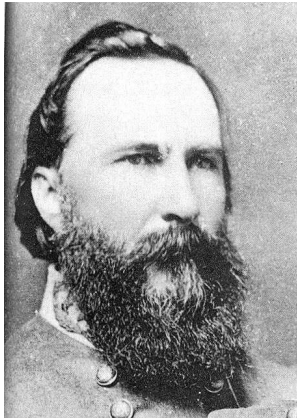


Spiritual Lessons from the American Civil War

Why I'm Interested

I am not a Civil War *aficionado*. I do not attend conventions. I do not dress up in Civil War garb and I don't go to reenactments. But since my youngest days I have been interested in the War Between the States. I was born in Washington D.C. and grew up just outside Washington in Annandale, Virginia (a town rich with Civil War history) and the echoes of that conflict were in my ears all of my growing up.

- Very young, my parents took me to a backwoods place between Fairfax and Annandale where the remnants of a wartime dam could still be viewed. (I re-visited the place this past summer). Union troops retreated through my neighborhood after both Bull Runs.
- In the sixth grade (on the kickball diamond), I found a minié ball. (I later learned there had been a wartime Federal stockade at that very place—even attacked by Mosby once!) As a Boy Scout, our troop occasionally met in a church annex, which had been used by both the Union and Confederate armies as a field hospital.
- A friend of mine had on his family property part of a railroad embankment from 1861.
 - When I discovered the wonder of Civil War cartography (map-making), I learned that there had once been Federal entrenchments all over my own neighborhood. (In late 1861 General Longstreet placed a Confederate signal tower down the road from my home.)
 - I have visited the battlefields at Manassas (many times), Antietam, Culpeper Court House, New Market, McDowell, Bridgewater, Port Republic, Cross Keys, Charleston harbor/Fort Sumter, Gettysburg (x2), Chancellorsville, Cold Harbor, the Wilderness, Hanging Rock, Franklin, Nashville, Petersburg, Williamsburg and Richmond. (My father-in-law is buried in the National Cemetery at Culpeper, which was opened after the Battle of Cedar Mountain).



But when I came to faith in Christ at nineteen years old another element of the War took on interest for me—an almost magical element. I was intrigued to learn that many famous men from the Civil War—names with which I was well acquainted--were men of great faith. In my twenties I first viewed the Jimmy Stewart film *Broken Arrow*, in which we were introduced to a character named Oliver Otis Howard, “the Christian general.” Howard was a real person (1830-1909) and was a true man of faith, a Federal major general by war's end, who had who lost an arm at the Battle of Fair Oaks. Despite the compulsion to fight in combat, to lead men in death or to order men *to* their deaths, these men of faith did not lose their belief in Jesus Christ. That kind of determination and strength inspires me. I make no claims of being a true Civil War historian. But in all my lengthy reading I find in the short, four year conflict a time which truly drove our nation *further* to its knees.



Perspective

I grew up in the sympathies of the Union. My Dad—to the extent that he spoke of it—was a strict Federalist and Unionist. He was from Wisconsin. My mother was from Nashville but was a Unionist also--although her great uncle (William T. Porch, who died in 1924 when my mother was 3 months old) served as a Confederate surgeon throughout the whole war, and another relative (William Polk “Gotch” Hardaman) achieved brigadier generalship in the Confederate army. Several other relatives were Confederate soldiers as well. Both of my parents were loyalists. They had no sympathy for the southern cause or passion. In later years, however, I became exposed to the reasonings of the South for seceding from the Union in April 1861...

Sources

Sources abound for learning about the spiritual side of life in that terrible conflict. Many books have been written about it (usually by southerners) and many personal testimonies have passed to us. Among my favorite books is a famous (and somewhat valuable) volume called *Christ in the Camp* written by J. William Jones and published in 1887. Jones served in the Confederate Army throughout the war and left behind a masterpiece on religion during the War. Indispensable is the 1876 book by W. W. Bennett, *The Great Revival in the Confederate Armies*. Biographies about Stonewall Jackson, Robert E. Lee, Oliver Otis Howard and many others contain a wealth of spiritual lesson material. I have re-read Dr. John Hannah’s Notes from his class at Dallas Seminary *Christianity in Post-Revolutionary America*. For the years leading up to the Civil War no work can match Iain Murray’s *Revival and Revivalism: The Making and Marring of American Evangelicalism, 1750-1858*. But perhaps most telling among “sources” were the countless thousands of New Testaments carried by blue and gray soldiers, sometimes being made famous for their “body armor” quality. This was the beginning of Testament distribution, so common among us today. Chaplains and “colporters” (book sellers) amassed in numbers during the war because demand became so great. They were always petitioned by the troops for a Testament, a hymnbook or a gospel pamphlet.

