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Abstract

This study of public reaction to the Battle of Gettysburg in the context of the wider experience of the American Civil War focuses on the view of Providence in history and war. To that end, this study primarily utilizes documents which were part of the public discourse during the war. This includes two major groups of writings: newspaper editorials and articles and published sermons. This allows a view of the intersecting of religion with the secular world as well as patriotism within the religious community. Collections from both the Union and the Confederacy have been accessed in an attempt to provide a balanced picture of the wartime public religious discourse. Published sermons have been selected for two reasons. First, they make up the vast majority of the historical record which we have today. Second, published sermons had the ability to reach a wider audience than one congregation on one specific Sunday morning. It is important to note that published sermons generally reflect a specific socio-economic and political group. Only pastors who had access to a publishing house, or who had members with such connections, would have been able to publish their sermons or would have been asked to publish their sermons. This would suggest that pastors whose sermons were published were not of the lower economic classes. Further, since most of these published sermons were requested by groups, they likely represent views held by a wider section of the surrounding society. This fact contributes to their import as evidence of the tide of religious discussion on each side, but also limits any dissenting voices. Thus, this study is interested in the commonly expressed religious views of each side, but does not examine in depth questions of the totality of such views.

Keywords

providence, Battle of Gettysburg, published sermons, public discourse

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PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON PROVIDENCE
AND THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

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PREFACE

This study of public reaction to the Battle of Gettysburg in the context of the wider experience of the American Civil War focuses on the view of Providence in history and war. To that end, this study primarily utilizes documents which were part of the public discourse during the war. This includes two major groups of writings: newspaper editorials and articles and published sermons. This allows a view of the intersecting of religion with the secular world as well as patriotism within in the religious community. Collections from both the Union and the Confederacy have been accessed in an attempt to provide a balanced picture of the wartime public religious discourse. Published sermons have been selected for two reasons. First, they make up the vast majority of the historical record which we have today. Second, published sermons had the ability to reach a wider audience than one congregation on one specific Sunday morning. It is important to note that published sermons generally reflect a specific socio-economic and political group. Only pastors who had access to a publishing house, or who had members with such connections, would have been able to publish their sermons to would have been asked to publish their sermons.¹ This would suggest that pastors whose sermons were published were not of the lower economic classes. Further, since most of these published sermons were requested by groups, they likely represent views held by a wider section of the surrounding society. This fact contributes to their import as evidence of the tide of religious discussion on each side, but also limits any dissenting voices. Thus, this study is interested in the commonly expressed religious views of each side, but does not examine in depth questions of the totality of such views.

"God moves in a mysterious way,
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines,
Of never failing skill,
He treasures up His bright designs,
And works His sovereign will"²

Following the Battle of Gettysburg in the first days of July 1863, President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed, "It has pleased Almighty God to hearken to the supplications and

¹ The overwhelming majority of sermons used in this study appear to have been requested for publication by members who heard the sermon delivered. This is seen by the series of introductory letters between members or committees and ministers which generally accompany the sermons preceding the actual text of the sermon.

² William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way," taken from *Service Book and Hymnal* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Augsburg Publishing House, 1958) 484.

prayers of an afflicted people, and to vouchsafe to the army and the navy of the United States victories on land and on the sea...it is meet and right to recognize and confess the presence of the Almighty Father and the power of His hand equally in these triumphs and these in sorrows.”³ Truly, Lincoln’s words captured the mood of many in the Union. July and early August of 1863 found many ministers, rabbis and laymen invoking the wonderful mercy and assistance of God for the Union cause. However, southern clerics were simultaneously maintaining that the Lord was on the side of the Confederacy, using the victories of the ancient Hebrews over pagan nations as evidence of God’s faithfulness. When all of the political, social and military interpretations have been completed, it is in the interplay of the sacred and secular that the deepest meaning of the Battle of Gettysburg is to be found, religion remains a vital element of the contemporary understandings of the battle.

The entire basis of the historical analysis of religion and the religious window on history presupposes that whether or not one personally believes in God’s providence, or the will of God manifest, many people throughout history have accepted just such a notion. The continuing scholarly debate about the origins of religious belief and practice raises questions such as whether religion and faith developed as a result of a human psychological need to find a higher power that governs the world with some sort of intelligible system. In his well-publicized 1997 work *The Cousins’ Wars: Religion, Politics, and the Triumph of Anglo-America*, Kevin Phillips explains that the value and importance of religion in the history of peoples and nations, “should not even be debatable.” Further, Phillips argues, all of the central historical landmarks in British and American history, “were wars—bitter, fratricidal wars—accompanied by Puritan and abolitionist sermons and battle hymns and principally fought to change the shape of internal politics, liberty, and religion.”⁴

In *For Cause and Comrades*, his landmark study of the reasons why soldiers joined and fought in the Civil War armies, James McPherson examines the letters and journals of numerous soldiers on both sides of the conflict. Many of these soldiers used religious language in their writings, often as a justification for the struggle. Characteristic of these soldiers was one Southerner who wrote home to his wife, “Everyday I have a more religious feeling, that this war is a crusade for the good of mankind.”⁵ Nonetheless, though the views of the soldiers were central to the ability of the sides to continue the fight, the morale of the Northern and Southern home-fronts also dictated the ability of Abraham Lincoln and Jefferson Davis to keep their armies on the field. Since they shared many religious traditions, both sides often used the same arguments to support a wide range of views. In words that were echoed in similar fashion by people on all sides of the war,

3 Abraham Lincoln, “Proclamation of Thanksgiving,” ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 6, *Collected Works* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953) 332.

