



9-28-2018

“Where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty”: The Bible as a Vessel for Remembrance, Guidance, and Self-Understanding during the Civil War

Savannah Labbe
Gettysburg College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler>

 Part of the [Military History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Share feedback about the accessibility of this item.

Labbe, Savannah, ““Where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty””: The Bible as a Vessel for Remembrance, Guidance, and Self-Understanding during the Civil War” (2018). *The Gettysburg Compiler: On the Front Lines of History*. 339.
<https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/339>

This is the author's version of the work. This publication appears in Gettysburg College's institutional repository by permission of the copyright owner for personal use, not for redistribution. Cupola permanent link: <https://cupola.gettysburg.edu/compiler/339>

This open access blog post is brought to you by The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College. It has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of The Cupola. For more information, please contact cupola@gettysburg.edu.

“Where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty”: The Bible as a Vessel for Remembrance, Guidance, and Self-Understanding during the Civil War

Abstract

Courage, guidance, family, strength, self-understanding, and survival: These are just a few of the things that this Bible represented to the soldier who carried it. For Private Lewis Tway of the 147th New York Volunteers, this Bible provided a tangible link to all these things—a way to make sense of the at-times non-sensical chaos and carnage of war, a way to grow, learn, and adapt to the infinite physical and spiritual challenges of soldiering while still firmly rooting Tway in the foundational people and principles that gave his life meaning. Tway’s engagement with this Bible was never static; the evolution of that engagement, coupled with the multiple meanings that this Bible took on throughout the course of the Civil War were instrumental in shaping, and re-shaping, the man who carried it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Bible, Christianity, Lewis Tway, The Good Death

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

This blog post originally appeared in [The Gettysburg Compiler](#) and was created by students at Gettysburg College.

THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

“Where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty”: The Bible as a Vessel for Remembrance, Guidance, and Self-Understanding during the Civil War

By [Savannah Labbe '19](#)



The Bible of Lewis Tway

Courage, guidance, family, strength, self-understanding, and survival: These are just a few of the things that this Bible represented to the soldier who carried it. For Private Lewis Tway of the 147th New York Volunteers, this Bible provided a tangible link to all these things—a way to make sense of the at-times non-sensical chaos and carnage of war, a way to grow, learn, and adapt to the infinite physical and spiritual challenges of soldiering while still firmly rooting Tway in the foundational people and principles that gave his life meaning. Tway’s engagement with this Bible was never static; the evolution of that engagement, coupled with the multiple meanings that this Bible took on throughout the course of the Civil War were instrumental in shaping, and re-shaping, the man who carried it.

21-year-old Lewis Tway enlisted in the 147th New York in July of 1863, shortly after the Battle of Gettysburg, and was discharged in July of 1865. The 147th saw heavy fighting in between: The Battle of the Wilderness, the Mine Run Campaign, Cold Harbor, and the Siege of Petersburg were just a few of their major engagements. This Bible was carried through the carnage of those battles in Tway's pocket. Soldiers had to carry everything with them wherever they went. Though merely a palm-sized New Testament, this Bible would have meant extra weight for Tway to carry, but he found it important enough to do so. Its black leather binding worn to brown in some places from constant use, the Bible conveys a sense of constant companionship and consultation for Tway. It has a latch in the front that Tway would have to consciously remove to open it, but he did so time and time again. On the front page, he wrote his name and his regiment, which would have served as a type of dog tag in the case of his death—no doubt a comforting notion to a soldier who would be fighting hundreds of miles away from home and family. It also had blank pages in it which Tway could use as a sort of journal and a place to reflect on his experiences of warfare.

The text of the Bible is very small, but Tway marked up a lot of the passages in it that resonated with him, even writing notes in the margins. Tway's notes bear witness to the emotional and spiritual challenges he confronted as well as his evolving perspective on those challenges. For example, he circled in pencil, 1 Corinthians 15:20, which refers to the resurrection of Christ, and he writes the word "easter" next to it. He may have been reading this and remembering the comforts of home and how he attended Easter services before the war began, as well as how he celebrated the holiday with his family. Making such notations may have also been a way for Tway to get his mind off the horrors of war, by really thinking about and examining each verse and attempting to understand what they meant in the broader context of the Bible as well as the context of his life as a soldier. From instances like these it is obvious that Tway dedicated time to reading the small text of the Bible and reflecting on it and how its message intertwined with the realities of his daily life. As exhibited in Tway's notations, Tway appears to have turned to the Bible for self-understanding and as a coping mechanism during some of what were likely the darkest, most confounding days of his life.