Now let’s consider a few lessons on spiritual matters from the War Between the States...

Rebellion and Independence

During the American Revolution a great debate ensued among Christians as to the propriety of a Christian to rebel against a standing government (see Romans 13). The same issue of conscience arose 85 years later when the southern states “rebelled.” Or, did they? Their argument was simply their right to secede and as Jefferson Davis stated it, “We just want to be left alone.”

“Rebellion” is a synonym for “sin.” It is part of our fallen nature to rebel and to promote our own autonomy. We value independence as a national virtue—the freedom of self-determination to govern and to set cultural priorities. But the darker side of the desire for independence shows up in the divorce rate, the fracturing of families and the transient nature of so many restless Christians between churches. The Civil War dramatically illustrates what happens when the desire for independence becomes paramount.

Revival Often Follows Tribulation

The Civil War came on the heels of a little-known (today) but wonderfully unusual event in American history-- the “Layman’s Prayer Revival” of 1857-58. This was the third tremendous spiritual “awakening” in our country’s short history and it began with a few very simple and straightforward noontime prayer meetings in Hamilton, Ontario and spreading to New York City and then to most major

cities in the nation and in the United Kingdom as well. There had been an economic panic in 1857 and what had been a period before then of unprecedented financial and commercial prosperity had an adverse effect on American people. Boom times had turned men's hearts *away* from God but when the boom turned to bust in 1857 (interest rates were rising *5% per month!*) people began to again sense their need of the Lord; they began again to look to prayer.

The Layman's Prayer Revival was almost entirely a layman's movement. The work was entirely non-sectarian. The meetings were orderly (a distinct lack of emotional excess) but were also completely spontaneous. The meetings were held promptly and ended promptly. The business was intercessory prayer and thanksgiving and praise. The Revival began in the urban areas and filtered down to rural communities. Newspapers greatly publicized the events.¹

Tribulation Often Follows Revival

Alas! Revivals do not tend to last. All three great American "Awakenings" faded. In this pastor's opinion we continue to await the next one. After the Layman's Prayer Revival political tensions accelerated in both the North and the South. They erupted when old Edwin Ruffin pulled the lanyard on the cannon which sent the first shell screaming into the wall at the Federal fort in Charleston harbor, Fort Sumter in April 1861. South Carolina said she was leaving the Union. Other southern states soon followed, vowing to form a new nation on the same basic principles upon which the United States had been founded, 85 years previous.

It isn't that God is quick to withdraw His blessings after a time of revival. But people are just quick to forget His blessings, to discount them or to allow them to become overshadowed again with the cares of this world. Often a time of revival is followed by a time of "the flesh." There is no better example than 1861 to 1865.

Sometimes Boredom Brings Revival

All most of us know about the Civil War (if we know this, even) are the names of battles and some of the famous commanders. But for all the four years of the war, during most of it the troops were stationary, in camp, enduring endless drill and training and preparation as well as the hard work of just staying alive (in the southern camps). This bred an excruciating boredom sometimes for months at a time.

In many cases this made great soil for spiritual openness. Chaplains would set up services, distribute literature and Bibles and teach the troops Christian songs. To be sure, many were not interested. But many *became* interested, especially in light of the promise of eternal life and the ever-present possibility of battle (and death). Eternal life was not mere theoretical fantasy. If it was real, it would be needed soon enough! Time to ponder these things, fueled by the monotony camp routine opened some men up to the work of the Spirit.

