

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## A Great Deal of Good: The Work and Impact of Chaplains During the American Civil War

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“There is a protracted meeting going on in camp. We have preaching in the forenoon and prayer meeting in the evening . . . and it is my opinion it will do us a great deal of good.” ~ *Private John Meredith Crutchfield, Co. I, 60<sup>th</sup> Regiment, Virginia Infantry, Princeton, Mercer County, VA, 26 April 1863*<sup>1</sup>

The work of chaplains during the Civil War has, until recent years, been overlooked by many historians and scholars. While the more general topic of religion’s role during the war has been thoroughly researched and written about, the more specific role of the men involved in the work of ministering to soldiers has not received quite as much attention. The impact religion had on Civil War soldiers would never have been as pervasive were it not for the dedicated work of chaplains. Whether these men were Protestant preachers (the vast majority), Catholic priests, or Jewish rabbis, the influence of those who served in the capacity of chaplain was as definite as it was long lasting. Fortunately, a growing number of scholars are now recognizing and writing about the influence of Civil War chaplains, as a recent study attests:

“For the overwhelming number of Union and Confederate soldiers, religion was the greatest sustainer of morale in the Civil War. Faith was a refuge in great time of need. Troops faced battle by forgetting earthly pleasures and looking heavenward . . . Guarding and guiding the spiritual well-being of the soldiers was the primary responsibility of army chaplains.”<sup>2</sup>

For many of the young men who fought in the Civil War, it was their first time away from home for any extended period of time.<sup>3</sup> For these same men—away from the

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from Private John Meredith Crutchfield to Alcinda Douglas Crutchfield, April 26, 1863, from the author’s private collection. (Crutchfield is the author’s great-great grandfather.)

<sup>2</sup> John W. Brinsfield, William C. Davis, Benedict Maryniak, James I. Robertson, Jr., *Faith in the Fight - Civil War Chaplains* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2003), viii.

<sup>3</sup> The average age of a soldier during the war was just under 26.

influence of father and mother and exposed to a number of vices—chaplains often served as surrogate parents in keeping a young soldier on the righteous path. One soldier from Indiana’s Twenty-third no doubt expressed the sentiments of many of his comrades when he wrote: “Our chaplain, J.D. Rodgers, is as a father to me and keeps me straight.”<sup>4</sup>

Of course, chaplains were not new to the United States military. They had served since the American Revolution, though not in great numbers. The Civil War would see an increase in their numbers, as well as their influence. The Confederate Congress was the first to authorize Civil War chaplains for service in the army.

On May 3, 1861, bill 102 stated: “There shall be appointed by the President such number of chaplains, to serve with the armies of the Confederate States during the existing war, as he may deem expedient; and the President shall assign them to such regiments, brigades or posts as he may deem necessary; and the appointments made as aforesaid shall expire whenever the existing war shall terminate.”<sup>5</sup>

Originally, the Confederate Congress authorized a chaplain’s pay to be \$85 per month, but the amount was, by amendment, lowered to \$50 after one congressman complained that “all a chaplain has to do is to preach once a week.”<sup>6</sup> History and experience would prove the congressman wrong.

The United States Congress soon followed suit in authorizing chaplains. On August 3 1861, the United States Congress set the guidelines for Union chaplains. They were to be elected by the ranks and commissioned as officers by the regimental colonel commanding, after which the chaplain’s name was to be forwarded to the War Department for commissioning. The term of service for a chaplain ranged from three months to nine months, or even three years, depending on the terms of enlistment for the regiment.<sup>7</sup> Once commissioned, a Union chaplain was to receive \$100 per month, plus rations, and feed for one horse; if they had one.

All told, at least 2387 men and 1 woman served in the Union army as Chaplains, while Confederate records show at least 1303 men serving. The details of those who served as chaplains during the Civil War reveal their diversity and the overwhelmingly Protestant composition of the armies:<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Steven E. Woodworth, *While God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2001), 145.

<sup>5</sup> Charles F. Pitts, *Chaplains in Gray: The Confederate Chaplains’ Story* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1957), 39.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 40

<sup>7</sup> Benedict R. Maryniak and John Wesley Brinsfield, Jr., *The Spirit Divided: Memoirs of Civil War Chaplains - The Union* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007), xvi.