4 Kevin Phillips, *The Cousins’ Wars: Religion, Politics, and the Triumph of Anglo-America* (New York: Basic Books, 1999) xii-xiii.

5 James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) 13.

Northern clergyman George Ide told his audience,

Every attribute of God, every unfolding of His will in His word and in His providence, assures us that He is on our side in this awful exigency, and will bring to our aid the succors of His omnipotence. The wheels of His chariot may tarry. He may try us by delay. He may humble us by temporary defeats and reverses, in order to deepen our feeling of dependence upon Him, and to render us more obedient to the leadings of His hand. But He will not forsake us. Our cause is this cause, the cause of Civilization, the cause of Humanity, the cause of true Religion—and must triumph.⁶

As the war progressed, the religious discourse became a more complex mix of theology and reality. Eventually, each side would emerge from the war, victors or conquered, as Christians who still needed to reconcile their beliefs with their experiences. Thus, the examination of the religious justifications of the war in the newspapers and the political language in sermons which were directed both towards the soldiers and civilians have import for explaining the motivations behind the war in general. As one northern cleric concluded a few months after the close of the war, “During the dread struggle through which the nation has passed, no conviction was stronger or more universal than that of God’s interference in human affairs.”⁷

Despite the common patterns in both Southern and Northern religious dialogues, concepts were intensely connected with the success or failure of each side at a given moment. For example, while the South saw a virtually unbroken string of victories in the first two years of the war especially in the East, Confederate clergy and writers took great advantage of victories as signs of God’s favor. Small defeats were simply opportunities for Southerners to recommit to their personal piety and had no bearing on the righteousness of their cause. At the same time, in the North, many blamed moral lapses, such as Lincoln’s failure to emancipate the slaves, as the barrier between God’s active support of their cause and their current military ineptitude. Thus, with the issuance of the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation, many Christians across the Union joined Edmund Fairchild, the president of Freewill Baptist College, to herald that, “the day of our redemption draweth nigh...Justice...and Right and Heaven are with us!”⁸ Many in the North expected that 1863 would bring a renewal of God’s favor to their cause. In the first days of July 1863, they found that renewal; it was heralded from the small southern

6 George Barton Ide, *Battle Echoes, or, Lessons from the War* (Boston : Gould and Lincoln, 1866) 52.

7 *Ibid.*, 5.

8 Victor B. Howard, *Religion and the Radical Republican Movement* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1990) 55.

Pennsylvania town of Gettysburg.

The origins of religious discourse in the public arena are varied for the extremes of the Union and Confederacy—Puritan New England and the Deep South. Since the first Puritan settlements, religion and politics had been intertwined in New England society. The South also saw an intertwining of the religious and political spheres early in its history, but had developed a socio-religious system independent of the North in many ways. One element of this separation became a marked division in the South between sacred and secular. For example, it was highly frowned upon in much of the South on the eve of the war for preachers to mention politics in their sermons. In their study of “white Richmond society at war,” Harry Stout and Christopher Grasso explain that church-wide fast days were common in the Old South. With the exception of some fasts surrounding Henry Clay’s 1850 Compromise, these fast days had specific boundaries, and were never integrated as tools in the political landscape. The common fasts in the South, “were spiritual events confined to the spiritual space and time of churches. With rare exceptions, fast sermons delivered on these occasions were not published, nor did they constitute a central genre of public discourse.”⁹

With the coming of secession, however, pressures upon the new Confederate States of America precipitated a shift in the application of jeremiads. Whereas the ante-bellum years had been characterized by a practical separation of church and state, the very news of secession brought an intertwining on the two. For example, Richmond witnessed mass euphoria upon the announcement of Virginia’s departure from the Union, including a speech by former president John Tyler, who invoked the “benign providence” of God upon the “holy effort” of the newly declared nation.¹⁰ Over the next few years, this call for God’s mercy and definition of the sacredness of the Southern cause would be continually repeated. As North Carolina pastor Joel Tucker told his congregation, “Your cause is the cause of God, of Christ, of humanity. It is a conflict of truth with error—of the Bible with Northern infidelity—of a pure Christianity with Northern fanaticism.”¹¹ The gauntlet had been laid and the course defined—this would be a war steeped in religious rhetoric. The outcome of the war would be deeply intertwined with the development of various theological and religious ideologies.

The discourse of providence in the Confederacy had several foundations. From the beginning of the war, Southerners relied upon obedience to God and fidelity to their cause as a hallmark of their claim to God’s providential aid. Joseph Atkinson told his Raleigh, North Carolina congregation, “So long as we shall deeply feel our dependence on

9 Harry S. Stout and Christopher Grasso, “Civil War, Religion, and Communications,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 314, 319.

10 Stout, and Grasso, “Civil War, Religion and Communications,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, 318.

11 Joel W. Tucker, “God’s Providence in War,” 229-237, in “God Ordained this War”: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865, David B. Chesebrough, ed. (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 236.