High Death Prospects Raise One's Spiritual Awareness

It is no guarantee that a person will embrace Christ by faith, but going into battle and knowing that "your number may be up today" certainly has a way of raising one's awareness and attentiveness to spiritual things. Civil War diaries are full of talk about the immanency of death. Many soldiers changed their spiritual outlook after experiencing doubts about their peace-time religion. In that war death became industrial. After the first few months of the war—when everybody awakened to the fact that it would not a brief conflict—soldiers, civilians and correspondents alike learned to expect death to strike large numbers horribly and indiscriminately. In some camps the prevalent song was "If you do not have yourself ready to meet your Maker, you are a fool!" But in many places, as the war wore on, soldiers became spiritually indifferent or fatalistic about death.

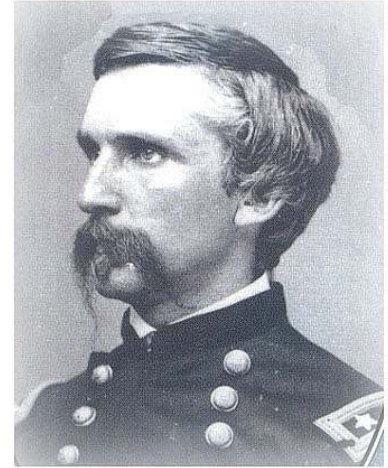
Tribulation Is Unpredictable for Breeding Bitterness or Tenderness

There are countless examples of soldiers who fought hard in the Civil War, lost friends, beloved commanders, horses that were dear to them and surviving many other deprivations, but who did NOT allow their hearts to become spiritually softened. Chief among these was General Jubal Early of the Confederate Army, an attorney before and after the war. From Manassas to Appomattox Early was a bitter, hard man and remained so until he died in 1894.

In contrast was a man like Medal of Honor winner Joshua Chamberlain of the 20th Maine. A college scholar and orthodox Congregationalist, Chamberlain was thrust into heroism at Gettysburg on Little Round Top. He suffered six serious injuries throughout the War (and had six horses shot out from underneath him) but lived until 1914. He remained a tenderhearted man, reflective, spiritual, unhardened—steadfastly resigned to the “providence of God.” Just before his death he said, “I am passing through deep water...I am trying



to get a little closer to God and to know him better.” Enigmatic Richard Ewell also held on to his faith until his death in 1872—though being severely chided by a friend for having any faith even on his deathbed. The contrasts of the effects of “tribulation” make us echo Jeremiah, *The heart is deceitfully wicked—who can know it?*



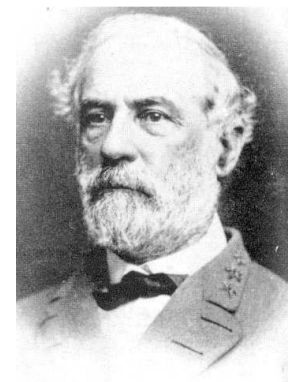
God’s Providence Allows Great Suffering

We do not know why God would allow such a holocaust as the American Civil War. But it is a simple lesson that God does allow such things. It is not out of a mean-spiritedness in Him. It is, as we say, providential. It is interesting that in the correspondence of great soldiers of faith (Lee, Jackson, Howard) there are frequent references to “an all-wise Providence.” It was a favorite wartime title for God.

Some of our most well-known “thinkers” today balk at one thing in our theology: how can God allow suffering? They reject the traditional God of Judeo-Christianity because they determine that any *reasonable* God would disallow significant suffering or injustice. Part of our theology is to admit that we do not understand all things that happen. But we entertain a *high* view of sin and its rampant effects on this world. We understand that in the Lord, Himself, there is no evil. But for His greater dispensational plans, He has allowed evil to exist, to rage and to take lives. And as we understand biblical prophecy, it is only going to grow worse. But God has also ordained the “weapons of warfare,” chief among which is prayer. It is no small weapon, in the heart and mind of those who choose to make use of it. God has ordained that prayer by Christians is a powerful deterrent to evil in this world.

God is Bigger Even than Human Holocausts

As the battlefields again sprouted grass and saplings and wildflowers after Appomattox, people began to recover from the War. The war was true horror and tragedy. Our country has seen none worse. But with time people came to see that even in its hellish effect the War was used by God. Robert E. Lee pondered this in the short five years he had to live after his surrender (he died of congestive heart failure in 1870).