<sup>8</sup> “Their Service in Numbers” n.d., accessed 13 August 2011

[http://www.chaplainsmuseum.org/i/?page\\_id=311](http://www.chaplainsmuseum.org/i/?page_id=311)

### In the Union Army

- 32 Naval Chaplains
- 32 Post chaplains
- 178 hospital chaplains
- 2138 regimental
- 631 Methodist – 26.42%
- 284 Presbyterian – 11.89%
- 199 Baptist – 8.3%
- 176 Episcopalian – 7.37%
- 140 Congregational – 5.9%
- 93 Roman Catholic – 3.89%
- 44 Unitarian – 1.84%
- 26 Dutch Reformed – 1.09%
- 25 Lutheran – 1.05%
- 21 Disciples of Christ – .88%
- 19 Universalists – .80%
- 8 Dutch Reformed – .34%
- 4 African Methodist – .17%
- 4 Church of Christ – .17%
- 3 Brethren – .13%
- 3 Jewish – .13%
- 3 Quakers – .13%
- 1 Christian – .04%
- 1 Evangelical – .04%
- 1 Moravian – .04%
- 1 Religio Philosophical Society – .04%
- 1 Unified Church of Christ – .04%
- 727 no record found – 30.4%

### In the Confederate Army

- 1162 regimental chaplains
- 91 hospital chaplains
- 40 post chaplains
- 10 camp/fort chaplains
- 438 Methodists – 33.6%
- 180 Presbyterian – 13.8%
- 159 Baptist – 12.20%
- 98 Episcopalian – 7.5%
- 30 Roman Catholic – 2.3%
- 17 Cumberland Presbyterian – 1.30%
- 12 Lutherans - .92%
- 6 Disciples of Christ – .46%

- 1 Congregational – .08%
- 351 no record – 26.9%

While their numbers were relatively small compared to the more than 2.5 million soldiers who fought from 1861 to 1865 their impact, though somewhat veiled, was substantial; particularly in the South.<sup>9</sup> Over 150,000 Confederate soldiers rededicated or were baptized during the war, and actual new conversions within the Confederate Army have been estimated to be at least 100,000, with an equal or greater number in the Union Army. Eighty percent of college students in the South after the war found their religious faith while in the Confederate Army, while thirteen former Confederate chaplains were consecrated as bishops by 1892, and twelve former Confederate chaplains became presidents of major colleges. By 1890 church membership and the value of church property in the South were double that of 1860, new growth included 10,000 new Baptist churches in Texas alone.

But the work of chaplains, both North and South, often went beyond just the spiritual needs of their flocks. As Steven Woodworth points out in his book, *While God Is Marching On*, chaplains fulfilled a variety of duties including that of courier, postal clerk, carpenter, nurse, gunrunner, and soldier.<sup>10</sup>

The chaplaincy also produced some unexpected firsts during America's bloodiest war. To the Union belongs the distinction of authorizing the first female military chaplain. After first receiving encouragement from President Lincoln upon expressing a desire to become an Army chaplain, Mrs. Ellen E. Hobart did not receive the same welcome from Secretary of War Edwin Stanton--despite a signed note of approval from Lincoln himself. Though Hobart was an ordained minister and married to a regimental chaplain, Stanton bristled at the notion, stating he did not want to "set a precedent" and then bluntly refused Hobart's petition.<sup>11</sup> But Hobart, coming from a rather liberal theological background, had been trained to challenge traditional notions of Christian service and dogma.<sup>12</sup> She continued to work with various Christian aid societies on behalf of soldiers and eventually won the support of Wisconsin Governor, James T. Lewis. After obtaining the endorsement of several other ministers, as well as gaining the confidence of a number of

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<sup>9</sup> The consensus among historians is that religion and revivalism, while present in both armies, was much more widespread and influential in the Confederate Army than it was in the Union. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust suggests that this was due to "the greater homogeneity of religious outlook within the overwhelmingly evangelical and Protestant southern army" as well as "the more profound stresses on southern soldiers, who because of shortages of manpower and material served for longer periods of time, with fewer furloughs, and with greater physical deprivation." See: Drew G. Faust. "Christian soldiers: The meaning of revivalism in the Confederate army" *The Journal of Southern History*, 53 (February 1987): 63-90.

<sup>10</sup> Woodworth, 154-158

<sup>11</sup> Brinsfield, Davis, Maryniak, Robertson, 37.

<sup>12</sup> Hobart had been ordained by the Religio Philosophical Society of St. Charles, Illinois—a spiritualist organization which rejected many orthodox Christian traditions.

