.”¹⁹ Another minister reported, “[w]e had a Presbyterian sermon, introduced by Baptist services, under the direction of a Methodist chaplain, in an Episcopal church. Was that not a beautiful solution of the vexed problem of Christian union?”²⁰ The efforts of Christian associations also helped contribute to cooperation among denominations. “It has drawn out and developed all the religious element among us,” reported a soldier of Anderson’s Georgia Brigade. “It has created a very pleasant, social feeling among the regiments, and has blended them into one congregation.”²¹ Confederates were willing to put aside sectarian differences in the interests of the armies’ spiritual needs, and their efforts proved to be remarkably harmonious.

In addition to uniting denominations in the common cause of evangelism, the Great Revivals helped unify Confederate soldiers along egalitarian lines. Free whites accustomed to their independence before the war found themselves thrust into a strict pecking order of authority which demanded a level of compliance that many found distasteful. Religion and revivalism helped ease this transition from civilian freedom to military submission. As Drew Gilpin Faust writes, “The Christian soldier would be an efficient soldier because he would not be afraid to die; he would be obedient and well disciplined because he would understand the divine origin of earthly duty.”²²] As one soldier in the Army of Northern Virginia remembered, worship occurred “sometimes in the quarters occupied by a mess of privates—and all unite—without respect to rank or former denominational associations—in the worship of God.”²³ There is an ironic parallel between Confederate revivalism and slave Christianity, in that both institutions served to ease the difficulties of a subservient group faced with strenuous hierarchical demands upon personal autonomy. However, unlike slave Christianity, which helped slaves cope with and resist institutionalized oppression and servitude, Confederate revivalism urged conformity and ultimately supported a cause whose aim was to preserve the status quo of a strict social hierarchy based on race.

Historians credit the religious press and Southern churches with nurturing revivalism in the Confederate armies, and rightly so. Despite shortages in materials and manpower, an astonishing amount of religious literature intended for distribution in the armies was produced. Much of the literature was printed by the Evangelical Tract Society of Petersburg, Virginia, supported by the financial contributions of churches and denominations throughout the South. From 1861 to 1865, the Evangelical Tract Society printed an estimated 50 million pages of pocket-sized evangelical tracts. In addition, the Rev. W.J.W. Crowder published 5 million pages of tracts in North Carolina, and the General Association of the Baptist Churches in Virginia printed over 6 million pages. A number of Southern Bible societies also provided hundreds of thousands of Bibles to the men.²⁴ Colporteurs, volunteers who delivered religious literature to soldiers, played an important role in fostering revivalist sentiments among the

camps through their efforts to circulate tracts, prayer books, hymnals and Testaments. Distribution of religious literature by colporteurs reached its peak in 1863, and the outbreak of the Great Revivals began around the same time, partly due to these labors.²⁵ One reason for the immense popularity of religious literature in the armies is the soldiers' desperation for reading material to pass the time. Soldiers were hungry for anything to read, and religious tracts provided both entertainment as well as spiritual comfort.²⁶

Though church leadership and the religious press played an important role, the Confederate revivals would have been of limited scope but for the effort and enthusiasm of common soldiers in promoting the movement. Like any popular or religious movement, the leaders of the revivalism movement could only point the way; without widespread support among the soldiers, few revivals would have occurred. For example, Rev. Jones tells of two soldiers from the Tenth Alabama Regiment who sparked a revival among their comrades due to the strength of their own personal convictions. "They go over every evening and preach the Gospel, comforting and encouraging Christians and warning sinners. A revival has sprung up under their labors."²⁷ Small, informal meetings such as these took place with little or no prompting from the Confederate leadership, and sometimes consisted of as few as six or eight men. Occasionally Confederate soldiers desired to hold prayer meetings, but could find no chaplain or missionary to lead them; in those cases, the soldiers often took it upon themselves to conduct the services as best as they could.²⁸ Robert Stiles recalled that "the preacher was sometimes a distinguished divine from Richmond, sometimes one of the army chaplains, sometimes a private soldier from the ranks, but whoever he might be, he preached the gospel and the gospel only."²⁹

Confederate revivalism was profoundly influenced by the personal nature of Southern Christianity, and as a result its origins and momentum lay primarily with the common soldiers. Unlike some elements of Confederate nationalism, revivalism was not a product of the elite or a tool for manipulation of the masses. It was, by most estimates, entirely sincere. While it is true that revivalism was encouraged by Southern churches and then by the Confederate High Command itself, the impetus for the revivals was mostly with the chaplains and the common soldiers of the army. The chaplains and the soldiers were mainly concerned with simple issues of personal salvation and repentance, and the message of the revivals remained sharply focused on these issues.³⁰ The revivalism impulse would arise in response to the questions or concerns of individual soldiers who sought the comfort and guidance of their comrades. As one army minister reported, "[a]ll the recent converts meet twice a day by themselves, and pray and talk over their wants and necessities to each other, and every one who attends must lead in prayer. It is refreshing to see so many young converts, all in their freshness and vigor, serving the Lord and full of redeeming love."³¹