God alone, and put our trust in Him, He will favor us, and our progress will be irresistible as the march of time.”¹² Readers of the *Charleston Mercury* read in late July 1863 that, “Although our afflictions may be great, and protracted beyond expectations, let us have faith to believe that a just cause will prevail at last. Let us derive fortitude and Christian courage to suffer and to dare all things in this struggle for liberty and pure religion.”¹³

Secular newspapers contributed a great deal to the religious propaganda during the first half of the war. Civil War Richmond was the home of four major secular newspapers, which all published a spattering of religious interest items. Two of these papers, the *Enquirer* and the *Dispatch*, took a special interest in Christian issues, publishing lists of upcoming religious events and occasionally even minutes from regional church conventions.¹⁴ As ministers across the South interpreted early Confederate defeats as recriminations for the sins of individual Southerners, the *Dispatch* simply bowed to the mysterious ways of God. Confederate fast-days were declared across the nation beginning early in the war and prompting a variety of support and reaction from the leading papers. The *Dispatch* viewed fast days as opportunities to repeat the chorus of God’s overarching providence and the certainty of an eventual retribution against the North for its transgressions. Another Richmond paper, the *Enquirer*, used fast days throughout the war to call forth God’s blessing and to strengthen Southern confidence in their ultimate success under God.¹⁵ This difference of religious interpretation was maintained throughout the war, though the defeats of 1863 began a tense era in the religious discourse of the South, as orators and writers struggled to weave their wartime theology into new circumstances.

Some Southerners were unable to continue to accept the idea of God’s aid, especially once the Confederate army began to suffer severe defeats. The *Examiner* criticized the prevalent emphasis in the young nation upon God’s deliverance, especially as shown by Jefferson Davis. While the paper admitted that, “Piety is estimable,” it firmly maintained that practical concerns, such as better equipping the army, had to be addressed as well. Further, the paper said that instead of gearing up for war, Davis was, “relying on a miracle to save the country,” a stance that was, “depressing in the extreme.”¹⁶ In an October 1863 speech to troops in the western theater, Jefferson Davis echoed his religious refrain, telling the soldiers of, “his deep conviction of our eventual success under the blessing of Providence.”¹⁷ Coincidentally, it was at the location of this speech, Missionary Ridge, that the Confederate Army suffered yet another terrible defeat only a month and a half later. A month after the Battle of Gettysburg, the *Examiner* went so far as to proclaim to its readers, “There is neither Christianity nor religion of any kind in this war. We prosecute

12 Atkinson, Joseph M. “God, The Giver of Victory and Peace.” Sermon. Delivered in the Presbyterian Church, Raleigh, North Carolina, September 18, 1862. Located in the database of the Documenting the American South project of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. Collection accessible at <http://docsouth.unc.edu>. Accessed 7 October 2001.

13 “Humiliation and Prayer,” *Charleston Mercury*, 29 July 1863, page 1, column 2.

14 Stout, and Grasso, “Civil War, Religion and Communications,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, 330.

15 *Ibid*, 331.

16 *Ibid*, 335.

it in self-defense, for the preservation of our liberty, our homes and our Negroes.”¹⁸

The Northern Christian community was not more united. The issue of abolition had divided groups early, as churches such as the Methodist Episcopal Church managed to maintain full communion with Southern conferences until the middle of the nineteenth century. At the denomination’s 1844 Annual Conference a conflict over the ownership of slaves by Bishop James Andrew of the Baltimore Conference initiated a split that would last nearly an entire century.¹⁹ The Southern Baptist Convention came into being the following year, as Baptists in eight slaveholding states withdrew from the national organization.²⁰ Lutherans splintered into even more branches than they had been before the issue arose in their synods. The Presbyterian Church maintained union until the outbreak of the war, when the Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America was established.²¹ During the war, Protestant Episcopal churches in the South attempted to leave their national organization, but the Northern members never approved the move. This allowed a simple re-integration of Southern churches after the war. To many, these church divisions laid the way for the rupture of the bonds of the nation. Almost a decade before the fall of Fort Sumter, statesman Henry Clay lamented on his death bed, “I tell you, this sundering of the religious ties which have bound our people together I consider the greatest source of danger to our country.”²²

However, abolitionist sentiment in the North was still not unified after the purge of the Southern churches. Indeed, some staunch abolitionists sought to blame the early losses of the North on Lincoln’s failure to free the slaves. In a collection of his wartime writings published in 1866, cleric George Ide included an essay written prior to Lincoln’s Proclamation, pleading, “In our methods of conducting [this war], we are not working in harmony with the Divine intention. We are aiming to restore the Union as it was, with slavery in it.” Ide argued that God’s plan is freedom of the slaves, and he maintained, “Disaster will pursue us till we accept [God’s] plan.”²³ The Emancipation Proclamation, served as a huge ethical underpinning for Christian abolitionists. After Lincoln’s issuance of the document on the first day of 1863, these religious activists heralded the arrival of God’s favor now that the nation was fighting for a truly holy cause. In early December 1863, a seminary professor from Pennsylvania reflected,

Slavery dreads the spirit of the North quite as much or even more than it dreads the bayonets and columbiads of the North. The South at-

17 Haskell M. Monroe, Jr. and James T. McIntosh, eds., *The Papers of Jefferson Davis*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971) vol. 10, page 21.

18 Stout, and Grasso, “Civil War, Religion and Communications,” in *Religion and the American Civil War*, 339.

19 Frederick Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974) 197-199.

20 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1953) 1261.