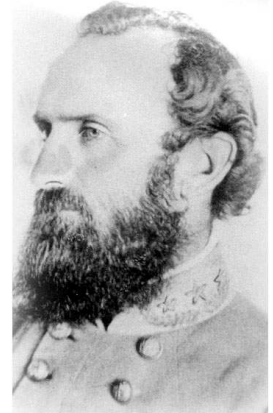


It would be trite to say that “time heals all wounds,” even the most severe. History does not always bear that out. But history does bear out that

occasional “holocaust” has been part of the whole human experience. Gods plans transcend all human suffering. I do not mean to trivialize human suffering or injustice or tyranny. But from the Christian perspective the greatest “holocaust” was endured by the spotless Lamb of God. We cannot begin to imagine the suffering of the Son of God on the cross.

How Spiritual Men Sometimes Interact

My own studies have taken me deep into the literature about Lt. General T. J. “Stonewall” Jackson and the other commanders around him. Jackson and Lee were very close, although not in the “huggy” way we think of “close” today. Jackson was Presbyterian and Lee was Episcopalian, but their personal theologies were indistinguishable. Before the War Jackson was a professor of military engineering at V.M.I. in Lexington, Virginia. He died half-way through the war and was buried in Lexington. Lee never recovered from the loss of Jackson and it is thought by many that had Jackson been alive during the Gettysburg campaign the outcome would have been different. It is providential that he was not. (Note: Lee lived out his last five years in Lexington (as President of Washington College). Jackson’s grave must have haunted him and he, himself was buried nearby.)

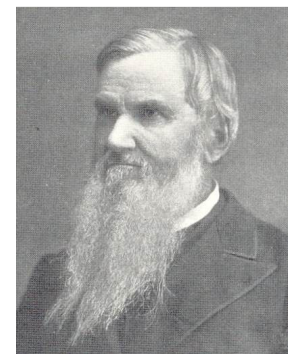


Lee and Jackson were both men of prayer and there was a mutual respect and deference between them. There was no Union army counterpart to this team (unless you count Grant and Sherman, who enjoyed a good understanding.) But both were Jackson and Lee were spiritual men who revered the Word of God (Jackson taught a Sunday School class every week for African-American children *before* the War). But both men had great conflicts with *other* commanders who were also Christians. These were not theological issues. They were matters of ego and patience and “doing things my way.” Sometimes the best of men simply do not get along, despite their brotherhood in Christ.

When We Think Our Culture is “Biblical”

Unlike today, people in the 1800s assumed that God cared about their lifestyle choices and that He was “near” enough to mankind to care about their societal choices—how they choose to run their country. Both northerners and southerners assumed that their perspective on morality was the “high ground.” Simply put, everyone thinks God is on their side. Northern preachers railed against the injustice of slavery. Southerners responded that the Bible neither condemns slavery nor offers any mandate for emancipation. It was a rhetorical “war” for four decades.

Robert L Dabney was a fiery Presbyterian theologian, pastor, architect, writer and one-time adjutant to General “Stonewall Jackson.” He is well known among evangelical thinkers of the period and his four-volume *Discussions* form one of the best statements of Christian theology there is. But an obscure writing, re-published only fairly recently is a little volume entitled *A Defense of Virginia and the South*. The uniqueness of this book is in its strident and careful attempt to demonstrate that the southern way of life was biblically *permissible*. Dabney sought to meet the great host of northern preachers on the field in an intellectual and rhetorical “Gettysburg.” And long after the guns were stacked and battle flags surrendered at Appomattox the “war of pen” continued.



The compelling call to us (with the benefit of being 135 years removed from Civil War passions), is to see that just because we may *think* our view of culture is biblically sound, it may be less so than we believe. Only until recent years have we envisioned American society as being “Christian.” And indeed many of our institutions and customs and public services were motivated out of Christian principles and even originated by Christians, themselves. But if the Civil War illustrates anything, it shows how sincere,

biblically minded people can come down very differently on matters not strictly related to faith. Whatever our passions *now* about slavery or about States-rights, these are not the front-line spiritual issues addressed in the Scriptures. Men and women of seemingly equal spiritual attainment, might be on completely opposite ends of the issue of “political involvement.” Within the same city, equally spiritual people may interpret differently on how a Christian is to respond to abortion-on-demand, the drug problem, homosexuality, the AIDS community and domestic violence.