The most effective sermons, and consequently the most common, were brief, straightforward messages of personal salvation. Sermons were, "though quite elementary" writes historian Herman Norton, "usually clear, logical, and earnest," sometimes for the sake of clarity, or sometimes due to the eloquence and educational limits of the preacher.³² Woodworth writes that soldiers believed in a very personal type of spiritual salvation, in which

“each person had to avail himself individually of God’s plan of salvation, which was fixed by God and the eternal.”³³ Simply following the forms of religion was insufficient to secure salvation. “[M]ere formalities are too often substituted in place of real heartfelt repentance for sins,” remembered Reuben A. Pierson of the Ninth Louisiana Regiment.³⁴ For soldiers like Peirson, religious rituals and traditions were insufficient to provide the necessary spiritual assurance of salvation they sought so intently.

Tracts and printed sermons also bear out the fact that revivals were evangelical and personal in nature, and primarily emphasized issues of sin and salvation. Apparently the demand for these salvation tracts was voracious, as Rev. A.E. Dickinson remembered in an incident at a Virginia camp.

I announced at one of the meetings that there was an assortment of tracts in the chaplain’s tent. In a few moments after I found numbers crowding around the tent and helping themselves. Each man looked over the packages and selected such as wanted, and consequently every tract which explained the plan of salvation, or which treated of Christ, was taken, and the others left.³⁵

Examples of the most popular literature of salvation include such materials as “The Great Question Answered”, “Come to Jesus”, and “Prepare to Meet Thy God”. Rev. Dickinson remarked that “[n]o one seemed to feel that he had time to read of anything else except the way to be saved.”³⁶

In an army that prided itself on its Christian nature, a number of notable officers were converted during the war. The eminent Confederate minister Dr. Charles Todd Quintard of Tennessee described his interview with General Braxton Bragg, commander of the Army of Tennessee, in which the general was converted. “I was very much frightened,” Quintard confessed, thinking of Bragg’s reputation for possessing a prickly temperament. “When I looked up after a while I saw tears in the General’s eyes and took courage to ask him to be confirmed. At last he came to me, took both my hands in his and said: ‘I have been waiting for twenty years to have some one say this to me, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart.’”³⁷ Bragg’s conversion was no isolated incident among the Confederate High Command. Other notable examples of wartime converts to Christianity included Generals Ewell, R.H. Anderson, Rodes, Pender, Paxton, Hood, Hardee and Joseph E. Johnston, as well as President Jefferson Davis.³⁸ A number of the South’s most prominent officers, including Robert E. Lee, Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, J.E.B. Stuart and others, were already enthusiastic adherents to the Christian faith who actively encouraged religion and revivalism among their troops.³⁹

However, not every Confederate officer was sympathetic to the cause of revivalism. There was resistance to revivalism among a minority of Southern officers who resented the revivals’ intrusions into their efforts to conduct military operations. In fact, some commanders made a point of scheduling drill, inspections, and dress parades on Sundays in order to disrupt the bothersome worship services. This naturally led to instances of conflict between the

chaplaincy and the commanders. Other officers believed that emphasizing fear of divine punishment was detrimental to men in combat, and made a point of exercising their men instead of letting them worship. On various occasions throughout the war Generals Lee, Bragg, Forrest and Hood were subjected to disgruntled clergymen's grievances about the improper observation of the Sabbath by the certain members of the Confederate officer corps.⁴⁰

Though some officers remained dubious about revivalism, after observing the effects of the Great Revivals upon the morale of their men many concluded that religion made for better, more disciplined and contented soldiers and therefore allowed the revivals to spread throughout the ranks.⁴¹ The actual validity of these officers' conclusions is debatable. In spite of the revivalists' efforts to bolster morale and reinforce the character of the men, desertion remained a significant problem for the Confederate armies when the war turned against the South. As Faust points out, the revivals could not have succeeded completely in turning the Confederate armies into disciplined and obedient organizations, "for complaints about insubordination continued throughout the war and even increased as the desertion rate rose dramatically in 1864 and 1865."⁴² By 1865 as many as 200,000 of the Confederacy's 360,000 soldiers were absent without permission, many of these due to desertion.⁴³ Rev. Basil Manly, in his tract "The Young Deserter," described desertion and spiritual backsliding as inseparable sins, and repentance as the only solution for either offense. "Your influence is most decidedly felt against the cause of Christ, which once you professed to honor," he warned deserters both spiritual and temporal. "You are not only ranked with the enemy; but you are so ranked by your own deliberate preference.... There is pardon for Deserters, who repent and return."⁴⁴ Certainly religion helped ease the pressures of army life for many soldiers and may have discouraged desertion in some cases. But the Great Revivals did not prove to be the panacea for morale problems amongst the ranks as some Confederate leaders hoped, and desertions increased as the war progressed.