21. This organization was renamed as the Presbyterian Church in the United States during Reconstruction. *Ibid*, 1261

22 Phillips, *The Cousins’ Wars*, 401.

23 Ide, *Battle Echoes*, 142.

tempts to found a mighty empire, the “cornerstone” of which is Human Bondage. The North inscribes Universal Freedom on her banner, and flings it to the breeze. While He who came into this world “to proclaim liberty to the captives,” sits on the throne of the universe, who can, for one moment, doubt the issue?²⁴

Other Northern preachers also appealed to the sacred cause of emancipation as justification for God’s favor upon their cause.

However, the entire North was not ready to accept the liberation of slaves as the primary focus of the war. In a September 1863 article in the *Christian Examiner*, the author chided those who sought to make the war just about slavery. He wrote, “We do not consider battles and carnage a fit method of establishing policies of mercy, or extending the Divine kingdom upon earth...it is for the integrity, the honor, the existence of a nation which we belong to, and believe in, and are loyal to...[that] we fight, and invoke the blessing of Heaven on our arms.”²⁵ Nevertheless, the author goes on to declare that, “in fighting for ourselves because we must, we could not do it without also fighting for the dearest and most sacred principles of universal humanity.”²⁶ Such a view was also argued by many other Northerners, including Abraham Lincoln, most notably in his August 22, 1862 letter to Horace Greely in the *New York Tribune*. In the letter, Lincoln told Greely, and thus, the American people, “My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union, and is not either to save or destroy slavery...What I do about slavery...I do because I believe it helps to save the Union.”²⁷

Leaders in the North called upon the glorious history of their own nation as proof that God would continue to support them. As a Pittsburgh pastor told his flock, “God has not piloted the Ship of State through so many storms, and over so many breakers, to allow her to be sunk by the snag—secession.”²⁸ The same pastor also called upon struggles of great peoples throughout history, from the Greeks to the Romans and the Crusaders. He further identified his people with the ancient Hebrews, proclaiming, “When the Jew wanted to assure himself of God’s continued favor and protection, he ran his eye back over the history of his nation...The past was glorious, and full of miraculous power... With hope and joy he flung his glance into the future...So do we to-day.”²⁹ Religious faithfulness was equated with patriotism. A sermon republished in Gettysburg’s *Adams Sentinel* expressed a deep commitment to both Christianity and the Union. The author wrote, “Our first duty is to stand by the throne of God; the next, by the flag of our country. If we are a christian, we must, we should be a patriotic people. A true Christian must be,

24 Samuel Jennings Wilson, “Hope for the Republic.” Sermon. Delivered at Sixth Presbyterian Church, Pittsburgh, November 26, 1863. (Printed by Klausner & Theophilus, Allegheny City, Penn., 1864) Located in collection of the Clifford E. Barbour Library, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, 10.

25 “A Month of Victory, and Its Results.” *Christian Examiner* 75 (September 1863): 258-278, 277.

26 *Ibid.*, 278.

27 Abraham Lincoln, “To Horace Greely,” ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 5, *Collected Works* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953) 388.

is, the best ruler and subject, citizen and soldier.”³⁰

A rhetorical tool that was relied upon in both Northern and Southern religious discussion was the identification of both sides with the ancient Hebrews of the Old Testament. In the trials of Israel, citizens and soldiers alike found reason to believe that their reversals and losses were merely part of God’s plan to refine them into His true people. In victory, each faction claimed that God had been faithful to his people, as He had always been to Israel. For example, Northerner George Ide used many illustrations from the Old Testament to convince his readers of the justification of the Northern cause, concluding, “By placing us in circumstances which require the furnishing of vast means to sustain the Government, [God] rebukes our avarice,” as He had used defeat to recommit the people of Israel to their God.³¹ Southern ministers equated their people’s position as that of the “chosen people [of Israel],” whose, “affliction, permitted by paternal love to chasten and purify them are part of the process by which their Father is preparing them for fuller and sweeter communion with himself in this world, and for heaven at the end.”³² Following the Battle of Gettysburg, one New York rabbi prayed with his congregation that, “In other days and in ours may Judah be saved and Israel dwell in safety, and may the Redeemer come unto Zion, and may this be the will of God, and let us say Amen.”³³ Further, some Southerners not only identified themselves with the Israelites, but they also equated the North with Pharaoh and Egypt, as voiced by Confederate clergy in a letter to the Charleston Mercury in mid-July 1863, stating that the Confederacy, “asked only, as the Israelites asked of old, that they should be allowed to ‘depart in peace.’”³⁴

Further, both the Union and the Confederacy claimed the heritage of the nation’s Revolutionary fathers as well as other secular examples of God’s will. Parishioners in a Fayetteville, North Carolina, church in May of 1862 were told by their pastor that, “God was with our Revolutionary fathers in their struggle for independence; but he suffered them often to be defeated in their seven years conflict with the mother country. . . . So, God has sent our reverses for our good.”³⁵ Several months later, a pastor from North Carolina asserted to his congregation, that, “The course of Providential development in our first Revolution was essentially unlike what we have thus far witnessed in this. Compared to the former, the hand of God is more bare, more open, more visible, in that which is now in process of consummation.”³⁶ A writer for the Charleston Mercury told his audience in mid-July 1863, “There has, perhaps, been less in the South of that narrow, pharisaic, intolerant Puritanism which distinguished the founders of Massachusetts, and is not yet

28 Wilson, “Hope for the Republic,” 18.

29 Wilson, “Hope for the Republic,” 18-19.

30 George Duffold, “God and My Country!” *Adams Sentinel*, 15 September 1863. Page 1, Column 6.

31 Ide, *Battle Echoes*, 48.

32 A.M. Poindexter and R. Lynden Cowper, *God’s Providence a Source of Comfort and Courage to Christians [1861-1865]*. Tract. Located in the database of the Documenting the American South project of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, collection accessible at <http://docsouth.unc.edu>, accessed 7 October 2001.