For men like Tway, the Bible was not simply a holy book, but a piece of home they could carry with them. Many men received their Bibles as gifts from family members or dear friends. While it is unknown how Tway received his Bible, he most likely got it before leaving home. Judging by how worn and well-loved the Bible looks, it was one of Tway's most cherished possessions, perhaps one that was a reminder of who was waiting at home for him. While he was not married until after the war, he did have a sister that he was very close to and who was one of the few people he wrote to during the war. The Bible was a piece of home for Tway, a reminder of his sister and other loved ones for whom he was fighting, and who were waiting for him to come home. Along with this Bible, he also carried a picture of a little girl, possibly his sister, which would have complemented the Bible as a visual reminder of whom he was fighting for.

The weight of the Bible in Tway's pocket also served as a reminder to keep the faith and resist the many temptations of army life, such as alcohol, gambling, and prostitution. Religion, especially Christianity, was a powerful force in the lives of most 19th century Americans. They went to church every week and looked to the Bible for all forms of moral guidance and teaching. It was essential not to stray from those teachings, which was why so many soldiers, such as Charles O. Varnum of the 40th Massachusetts, were warned by their parents to be wary of temptation in camp. Such calls for caution were not unique to the Union. On the Confederate side, Carlton McCarthy's likewise father said he would rather see his son dead than hear tales of his immorality. The army had long been known as a place of temptation and these fathers were correct in voicing concern over their sons' moral health. The physicality of the book in Tway's pocket served as a constant reminder from home to never stray from the teachings of the Bible that so strongly undergirded so many elements of Victorian society.

Tway also probably found himself looking to his Bible often for religious advice or guidance in the midst of a war where God often seemed quite absent amidst the constant and horrifyingly brutal deaths of friends and comrades, who succumbed not only to battle wounds but to debilitating diseases. Tway wrote in a blank page of his Bible, "where the spirit of the Lord is there is liberty." He may have been trying to fortify his own courage by reminding himself that constant faith in the Lord would liberate his own soul, both to perform great acts of courage in battle and to reach the gates of Heaven. However, by writing this notation in the midst of war, Tway may have been suggesting that he believed the spirit of the Lord was with the Union and on the side of liberty, and thus also with Tway, as a soldier in blue. His notation also may have referred to the liberation of slaves, as he joined the army after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued. Thus, Tway may have been reflecting on the political aims of the war through the lens of the Bible which, for many, imbued the Union cause with a comforting sense of sacredly ordained responsibility.

Like Tway, people on both sides of the conflict used the Bible as justification of their cause. The South tended to take a literal approach to the Bible, citing its many references to slavery as proof that God condoned slavery. The North tended to interpret the Bible less literally, saying that the characteristics of God as depicted in the Bible proved that He would not condone slavery. Due to passages found in the Bible, both sides believed that God was on their side and that He supported their cause. Indeed, not only soldiers, but entire armies felt that they were carrying out God's will. For example, "Battle Hymn of the Republic," a Civil War song, is a deeply religious song written by a northerner who believed that the Union Army was doing God's work. The North was on a Christ-like mission, according to the song: "As [Christ] died to make men holy, let us die to make men free." The Bible was proof that the war and the killing necessitated by it were acceptable to God. Thus, the Civil War transformed the Bible into much more than a book that one looked to for moral guidance. It became a moral justification for all the killing and carnage that went along with the war. For the North especially, the war took on an increasingly religious cause, with the Emancipation Proclamation and the freeing of the slaves raised to a holy mission. Many northerners thus ultimately interpreted the war as a conflict fought under God's will for the North and the Union's great

“democratic experiment ” to win and the oppressed to be freed, not merely a war to reunite the states.

Similarly, Tway seemed to have looked to the Bible for constant reassurance that his actions on the battlefield were indeed compatible with, and justified, by God. He marked Mark 10:17-20 in which a man asks Jesus what he has to do to achieve eternal life and Jesus answers that he must keep the commandments, one of which is not to kill. Tway was unable to keep this commandment during the war, but he seemed to have reconciled this fact both with the comforting knowledge that the cause in whose name such killing occurred was morally justified, and with other, specific verses in the Bible that gave more personal comfort. One of these, was Luke 15:7, which reads “there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance.” As long as he repented, Tway knew he would still have a place in heaven. Tway was not the only soldier who worried about the apparent contradiction between soldiering and moral living; many dealt with immense guilt over the fact they had to kill their fellow human beings, even if they were the enemy. For these soldiers, the Bible provided moral guidance on how one could still achieve salvation.