In addition to an unyielding minority of doubtful officers, a number of common Confederate soldiers were unmoved by the revivals in the armies. Resistance to the message of the Great Revivals manifested itself most commonly in the perpetuation of vice among the ranks. "It was not uncommon, even during our most powerful revivals," admitted Rev. Jones, "to see a party playing cards not far from where the preacher stood, and to hear the profane oath or the vulgar jest as you came from the place of prayer, and visitors would be, naturally, greatly shocked at this state of things."⁴⁵ Profanity, drinking and gambling were viewed by many Confederates as the curse of the armies and the divine cause of Southern setbacks; these sins remained popular targets of preachers and religious writers throughout the war. "No wonder that disasters have befallen our arms, when in defiance of the mandates of heaven and the melting appeals of suffering humanity, reeling inebriates, are appointed to lead our brave cohorts to the charge," one Confederate temperance tract bewailed.⁴⁶ "Beware of gaming even for amusement," warned a tract aimed at curbing the spread of gambling among Confederates. "It nourishes a habit that may prove the wreck of property, the bane of virtue, the blight of happiness, the ruin of the soul, and the curse of eternity."⁴⁷ Like desertion and morale problems, these vices were never eliminated from the armies, and may even have increased as the war progressed. As Wiley notes, "with brief interruptions occasioned by religious revivals

[vices] increased with the passing of time until they affected such great numbers as to support a soldier's advice to his wife: 'dont [sic] never come here as long as you can ceep [sic] away for you will smell hell here.'"⁴⁸

Many Southerners did not believe that God would permit the Confederacy to triumph unless her people humbled themselves, repented of their sins, and relied upon divine providence for both personal and national salvation.⁴⁹ As it became clear the South was not winning the war, the emphasis of revivalists' messages began to shift from primarily issues of personal salvation and repentance to larger concerns about national sin and deliverance. The message that personal sin affected national fortune was not a new one, but as national fortunes suffered, the calls for individual repentance became louder. In 1864, revivalist Rev. Joseph C. Stiles called upon the Confederate rank and file to repent not just for personal salvation, but for the sake of national victory:

Tell me! for the victory of our arms, the overthrow of our enemies, our national independence, our personal liberties; for the cessation amongst us of all the horrors of intestine war; for the dispensation through all our borders of the blessings of a heaven-sent peace; and better, far better than all, for the promotion upon earth of human rectitude and divine salvation -- will you not, my countrymen, will you not put away all your profanities, all your dishonesties, all your intemperance, all your Sabbath breaking, all your straggling, all your desertion? Will you not give heed to the earnest voice of your chaplains, and study the holy word of God?⁵⁰

Stiles was not alone in perpetuating this message. Confederates from the lowliest private to the highest general, as well as chaplains, clergy, and civilians, began to see their personal spirituality as an essential component of national salvation. Consequently a sense of defiant faith in divine providence set in, and military setbacks were dismissed as inconsequential, or even as beneficial to the spiritual health of the Confederacy. "What cared they for the failure of mere human efforts, when they were persuaded that through such failures God was leading us to ultimate victory?" wondered George Cary Eggleston. "Disaster seemed only to strengthen the faith of many. They saw in it a needed lesson in humility, and an additional reason for believing that God meant to bring about victory by his own and not by human strength," he remembered of this unusual defiance. "All this, nevertheless, and our diligent cultivation of an unreasonable hopefulness served in no sensible degree to raise our spirits."⁵¹

Revivalism in the Confederate armies occurred most strongly when things were going badly for the Confederacy, and the intensity of the revivals tended to climax after defeats. The confidence bred by the Confederacy's early successes was not at first conducive to reliance upon divine providence; defeat, on the other hand, was a different story entirely. The revivalism phenomenon reached its peak in the fall and winter of 1863, almost immediately after major Confederate failures at Vicksburg, Gettysburg, and Helena, Arkansas.⁵² Following these disastrous defeats, the myth of Southern invincibility was called into question

and revivalists began to see military setbacks as the unmistakable work of divine providence. Accordingly, some Confederates began to view failure on the battlefield as God's collective judgment upon the nation for individual sins of its citizens.