33 “Thanksgiving Among the Jews,” *New York Herald*, 7 August 1863. Page 1, Column 5.

34 “Letter of the Confederate Clergymen,” *Charleston Mercury*, 21 July 1863, page 1, column 2.

35 Tucker, “God’s Providence in War,” 233.

extinct in New England; but the Southerners have always been always an earnestly and devoutly Christian people.”³⁷ Preaching in Pittsburgh at the end of 1863, Dr. S.J. Wilson from Western Theological Seminary told his Christian Commission audience that the geography of the nation itself was a sign from God that the country must be united. Specifically, Dr. Wilson explained, “[God] has poured the floods of ocean around [the nation] in the form of a U, and that U stands for UNION.”³⁸ Ministers and political leaders scrambled throughout the war to create and maintain public support for the war, using whatever tools they could lay hold of, from Biblical precedent to American history to geography.

The Battle of Gettysburg, July 1-3, 1863, changed the stakes in the religious discourse of both nations. In the North, Christians could finally begin to see God’s active hand in the outcome of the war in their favor. As one newsman wrote to his readers in Philadelphia who awaited final news of the battle, “May God defend the right.”³⁹ Though some in the South initially heard good news from Pennsylvania, as the *Charleston Mercury*, for example, reported on the ninth of July on the battle, claiming a “brilliant and crushing victory,” for the Army of Northern Virginia.⁴⁰ However, by the thirteen, the *Mercury* was reporting that northern papers were proclaiming a Confederate defeat.⁴¹ The Union victory there marked the heightening of voices in the South who questioned whether, “God had always been on our side, or that he operates actively, in this conflict at all.”⁴² In fact, some scholars argue that doubts about God’s favor for the Confederate cause had never been, “very far beneath the surface,” and were simply exposed by the combined Confederate defeats at Gettysburg and Vicksburg in the first days of July 1863. However in the wake of Gettysburg, many southern clerics did attempt to maintain the theological foundation they had labored so hard to establish throughout the first half of the war.

As Southern pastors sought this continuity, David Chesebrough maintains, “they must be admired for their consistency. They were sure that even as God had been a participant in the early stages of the war when so much was going well, so God was still a participant in the latter stages.”⁴³ Chesebrough then identifies two common characteristics of post-Gettysburg/Vicksburg southern jeremiads. First, pastors argued that Southerners were being punished for their transgressions. Second, despite this punishment, the South could reclaim God’s favor, but only by earnest penitence and a renewed dedication to the holy cause of the war.⁴⁴ Southern Christians were thus able to

36 Joseph M. Atkinson, “God, the Giver of Victory and Peace.”

37 “Letter of the Confederate Clergymen,” *Mercury*, 21 July 1863.

38 Wilson, “Hope for the Republic.”

39 “The Battle at Gettysburg,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 3 July 1863. Page 2, Column 3.

40 “The War in Pennsylvania,” *Charleston Mercury*, July 9, 1863, Page 1, Column 2.

41 “From the United States,” *Charleston Mercury*, 13 July 1863, Page 1, Column 3.

42 Richard E. Beringer, *The Elements of Confederate Defeat: Nationalism, War Aims, and Religion* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1988) 119.

43 David B. Chesebrough, ed., “God Ordained this War”: Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865 (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1991) 238.

44 *Ibid*, 238.

maintain their commitment to the war effort, in spite of July 1863. As one person wrote in to the Milledgeville Confederate Union, "We need the favor of God. Without it, we perish. God is angry with us for our sins. Hence the war itself, and hence the reverses of this summer."⁴⁵ In reality, the ability of people of faith to adapt their theology to defeat was determined by a variety of factors, including the depth of that theology prior to July 1863, how intensely comparisons were made to the defeats of ancient Israel, and whether they viewed Gettysburg as an anomaly or as a sign of things to come.

The secular press, which had long participated in this public religious discourse, maintained their religious rhetoric in their immediate reactions to the battle. In a July 10, 1863 editorial, the *Richmond Enquirer* asked its readers if the battle should prompt Southerners to lose faith in God's support, help and, "just Providence." The writer concludes, "All that we have already done, and vowed to do; all our past, all our future, call on us, pledge us, compel us, to read in all that has befallen but one lesson—that we must repair our faults...and use all our resources so as to present a stern front of resistance," to the enemy.⁴⁶ Eleven days later, the *Enquirer* was casting Abraham Lincoln in a decidedly negative religious role as, "the vicegerent [sic] of the Devil on earth."⁴⁷ The same article concluded with an affirmation from the author professing his belief in the ultimate triumph of the Confederacy, rooted in his, "firm faith which reliance in the justice of a righteous God inspires."⁴⁸

Southern fears about the future after the Battle of Gettysburg raged from caution, and even hope to despair. One of the most vocal Richmond religious writers was J.B. Jones, who voiced his opinions throughout the war, though seldom quite so hopelessly as he did in the July 29, 1863 issue of his paper. Jones moaned, "Still raining! The great fear is that the crops will be ruined, and famine, which we have long been verging upon, will be complete. Is providence upon us for our sins, or upon our cause?"⁴⁹ The secular *Charleston Mercury* hit a more cautionary note the same day, explaining,

It may be, too, that the Supreme Ruler has chosen this means to teach us the iniquity of all invasions, and to impress upon our minds the justice and wisdom of defending our cause upon our own blood baptized [sic] soil. Indeed, there are some things connected with the late battle which would seem to justify the belief that this punishment was inflicted by

45 Beringer, *The Elements of Confederate Defeat*, 121.

46 Editorial, *Richmond Enquirer*, 10 July 1863, located in the database of Accessible Archives, <http://srch.accessible.com>, accessed 26 September 2001.