I am reminded of Paul’s words to the Galatians (an area with no small cultural complexities): ***If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another*** (Galatians 5:25,26). In the decades leading up to the Civil War—there was great envy and challenge between Northern thinkers and Southern thinkers. There was jealousy (the South did not possess the industrialization nor the immigrant force that was in the North; the North could not make slavery work—when it *did* in the South after the invention of the cotton gin). Great societal movements all begin with one or two or three individuals who have a passion and a vision for “how it should be.” When those people are Christians, they are responsible to be *Spirit-filled* and to pray and to seek the Lord.

When Disillusionment Unclouds the Spirit

Pre-war America was a wonderful time of prosperity all across the land. Only on the Western frontier was deprivation much known. These were the high times for New Bedford, for instance, when commerce peaked and the city grew.

But when the Civil War devastated the lands (from Pennsylvania to Texas and particularly in the deep South), it disillusioned people with their smugness and success. It brought them face to face with an undeniable depravity. It was not yet fashionable to blame evil on evolutionary mutation. It was still laid at the door of “sin.” People’s spirits, for a while, became unclouded from their prosperity. It would not last. No revival does. But for a season, after Appomattox, there was a national *tenderness* to the things of the Lord. This was the time of the beginning of the great works of “missions.” For better or worse, it was a time of great *definition*, theologically—a time of searching the Scriptures--as most of the almost countless Protestant denominations found their beginning in the post-War years. (Note: the world’s largest Protestant denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, had its beginning in the time of and because of the Civil War.)

When we pray for revival today (as some of us do) what are we really asking God to do? A necessary part of revival is a corporate humbling. What would it take to humble modern Americans? What would it take to drive people to the cross of Jesus Christ and lay down their shallow adherence to religious pluralism?

When Bravery and Courage Accompany Faith

I am convinced that the truly noble do not show themselves until the “chips are down.” Evangelical Christians today are great talkers, and so we have always been. In recent decades we have become Great Articulators. But I am confronted by countless accounts from the Civil War—of men far less articulate and particular—accounts which testify that real faith is usually accompanied by a simple bravery, self-sacrifice and courage.

Bravery cannot be planned. Its behavior can perhaps be trained and conditioned but its actual outworking cannot be scheduled. It is either there or not. The apostles had to manifest a constant bravery and sometimes their hearts failed them (ref. John Mark in his early days). Real confidence in the promises of the Lord Jesus Christ will come to the surface under conditions of danger. False confidence and faith will burn up under fire. So many Civil War heroes found ability to serve their country, their commanders and their comrades because they *knew that this is not all there is!*

When Real Horror Precludes Fantasy Horror

Finally, I see in our culture of prosperity today the phenomena of spiritual callousness. In particular there is a marked (and I believe growing) insensitivity, even fascination with horror. But when the horror of Civil War was all around, there was no need to manufacture *fantasy* horror. Our culture today, evidently, can afford to invent spiritual horror. Movies, books, comic books, commercials, television shows, Halloween displays, heavy metal music, etc. all are creatively exploring more and more ways to *pretend* in the area of horror.

But when a man is standing in front of you—maybe even a man who was once your neighbor—and his clear goal for the moment is to disembowel you, personally with his sword or with his bayonet—the silliness of our modern national preoccupation with fantasy horror becomes clear. If America needs anything it is to recover our national common sense; to reign back on commercialism; to discipline the out-of-control lust to make a buck on anything that will sell. When we look back on 1861 to 1865—remembering that the War devastated a basically prosperous country—we can get a good perspective on how far we have spiritually deteriorated. We can be grateful for technology's advances and for good progress of all kinds. But a culture which can afford the time, money and creative energy for entertainment which is evil-focused is a culture which urgently needs revival.

The American Civil War abounds in spiritual lessons. We have only mentioned a few. Although this great conflict only lasted four years, it has permanently marked the course of our country and its people. We are still feeling the effects of that time.

ⁱ Dr. John Hannah, unpublished Notes for the Seminary class *Christianity in Post-Revolutionary America*, c. 1981