With not only individual salvation but national destiny at stake, personal revival became even more urgent to Confederates in the final years of the war. Confederate preachers such as Rev. Stiles continued to personalize the need for national repentance in stark terms: "All these our sins, our personal, national sins, God in person, by this war, is charging home upon us. And see! if war is God's arraignment of a people for their sin—then Southern sin is Federal power."⁵³ Victory was attainable, but only if sinners examined themselves and sought forgiveness and salvation. "If we are true to Him, and true to ourselves, a glorious future is before us," insisted Rev. J.H. Thornwell. "We occupy a sublime position. The eyes of the world are upon us; we are a spectacle to God, to angels, and to men. Can our hearts grow faint, or our hands feeble, in a cause like this?"⁵⁴

Though the Great Revivals may not have succeeded in driving sin completely from the armies or bringing every sinner to repentance, revivals and religion served as a form of spiritual and emotional comfort that helped many Confederate soldiers cope with the stress of army life. For a large number of Confederates the war represented a trauma. Young men who had never ventured beyond their town or county found themselves hundreds of miles from home, faced with all sorts of hardship and difficulty. The emotional strain of homesickness, the scourge of disease, and the omnipresent fear of death or catastrophic injury in battle all served to prey upon hearts and hopes. Revivals provided both an outlet for the men's fears and an answer to their worries. "Not a few [soldiers] have received their first religious impressions on the battlefield," admitted Rev. Dickinson after conducting an extended revival near Orange Court House, Virginia. "I think eight or ten spoke of having been convicted at the Chancellorsville fight, while an interesting young man assured us that during the battle of Seven Pines, while his comrades were falling around him, he promised the Lord that he would love and serve him," he reported. "[F]rom that day to this he has been trying to make good his vow."⁵⁵

Combat forced soldiers to confront their mortality, and faced with the possibility of stepping into eternity on any given day, Confederates were increasingly receptive to the revivalists' call. "Without a doubt, in hundreds of instances, the shock of battle has been sanctified to the saving of souls," said Rev. Dickinson.⁵⁶ Rev. Jones likewise chronicled reports of intensified revivalism after great battles. "Strange as it may appear to some," observed Jones, recording an anonymous post chaplain's experience, "scores of men are converted immediately after great battles. This has become so common that I as confidently look for the arrival of such patients as I do for the wounded.... Here God covered their heads, and their preservation was a manifestation of His power and goodness that humbled their souls."⁵⁷

The Great Revivals helped Confederate soldiers face death with a sense of spiritual confidence. In 1864 a private in the Thirty-third Mississippi Regiment wrote that three of his comrades, including his best friend, had been killed near Atlanta. He mourned the loss of his

friend, “but when I took the last look at him I felt very happy to think that he had gone to a better world.”⁵⁸ For many Southern soldiers, death was a constant presence in their lives. The Civil War brought carnage to both Northerner and Southerner on a scale unprecedented even by modern standards. Naturally, soldiers were keenly aware of the fragility of life and the uncertainty of what came after death. Those who believed the message of the revivals were certain of eternal salvation for the faithful and eternal damnation for the faithless.⁵⁹

The fear of death proved to be a powerful agent for revivalism among Confederate soldiers. Soldiers surrounded by bloodshed were forced to confront mortality, and therefore to many of them the most logical course of action was to prepare their souls for eternity. “In this aspect, the recent battles have done more to make converts than all the homilies and exhortations ever uttered from the pulpit,” wrote Rev. Dickinson. “A man who has stood upon the threshold of eternity while in the din and carnage of the fight, has listened to eloquence more fiery and impressive than ever came from mortal lips.”⁶⁰ Scenes of death and destruction were commonplace; indeed, so common was death and the fear of dying that some Confederates believed they could intuitively tell when death was about to claim them. Private Sam Watkins of the First Tennessee Regiment recalled, “[t]he soldier may at one moment be in good spirits, laughing and talking. The wing of the death angel touches him. He knows that his time has come. It is but a question of time with him then. He knows that his days are numbered.” So certain was a soldier’s fate at this point, claimed Watkins, that he could only resign himself to the fact that “God has numbered the hairs on our heads, and not a sparrow falls without His knowledge.”⁶¹

The Great Revivals provided an opportunity for many thousands of men eager to settle their spiritual accounts with God to secure the blessings of heaven. “We shed a tear for the dead. They are buried and forgotten,” mourned Watkins, remembering comrades lost at the 1864 Battle of Franklin, Tennessee.

We meet no more on earth. But up yonder, beyond the sunset and the night, away beyond the clouds and tempest, away beyond the stars that ever twinkle and shine in the blue vault above us, away yonder by the great white throne, and by the river of life, where the Almighty and Eternal God sits, surrounded by the angels and arch-angels and the redeemed of earth, we will meet again...⁶²

Not only would death bring the prospect of lasting communion with God, but also the hope of a joyous reunion with departed friends and loved ones. For men facing loneliness and bereavement from their families as well as the possibility of death from battle or disease, the message of eternal life after physical death was a powerful form of consolation.