47 "From General Lee's Army," *Richmond Enquirer*, 21 July 1863, located in the database of Accessible Archives, <http://srch.accessible.com>, accessed 26 September 2001.

48 *Ibid.*

49 Stout, and Grasso, "Civil War, Religion and Communications," in *Religion and the American Civil War*, 341.

a Divine Hand, and for some wise purpose.⁵⁰

Southern reaction to Gettysburg affirmed the belief in God's providential aid, but it did so with a growing realization of the difficulty connected with maintaining such a belief in the face of disaster. As one military chaplain, R.F. Bunting, wrote to his troops almost two months after Gettysburg that their reverses were, "not a matter of astonishment," since the Southern people had, become too much elated," due to their early victories. Thus, they had forgotten, "the honor which was due to that God who hath power to put down one and raise up another," and hence, Reverend Bunting and his fellow Southerners were "receiving in our disasters for months past, the wages of our sins."⁵¹

In the North, victory at Gettysburg added a new element to their Puritan-based religious justification of their cause. Despite admitting an immense loss of troops, a writer in the September 1863 issue of the Boston-based *Christian Examiner* expressed satisfaction that, "The three days' desperate struggle at Gettysburg beat back the Confederate force at the highest flood-tide of its invasion: since then, we have seen only the baffled, slow, and sullen movement of its reluctant wave."⁵² Recognizing the significance of Gettysburg, the same author claimed,

It is not easy for us to realize, even now, the greatness and imminency [sic] of the peril from which we were saved at Gettysburg by the repulse of Longstreet's column on Friday afternoon, the 3d of July. To meet this crisis, or grand climacteric of the gigantic struggle, several things concurred, as if by special directing of a Higher Power, turning what might have been the most terrific disaster into a glorious deliverance... It was a stronger hand and a higher wisdom than ours that saved us on that Friday afternoon.⁵³

Secular newsmen across the nation also recognized the importance of Gettysburg. Readers in Philadelphia read that, "The battle of the 3d of July, at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, will probably be regarded in all coming time as one of those few great victories which have settled the map of the world," which was thanks to, "Almighty God, who has defended our liberties thus far."⁵⁴ The *Hartford Courant* praised the successes of the first week of July, including Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and even the repulse of Confederates in Helena, Arkansas, concluding, "Amid the exaltations of victory let us not forget our debt of gratitude

50 "The Pennsylvania Campaign," *Charleston Mercury*, 29 July 1863, page 1, column 4.

51 Robert Franklin Bunting, "The Mysteries of Providence: A Fast-Day Discourse," sermon, delivered August 21, 1863, in camp on Silver Creek, near Rome, Georgia (Atlanta: Franklin Steam Press, 1864) 9, 15.

52 "A Month of Victory and Its Results," in the *Christian Examiner*, 259.

53 *Ibid.*, 260-261.

54 "Attempted Repudiation of the Fourth of July," in *Philadelphia Public Ledger and Daily Transcript*, 6 July 1863.

to the Supreme Ruler who ordereth all things.”⁵⁵ The New York Herald told its audience, “great or greater than those of Waterloo are the results of this battle of Gettysburg,” and that, “To Him ‘who doeth all things well’ shall eternal praise be given.”⁵⁶

The secular press also passed on religious rhetoric as it published official statements. President Lincoln issued a proclamation the day after the battle which was published in papers across the nation, closing, “He whose will, not ours, should ever be done, be everywhere remembered and revered with the profoundest gratitude.”⁵⁷ The same day, General Meade issued a congratulatory order that was also published in many papers, though with a bit more delay. He closed his order with religious language, declaring, “It is right and proper that we should, on all suitable occasions, return our grateful thanks to the Almighty Disposer of events that in the goodness of his Providence He has thought fit to give victory to the cause of the just.”⁵⁸ By October, Lincoln had issued a longer declaration, judging that even those normally immune to sensing God’s hand in history could not easily cast aside, “the ever watchful providence of Almighty God,” after such a season. He also credited God with all of the successes the army had experienced over the summer of 1863, writing, “They are the gracious gifts of the Most High God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.”⁵⁹

In the North, the religious rhetoric of Lincoln’s tradition of days of Thanksgiving paralleled Davis’ fast days. Lincoln’s public proclamations of thankfulness for Gettysburg began immediately after the battle, with many papers publishing a July fourth statement requesting that, “He whose will, not ours, should ever be done, be everywhere remembered and revered with profoundest gratitude.”⁶⁰ On July fifteenth, Lincoln issued an extended proclamation, announcing August 6, 1863 as a Day of National Thanksgiving. To the God who had, “hearken[ed] to the supplications and prayers of an afflicted people,” the president gave, “the homage due to the Divine Majesty, for the wonderful things he has done in the Nation’s behalf.”⁶¹ Lincoln also echoed sentiments proclaimed in the South, telling his people that they needed to travel, “through the paths of repentance and submission in the Divine Will, back to the perfect enjoyment of Union and fraternal peace.”⁶²

Like many in the secular press, Christian ministers also recognized the import of the fighting at Gettysburg and Vicksburg. On August sixth, the specially appointed day of thanksgiving, the pastor of New York’s St. George Church told his members that God had done marvelous deeds for his faithful, the North, and that consequently, “The last

55 “The Fourth,” in Hartford Courant (Connecticut), 9 July 1863. Page 2, Column 1.