In addition, the Bible also provided soldiers with temporary salvation from their present mental hell. Soldiers were constantly aware of the fact that they could die at any moment, which caused immense anxiety and depression for many. Tway became so preoccupied by the eventual reality of his own death, that he even wrote his own obituary after the war was over. This suggests that the war changed Tway by awakening him to the reality and eventuality of his own death. With death being a possibility every day during the war, Tway realized that it was similarly possible after the war and he made sure to take control of how he would be remembered. Many soldiers faced this same reality of possible death, especially before a battle; some looked to the Bible, praying that they would make it through safely, or praying for the strength to accept the Bible’s teachings about the preordained nature of death. Others looked to it after battle, as a way of coming to terms with the horrors they had witnessed and the carnage in which they had participated. For those on the verge of going into battle, carrying a Bible provided a sense that God literally was “by their side,” especially if one made it out of that battle alive and in one piece, which often caused immense gratitude towards God. The moral fortitude and sense of peace that many soldiers derived from the Bible also gave soldiers courage and the strength to face the prospect of death. This was especially necessary in a society where displays of cowardice could impugn both a soldier’s masculinity and sense of honor. Although Tway survived the war, he was wounded badly enough at the Battle of the Wilderness to receive a furlough so he could recover at home. The fact that he survived such a terrifying experience likely would have filled him with gratitude toward God and deepened the sense of personal closeness he felt to his Creator. Indeed, Tway likely clung to this very Bible not only during, but after his recovering as an act of devotion to God, who had saved his life.

Bibles were also used as *momento mori*, objects proving the soldier had died a “good death.” Achieving the “good death” was essential for 19th -century Americans. One was supposed to die at home, surrounded by family, and demonstrating a preparedness for death. It was believed that the last moments before death were reflective of what that person’s afterlife would be like. For instance, it was thought that if a person were to die screaming, they would be sentenced to perpetually scream in the afterlife. Screaming was a sign that the deceased was not prepared for death nor resigned to God’s will, so their place in heaven was uncertain. With soldiers fighting hundreds of miles away from home, and facing unimaginable horrors and prolonged suffering , the good death was hard to come by on the battlefields of the Civil War. Thus, surviving soldiers constantly struggled to justify the death of a fallen comrade when writing to his family. Families wanted to hear that their soldier had died a heroic death, and was calm and serene at the end, accepting of his fate. When no one was around to see how the soldier died, *momento mori* served as hints as to if the soldier faced death with bravery and acceptance or cowardice and denial—hints that fellow comrades could convey to family to comfort them in their grief. A Bible was an important *momento mori* because it showed that the deceased was a believer and had held onto his Bible until the last second, proving that he had accepted God’s will. If Tway had died during the war, his Bible would have helped assure his family that he had a place in heaven. Although Tway survived the war, his Bible likely still played an important role in how he remembered and internalized his wartime experiences. An active member in postwar veteran’ organizations, Tway clearly derived great pride and meaning from his military service. Such meaning was deeply shaped by the religious lens through which he had understood his soldiering experience and the war, its causes, and its consequences. His Bible had helped him, physically, morally, and spiritually survive the war and ensured that he could help contribute to the restoration of the Union and the liberation of four million souls.



Lewis Tway

As is evident, the Bible took on many meanings for Tway and many other Americans during the war, and it helped shape the wartime experiences and worldviews of soldiers in camp and on the battlefield. Tway used the Bible, as many other soldiers did, as a lens through which to view his experience and explain what was happening to him. The Bible was able to affirm for him that, while what he was doing was technically a sin, he could still earn a place in heaven should he kill in the name of liberty, and repent sufficiently for taking a life. For many other soldiers, the Bible provided the same comfort in the face of battle and possible death. It provided them with courage to face the ensuing carnage and an explanation as to why they deserved to live when so many of their friends had died. For these soldiers and Tway, the Bible helped shape their wartime experiences and provided them with hope, courage, and guidance amidst a kind of carnage and death they had never experienced before.

Sources:

Faust, Drew Gilpin. "'This Is My Last Letter to You'. (Cover story)." *Civil War Times* 47, no. 1 (February 2008): 28-35. Accessed September 3, 2017.

MacDonald, G Jeffrey. "Gettysburg Museum Looks at Faith Roles in Civil War." *The Christian Century* 130, no. 17 (August 21, 2013): 17. Accessed September 3, 2017.

Miller, Randall M. "The Civil War as a Theological Crisis: A Comment." *Fides Et Historia* 39, no. 2 (Sum 2007): 13-22. Accessed September 3, 2017.

MS-011: [Lewis Tway Collection](#). Gettdigital: Civil War Era Collection, Special Collections and College Archives, Gettysburg College, Gettysburg, PA. Accessed September 10, 2018.