George Cary Eggleston recounted an extreme form of devotion among some Confederate soldiers who clung to their faith for assurance in the face of certain slaughter. “The only question with each was when his time was to come, and a sort of gloomy fatalism took possession of many minds,” he recalled. “Believing that they must be killed sooner or

later, and that the hour and the manner of their deaths were unalterably fixed, many became singularly reckless, and exposed themselves with the utmost carelessness to all sorts of unnecessary dangers.”⁶³ This fatalistic approach to matters of life and death may seem morbid by today’s standards, but many Confederates saw death as an ordinary consequence of the terrible war being waged and accepted their circumstances as God’s divine plan. “The life we now live is not the only life; what we call death is not an eternal sleep; the soldier’s grave is not an everlasting prison, but the gateway to an endless life beyond,” General John B. Gordon reflected. “[A]nd this belief in immortality should be cultivated in armies, because of the potent influence it must exert in developing the best characteristics of the soldier.”⁶⁴

Revivalism not only helped Confederates cope with the ever-present fear of death, but also helped them face the actual moment of their passing with courage. Soon after his conversion in one of the Virginia revivals, a Confederate soldier was mortally wounded in the Bloody Angle at the Battle of Spottsylvania. Knowing his end was imminent, he died with the words, “Jesus says, ‘Him that cometh unto me I will in no wise cast out.’ I have gone to Him, and I do not think that He will deceive me. I believe that He will be true to His word.”⁶⁵ Another dying Confederate, when asked why he did not fear his impending fate, answered, “Because I am going home to heaven, through Christ.”⁶⁶ Still another soldier who fell at Gaines’ Mill reportedly died with the utterance, “Tell my parents I die happy... Jesus is with me, and will give me all the help I need.”⁶⁷

Facing death with bravery was an issue of critical importance to Confederate soldiers. As Drew Gilpin Faust explains, according to the nineteenth century idea of a Good Death how one died “epitomized a life already led and predicted the quality of the life everlasting.” As a result “[t]he *hans mori*, the hour of death, had, therefore, to be witnessed, scrutinized, interpreted, narrated—not to mention carefully prepared for by any sinner seeking to demonstrate worthiness for salvation.”⁶⁸ The best death was a peaceful death, or failing that, peaceful acceptance of God’s divine plan in death. For many Southern soldiers how one died became as important as how one lived, and was often seen as a portent of one’s eternal fate. Assurance of eternal salvation after death, revivalism’s central message, gave them feelings of control and confidence over the uncertainty of the afterlife.

The preoccupation with a Good Death and dying as a brave Christian soldier became an integral part of the Confederate revival experience, and the line between patriotism and piety often became blurred.⁶⁹ One interesting effect of Confederate soldiers’ anxiety about death is the emergence of a Just Cause heterodoxy. Under this rationale, a soldier who died for the Confederacy could achieve spiritual salvation through his mortal sacrifice.⁷⁰ For example, while delivering a sermon to Confederate troops a Tennessee preacher named McClusky claimed “that the soldier fighting for a Just Cause, though wicked, if killed in battle would be saved—that he would be one of those spoken of in the scriptures whose work would be burned up but he should be saved as by fire.”⁷¹ Alfred Tyler Fielder, the diarist-soldier who recorded this leap of theological reasoning, was dubious of Rev. McClusky’s assertions. “I do not believe a word of it. God is of too pure eyes to behold sin with the least degree of allowance,” he concluded.⁷² Even though the majority of Southern Christians did not adhere to Rev.

McClusky's way of thinking, the idea that the war was a holy struggle and casualties were martyrs to the Confederacy persisted in many circles. As one soldier of the Eighth Georgia Regiment who died at Gettysburg put it, "if my heart ever sincerely desired [sic] any thing on earth...it certainly is, to be useful to my Country....I will sacrifice my life upon the alter [sic] of my country."⁷³

Other Confederates were less sanguine when faced with wholesale death and destruction, even in the cause of Southern independence, but somehow managed to carry on. "There was no longer any room for hope except in a superstitious belief that Providence would in some way interfere in our behalf, and to that very many betook themselves for comfort," Eggleston recalled. Yet revivalism and religion helped many to face death, and stiffened the resolve of some Confederates to carry on the fight. "This shifting upon a supernatural power the task we had failed to accomplish by human means rapidly bred many less worthy superstitions among the troops," Eggleston bleakly wrote of the state of the Confederate armies' spirits as the war ground on into its final act. "The general despondency, which amounted almost to despair, doubtless helped to bring about this result, and the great religious 'revival' contributed to it in no small degree. I think hardly any man in that army entertained a thought of coming out of the struggle alive." The Confederate armies managed to continue the fight despite death and hardship due in significant measure to the impact of revivalism. "Under such circumstances men do not regard death," Eggleston recalled, "and even the failure of any effort they were called upon to make wrought no demoralization among troops who had persuaded themselves that the Almighty held victory in store for them, and would give it them in due time."⁷⁴