56 “The Battle of Gettysburg,” in New York Herald, 9 July 1863. Page 1, Column 2.

57 Abraham Lincoln, “Announcement of News from Gettysburg,” ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 6, Collected Works (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953) 314.

58 General George Meade, “Congratulatory Order,” issued 4 July 1863, published in Adams Sentinel, 7 July 1863.

59 Abraham Lincoln, “Proclamation of Thanksgiving,” ed. Roy P. Basler, vol. 6, Collected Works (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953) 496-497.

60 Abraham Lincoln, “Announcement of News from Gettysburg,” Collected Works, 314.

61 Abraham Lincoln, “Proclamation of Thanksgiving,” Collected Works, 332.

62 Ibid.

thirty-three days had been days of lightning glances of power and triumph.”⁶³ Finally, Rev. Dr. Osgood told his Unitarian congregation,

We meet in the sanctuary, not to sing hosannas for triumphs over neighbors and friends achieved by men’s hands, but as a part of God’s people, and, as far as human weakness will permit, to celebrate His providence and grace and mercy to us as a people. As a loyal and civilized people we must recognize His power and His mercies to us; and, while our religion uses not the arms of warfare, it at the same time recognizes the legitimacy of military power in its own rightful season, keeping and reserving to itself the arms that are spiritual and eternal.⁶⁴

The August sixth Day of Thanksgiving was observed in churches throughout the North, as ministers hastened to take advantage of yet another opportunity to call forth God’s favor on the Union cause. Several sermons from August 6, 1863 were published the following day on the front page of the *New York Herald*. Among these were homilies from a range of denominations, and even an account of services held in the town’s synagogues. Among the clergy featured, many called for hearty thanks to “Almighty God,” who had “not given us over a prey to our enemies.”⁶⁵ Congregants at Madison Square Presbyterian Church were instructed by their pastor to, “trust in Jehovah alone, with adoration and enthusiastic oblations of the soul.”⁶⁶ The sentiments of the *New York* newsmen and clergy were mirrored across the nation.

In New York, the August 6, 1863 sermon that Reverend Chalon Burgess delivered in Panama was published in the *Chautauqua Democrat* (New York) in late September. Burgess told his audience, “God [has] been for thirty days or more granting [our] prayers and so arranged his providence [that] the harvests of war, should synchronize [with] the harvests of peace.”⁶⁷ Burgess also outlined American history as evidence of God’s providence, from the Pilgrims through the American Revolution and to the Civil War. Addressing the human cost, Burgess assessed it as, “punishment for our many national sins,” though despite the sins of the people, God, “has seen fit to interpose with his scourge, if by any means he might whip us back to paths of purity and justice.”⁶⁸ Nonetheless, Burgess cautioned his parishioners against naively assuming God’s favor, lest they fall victim to, “a superstitious and presumptuous confidence in our title as Americans to the

63 “St. George’s Church,” *New York Herald*, 7 August 1863. Page 1, Column 2.

64 “Rev. Dr. Osgood’s (Unitarian) Church,” *New York Herald*, 7 August 1863. Page 1, Column 3.

65 “Trinity Church,” *New York Herald*, 7 August 1863. Page 1, Column 1.

66 “Madison Square Presbyterian Church,” *New York Herald*, 7 August 1863. Page 1, Column 3.

67 Chalon Burgess, “Thanksgiving Sermon,” in the *Chautauqua Democrat* (New York), 28 September 1863, delivered at Panama, 6 August 1863, from Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University. Page and column numbers unclear.

68 *Ibid.*

69 *Ibid.*

70 *Ibid.*

good-will and favor of God.”⁶⁹ Burgess concluded his sermon by instructing his listeners and readers that, “Our impatient populace has yet to learn that every thing really valuable and lasting is slowly evolving and slowly matured,” and that Americans should not expect the victories of the summer to speedily end the war.⁷⁰ The North also celebrated Thanksgiving at its appointed date in November, when ministers had a wide range of victories to point to for reinforcing their argument that God was on their side.

November 1863 also witnessed the dedication of the Soldiers’ National Cemetery in Gettysburg, where many would speak of God’s providential aid to the North, though none would do so with quite the eloquence and historical impact of President Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. The religious language at the ceremony was initiated by Rev. Dr. Stockton, who gave the invocation, informing the audience, “Oh, had it not been for God! For lo! our enemies, they came unresisted, multitudinous, mighty, flushed with victory, and sure of success... Glory to God for this rescue!”⁷¹ The crowd then joined in a hymn, singing,

We trust, O God! Thy gracious power
To aid us in our darkest hour.
This be our prayer—“O Father! Save
A people’s freedom from its grave.
All praise to Thee!”⁷²

Even in his homage to classic Greek culture and tradition, Edward Everett’s speech at the ceremony called upon the providential aid of God. In the midst of a detailed recounting of the action during the Battle of Gettysburg, Everett praised the “providential inaction,” of the Confederate army.⁷³ According to Everett, it was “under Providence,” that the Union forces, motivated by patriotism and the belief in the justness of their cause, were able to gain the victory at Gettysburg.⁷⁴