The revivalists continued to hold out hope that their spiritual efforts would stamp out vice in the ranks and consequently incur divine favor upon the South's destiny. If only the armies would put aside vice in favor of the principles being preached by the revivalists, they reasoned, then all the ills which beset Southern ranks would disappear:

Every soldier would be a Christian gentleman. None by intoxication or vulgar conduct would put himself on a par with the brute. Should war arise, what an army of heroes, of conscientious, high-principled Christian soldiers to defend our country! Mutiny, desertion, cowardice, drunkenness, and sleeping on duty, etc., would find no place.⁷⁵

Revivalism continued to surge through the final year of the war, and one Army of Tennessee missionary reported that "weakness and vice seem restrained."⁷⁶ However, vice apparently did not include the institution of slavery to most Confederates. The idea that slavery was a national sin and that Southern defeat represented a form of divine judgment never seemed to enter the Confederate armies' consciousness in any significant degree during the war. "The soldiers themselves scarcely mentioned slavery at all," notes Woodworth. "Slavery lay behind those whom the soldiers frequently denounced as 'abolitionists,' but when speaking of their own cause, they preferred to use terms such as 'liberty' and independence."⁷⁷

After the war had been lost, unrepentant Confederates like John S. Wise refused to concede defeat to the North on the issue of slavery and chose to view abolition as God's plan made manifest:

All that I am saying to you now is, you who fought slavery, as well as you who have heard it described in the passionate denunciations following its death, realize that the name of slave-owner did not always, or even in the majority of cases, imply that the slave-owner was one whit less conscientious, one whit less humane, one whit less religious, or one whit less entitled to man's respect or God's love, than you, who, because, perhaps, you were never slave-owners, delight to picture them as something inferior to your precious selves. After all, it was not you, but God that abolished slavery. You were his mere instruments to do his work.⁷⁸

Wise's stubborn insistence that Southern defeat was the result of God's design was symptomatic of a larger Confederate desire to eke out a moral victory after earthly victory became unattainable. This faith in God's providence fostered through the Great Revivals helped Confederates face repudiation of their way of life. "Religious faith, honed by suffering in the wartime experience, remained as a symbol of the triumph that the South had won," writes historian Gardiner H. Shattuck, and "by 1865 moral victory looked better than no victory at all . . ."⁷⁹

Still, some Confederates could not imagine that a just God would allow the righteous Confederacy to suffer ultimate defeat, and went to amazing lengths to explain various setbacks. As Rev. Stiles preached:

What! Do you suppose, for one instant, that our God, who rules the world to save it, and fills the scriptures with superlative assurances of his fatherly protection of the righteous, would sacrifice both his great principle and his great object by suffering the only nation that abets his great cause to be overthrown by those who oppose it?⁸⁰

Rev. Stiles was not alone in his belief that God would grant the Confederacy final victory after permitting it to experience His divine chastening. "They cannot believe it," wrote Thomas Connolly of Confederate reaction to the fall of Richmond in 1865. "Heaven will interfere. It never can be!"⁸¹ Some Confederates chose to ignore reality, which permitted them to rationalize defeat after defeat as part of God's plan for the South, and to cling to hope in an increasingly hopeless situation. Only at the end, when all hope was lost, were these intractable partisans forced to come to terms with Confederate failure. Believing as they did in the intervention of God in human affairs, many were still able to justify their actions and their nation's defeat as simply an expression of God's will.⁸²

Lieutenant Colonel Frank Montgomery of Mississippi was perhaps more down-to-earth when assessing the role of the divine in Confederate defeat. "It is a curious thing in the history

of Christian nations when at war with each other,” he mused after the war, “that devout men and women on either side invoke with zeal and faith the aid of Deity, and when victory comes to one, Te Deums are sung, while to the other sorrow and humiliation and often oppression are brought.” Though disheartened and weary of war like many of his fellow Southerners, Montgomery still sought God’s purpose in Confederate submission and hoped for some good to come of the suffering he and his comrades had endured. “I believe it to be true that out of all great wars good has come to the common cause of humanity, for ‘He maketh even the wrath of man to praise Him.’”⁸³

Confederate revivalism certainly made the wrath of man to praise God. What began as a localized religious movement among ordinary soldiers became a sweeping spiritual awakening of remarkable scope and intensity. In addition to providing answers to life’s difficult questions, revivalism united Confederates in unique and powerful ways. Facing mutual adversity, Confederates took comfort in the feelings of common cause and brotherhood with their comrades derived from shared religious experiences. Religion and revivals also helped Southerners deal with the difficulties of adjusting to a life of hardship and discipline in the ranks. Confederate soldiers learned through religion that the duty of a Christian was to serve God and obey his leaders, a lesson which many Confederate officers believed to be beneficial to the cause of discipline. Though some officers and men resisted through vice or desertion, the message of revivalism and religion helped bring comfort and strength of conviction to many others.

Revivalism aroused sentiments among Confederate soldiers which resonated throughout the army in a powerful manner. Death was a constant presence in the armies, and the revivals provided Confederates with a sense of personal consolation and certainty about their eternal fate. As victory slipped from the Confederacy’s grasp, issues of personal salvation took on a sense of national importance due to the belief that God would favor the South on the battlefield if her sons would repent of their wicked ways and come to know Christ. When it became apparent that even this course of action was not sufficient to secure divine intervention for the Confederacy, many Southerners were forced to reconcile their defeat with their perception of God’s divine plan. Even in defeat many Southerners could still take comfort in claiming moral victory because of the remarkable revivals in the armies. A bitter Reconstruction was yet to come, but through the Great Revivals many Confederates became equipped to face the hardships of life after Southern submission.

Southern Christian leaders seized the evangelistic opportunity presented by the outbreak of revivalism in the armies and put aside denominational differences for the sake of winning souls. Religious presses flooded the army camps with spiritual literature covering every imaginable aspect of salvation and virtuous living. Chaplains, preachers, and colporteurs worked tirelessly to spread the message of the Gospel among the ranks. But the Confederate revivals would not have succeeded on so vast a scale as they did without the passionate participation of common soldiers eager to hear the simple messages of repentance and redemption that were central to the Confederate revival phenomenon. At its heart, Confederate revivalism was a movement based upon the most fundamental issues touching the lives of

individual soldiers; questions of providence, assurance, and redemption are as valid today as they were in the 1860s. The highly personal nature of these enduring questions and the straightforward, reassuring answers provided through the Great Revivals helps explain the magnitude of revivalism's important influence upon the common soldiers who fought and died for the Confederate cause.

Notes

1. John H. Worsham, *One Of Jackson's Foot Cavalry* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1912), 182.
2. Worsham, 182.
3. J. William Jones, *Christ in the Camp: or, Religion in the Confederate Army* (Richmond, Va.: The Martin & Hoyt Co., 1904; reprint, Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1986), 340 (page references are to reprint edition).
4. Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr. *A Shield and Hiding Place: The Religious Life of the Civil War Armies* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1987), 96; Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Life of Johnny Reb: The Common Soldier of the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1943; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2004) , 184 (page references are to reprint edition); Jones, 390; Stephen E. Woodworth, *While God Is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence, Kans.: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 246.
5. Reid Mitchell, "Christian Soldiers?: Perfecting the Confederacy," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 297-309.
6. Drew Gilpin Faust, "Christian Soldiers: The Meaning of Revivalism in the Confederate Army," in *The Civil War Soldier*, ed. Michael Barton and Larry M. Logue (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 327-353.
7. Wiley, 183.
8. Mitchell, 299.
9. Worsham, 181-182.
10. Wiley, 184.
11. Herman Norton, *Rebel Religion: The Story of Confederate Chaplains* (St. Louis: The Bethany Press, 1961), 69.
12. Jones, 333.
13. Wiley, 185-186.
14. Robert Stiles, *Four Years Under Marse Robert* (New York: The Neale Publishing Co., 1903), 114.
15. Woodworth, 212.
16. *Ibid.*, 210-212
17. Woodworth, 211, quoting Alfred Tyler Fielder, *The Civil War Diaries of Capt. Alfred Tyler Fielder, 12th Tennessee Infantry Regiment, Company B, 1861-1865*, ed. Ann York Franklin (Louisville, Ky: Privately printed, 1996), 120-121.
18. Jones, 279.
19. *Ibid.*, 235.