The words of the address of President Lincoln on that day are the longest lasting and most powerful words in the public discourse about the Battle of Gettysburg, and thus, central to the theme of public reaction to the battle in terms of God’s providence. The ceremony that November day has remained alive in American memory as children today, who are no longer forced to memorize facts to the extent of previous generations, still nonetheless can recite the beginning, if not the entire address of President Lincoln. Despite disagreements as to when Lincoln added these words to his speech, he felt the need to conclude his oration by crowning the United States as a nation “under God.” Two

71 “Prayer of Rev. Dr. Stockton,” Revised Report of the Select Committee Relative to the Soldiers National Cemetery together with the Accompanying Documents, as Reported to the House of Representatives of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (Harrisburg: Singerly & Myers State Printers, 1865) 180.

72 B.B. French, “Hymn,” Revised Report of the Select Committee Relative to the Soldiers National Cemetery, 210.

73 Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992) 226.

74 *Ibid.*, 229.

75 Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 263.

words, yet as renowned as he was for being succinct, it is all together obvious that Lincoln did not invoke God over the nation without a firm historical and cultural foundation and necessity. The ceremony on November 19, 1863 at the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg served as a major part of national closure for the Battle of Gettysburg insofar as that was possible. "It is altogether fitting and proper," that the religious rhetoric of the divided nation, both from the Union and Confederacy, would be called together in a speech which sought to unite the country, be united in two simple words in one of the single greatest orations in American and world history.⁷⁵

Religion, defined broadly as a person's conception of a higher power, and identified specifically as the ritualistic demonstration of that conception, has had a central part in history. The ability of humans to mentally accommodate the taking of another's life, laws establishing limits on appropriate and inappropriate actions, and social mores, all denote a sense of the greater good. In modern times, a dependence on human logic and reason to accommodate value structures has often superceded the role of religion as a law-establishing authority. Society is viewed as the greater good, and philosophers define right and wrong by reviewing the social benefits of actions and decisions. Consequently, established religion, such as the Christian church, has fought to remain relevant in a world where questions of origins and futures are increasingly answered adequately enough for many people by science and secular philosophy. This process of social secularization has accompanied religious development throughout history, as the line between religion, politics and culture have constantly intertwined and intersected.

The religious language and ideologies of the American Civil War illustrate the pervasiveness of religion in politics and politics in religion. Most people live lives of integration with the various elements of their existence forming streams that overflow into each other. It is impossible to study historical events such as war without examining all of the component ingredients. Both sides of the Civil War found justifications for their actions. And initially, both were able to be confident of God's favor for their cause. Despite differing substantially on the issues leading to the war, the religious rhetoric of the Confederacy and the Union was extraordinarily similar throughout the war. However as the outcome of the war became progressively more evident to many, especially in the wake of the Battle of Gettysburg, this public religious dialogue developed along increasingly different lines. Whereas many in the South became progressively more unconfident of God's active role in their cause as 1863 wore on, that same period saw a growing assuredness in the North that God was indeed on their side, especially as many viewed the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation as the final element to put the North completely on God's side.

In the end, the major difference between perceptions of providence in the Union and the Confederacy is rooted in one of the few differences in religious rhetoric

at the beginning of the war. Most Southerners, as proclaimed through their papers and preachers, accepted from the moment of secession that God was on their side. In the North, ministers urged their congregations to be worthy of God's favor, a categorization that still differed in each area of the Union. As the North was pummeled by defeat in the first two years of the war, few Northerners ever publicly questioned that their cause was true. At the same time, many left room for a long and terrible struggle that would not always grant their army victory. In the South, the early success of Lee and his men contributed to the assumption of God's providential aid, and the first week of July, with the combined reverses of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, seriously challenged the ability of many in the South, especially those had not been absolutely convinced of God's assistance prior to July, to accept that God would ultimately lead them to victory.

Religion, both in schematic and practical ways, did change as a result of the Civil War. The nation changed. While issues such as homosexuality and church polity challenge denominations today, our nation has distanced church and state to such an extent that one could no longer fathom the splintering of denominations as the opening act of a national war. Further, it seems absurd to most twenty-first century students of history that a state could leave the union. Like mid-nineteenth century Americans, religion today is often part of the lives of Americans, but it rarely enters the public domain until times of national crisis, whether it is a shooting at a high school in Colorado or a terrorist attack on our military and economic nerve centers. Even today, in a world Americans feel is becoming increasingly secular, crises draw forth the depths of our religious reserves. Political leaders continue to use religious language to identify our cause and delineate our enemy. Religious leaders proclaim patriotic messages from the pulpit.

Rather than being an anomaly, public response to the Battle of Gettysburg is just one piece in the pattern of religious importance throughout history. Without religious dialogues, the ability of the two sides to process and move on in the face of Gettysburg would have been significantly different, and perhaps inconceivable. Each side needed to feel that God was on their side regardless of the battle results. The South moved forth from Gettysburg a different nation, seeing more acutely than before the vulnerability of their troops. The North stepped forward with a renewed will to press on. Their consequent religious adaptations began a spiral of difference that continued throughout that war. What has and does remain the same throughout history is the human desire or need to have the providential aid of God. Like their nineteenth century ancestors, today's Americans face their challenges with an eye heavenward, a nod to God's mysterious ways, and a hope for the intervention of Providence in their struggles.