20. Ibid., 223.
21. Ibid., 338.
22. Faust, "Christian Soldiers," 334.
23. Wiley, 180, quoting *Montgomery Daily Mail*, April 10, 1863.
24. Woodworth, 165.
25. Wiley, 180.
26. Faust, 329.
27. Jones, 328.
28. Wiley, 184.
29. Robert Stiles, 140.
30. Norton, 69-71.
31. Jones, 343.
32. Norton, 71.
33. Woodworth, 56.
34. Thomas W. Cutrer and T. Michael Parrish, ed., *Brothers in Gray: The Civil War Letters of the Peirson Family* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 230.
35. Jones, 327.
36. Ibid.
37. Charles Todd Quintard, *Doctor Quintard, Chaplain C.S.A. and Second Bishop of Tennessee, The Memoir and Civil War Diary of Charles Todd Quintard*, ed. Sam Davis Elliott (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 70.
38. Wiley, 182.
39. Jones, 42.
40. Norton, 69-70.
41. Wiley, 191
42. Faust, "Christian Soldiers," 337.
43. Wiley, 145.
44. Basil Manly, Jr., 1861-1865. "The Young Deserter," Documenting the American South (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1998), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/deserter/deserter.html>, 5-6.
45. Jones, 391-392.
46. A Physician, 1861-1865. "Liquor and Lincoln," Documenting the American South (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/impls/physician/physician.html>, 3.
47. Jeremiah Bell Jeter, 1861-1865. "The Evils of Gaming. A Letter to a Friend in the Army," Documenting the American South (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1998), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/impls/jeter/jeter.html>, 7.
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49. Wiley, 183-184.

50. Joseph Clay Stiles, 1864. "Capt. Thomas E. King; Or, A Word To The Army And The Country," Documenting the American South (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/imls/stiles/stiles.html>, 51-53.
51. George Cary Eggleston, *A Rebel's Recollections* (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1875), 241.
52. Shattuck, 99-102; Faust, "Christian Soldiers," 338-339; Woodworth, 243-246; Wiley 184.
53. Stiles, "Capt. Thomas E. King; Or, A Word To The Army And The Country," 51.
54. J.H. Thornwell, 1862. "Our Danger And Our Duty," Documenting the American South (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/thornwell/thornwel.html>, 14.
55. Jones, 328.
56. Ibid.
57. Ibid., 281.
58. James M. McPherson, *For Cause And Comrades: Why Men Fought In The Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 76, quoting John McGrath to Lavinia McGrath, June 12, 1864, McGrath Papers, Hall Memorial Library, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge.
59. Woodworth, 41.
60. Jones, 276.
61. Sam Watkins, *Company Aytch, Or, A Side Show Of The Big Show And Other Sketches*, ed. M. Thomas Inge (New York: Plume, 1999), 82.
62. Watkins, 204.
63. Eggleston, 240-241.
64. John Brown Gordon, 1904. *Reminiscences of the Civil War, Documenting the American South* (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/gordon/gordon.html>, 223.
65. Jones, 402; William W. Bennett, *A Narrative of the Great Revival in the Southern Armies during the Late Civil War Between the States of the federal Union* (Philadelphia: Claxton, Remsen and Haffelfinger, 1877), 142.
66. Jones, 406.
67. Ibid., 401.
68. Drew Gilpin Faust, "The Civil War Soldier and the Art of Dying," in *The Civil War Soldier*, ed. Michael Barton and Larry M. Logue (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 489.
69. Ibid., 498-499.
70. Woodworth, 142.
71. Fielder, 8, quoted in Woodworth, 142.
72. Ibid.
73. James M. McPherson, "On the Altar of My Country," in *The Civil War Soldier*, ed. Michael Barton and Larry M. Logue (New York: New York University Press, 2002), 460, quoting H. Christopher Kendrick to father and sister, June 2, 1863, Kendrick Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.
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76. Bennett, 359-360.
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78. John Sergeant Wise, 1899. The End Of An Era. Documenting the American South (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1998), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/wise/wise.html>, 37.
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82. James W. Silver, *Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda* (Gloucester, Ma.: Peter Smith, 1964), 101.
83. Frank Alexander Montgomery, 1901. Reminiscences Of A Mississippian In Peace And War. Documenting the American South (University Library, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1999), <http://docsouth.unc.edu/montgomery/montgom.html>, 121.

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Biography

Andrew Scott "Drew" Bledsoe is a graduate student currently enrolled in the Master of Liberal Arts Program at Henderson State University. He earned a Bachelor's Degree in History and Political Science from Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia, Arkansas in 1996 and a Juris Doctor Degree from the University of Tennessee in Knoxville, Tennessee in 1999. His areas of interest include Southern, British, Constitutional and Medieval History.

Answer: Revivalism is a method of evangelism relying on what is usually a series of evangelistic meetings called revivals. Revivalism is concerned with the necessity of conversion—a personal decision to follow Christ. Evangelists leading revivals characteristically end every sermon with a strong, emotional appeal for a decision. Revivalism calls people out of a cultural Christianity into a living faith. Restore us, Lord God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved (Psalm 80:18–19; see also Psalm 85:6; 119:25; and Isaiah 57:15). In the more Calvinistic-leaning churches of the American Colonies, the emphasis was upon God who saves the sinner.