Union soldiers, Ella Hobart was elected chaplain of the 1<sup>st</sup> Wisconsin Heavy Artillery on November 22, 1864, thus becoming the first female chaplain in the United States military. Governor Lewis later recanted his original support and refused to commission her, “if Stanton won’t muster you” and the war ended with Hobart’s status in limbo. After several years of political wrangling, Congress would eventually pass a joint resolution on March 3, 1869 that authorized Hobart’s right to receive the full pay and recognition of a U.S. Army chaplain.

To the Confederacy also belongs a first in the history of military chaplains—the first black man known to minister to white soldiers. The September 10, 1863 issue of *The Religious Herald*, recounted how a Tennessee regiment was having difficulty securing a chaplain to conduct religious services for its soldiers. A slave in the regiment known by the men as “Uncle Lewis” enjoyed a reputation among the men of being devout. He was asked to fill in temporarily and conduct a worship service.

The soldiers were so pleased with his service that they asked him to continue to serve as their chaplain from the spring of 1862 until the close of the war, during which time the regiment experiences two revivals. The *Religious Herald* correspondent describing the services wrote, “He is heard with respectful attention, and for earnestness, zeal, and sincerity, can be surpassed by none.” To this Tennessee regiment, as well as the reporter who wrote the story, the service of their black chaplain was “a matter of pride.”<sup>13</sup>

Uncle Lewis’s full name was Louis Napoleon Nelson and he served with Company M, 7<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry, which was part of Nathan Bedford Forrest’s command. According to Nelson’s grandson, Nelson Winbush, his grandfather told him that a number of Yankee soldiers once joined the Tennesseans during a worship service and, after its conclusion, “all shook hands and went back to fighting.”<sup>14</sup>

As already noted, chaplains were also known to take on additional responsibilities beyond their ministerial duties. This often exposed them to the same dangers as soldiers. While many exhibited great courage, the battlefield sometimes revealed that ministers were best suited for preaching, not fighting. A somewhat humorous incident serves as an illustration of misplaced talents.

Robert Lewis Dabney was a well-known theologian and pastor who served on Stonewall Jackson’s staff as both aide-de-camp and chaplain. Dabney possessed a fervent belief in the doctrine of providence and this was a frequent topic of his sermons. Major Hugh Nelson had been present during a service where Dabney had exhorted the soldiers to face death fearlessly as providence had already determined the time and place of their death. Sometime after that service, Nelson was present at the battle of Malvern Hill and

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<sup>13</sup> Pitts, pp 48-49.

<sup>14</sup> Author telephone interview with Nelson Winbush, 10 October 2007. See also: “In Defense of His Confederate Pride”, October 7, 2007 accessed 13 August 2011. [http://www.sptimes.com/2007/10/07/State/In\\_defense\\_of\\_his\\_Con.shtml](http://www.sptimes.com/2007/10/07/State/In_defense_of_his_Con.shtml)

found himself under heavy fire. Jackson was also in the vicinity and as the fire became severe, ordered his staff to dismount and find shelter. Dabney took refuge behind a large, thick oak gate post, where he sat upright with his back pressed against the post. About that time, Nelson, whose views on providence did not completely agree with Dabney's, rode up and galloped directly toward Dabney where he coolly saluted the nervous Chaplain and said:

“Dr. Dabney, every shot, and shell, and bullet is directed by the God of battles, and you must pardon me for expressing my surprise that you should want to put a gate post between you and special providence.” Dabney, without hesitation, replied: “No! Major, you misunderstand the doctrine I teach. And the truth is that I regard this gate post as a special providence, under present circumstances.”<sup>15</sup>

Men trained as theologians and preachers displayed amazing courage when facing death, even when presented with an easy means of escape. Albert Gallatin Willis was offered a chaplain's pardon to avoid a hanging execution by Union soldiers. His response was quite remarkable.

He had been serving with Confederate Colonel John Singleton Mosby's rangers for several months. Though born into a wealthy Virginia family, Willis chose to pursue a life of gospel ministry and was, at the time the war broke out, studying to be a Baptist preacher. Willis had been looking forward to seeing his home as he headed toward Culpeper, Virginia on October 13, 1864. Mosby's men enjoyed frequent furloughs as their lightning-quick, hit and run missions allowed them to return to their homes and farms often. But Willis's horse came up lame near Flint Hill, forcing him to stop at the local farrier's shop at Gaine's Crossroad. Suddenly, Willis and an unnamed companion were surrounded by troops of the 2nd West Virginia Cavalry. Taken prisoner, the two soon learned their fate. One of them would be hanged. That order had come from General Ulysses S. Grant as retribution for Federals Mosby had killed. Grant's order required that one Confederate be hanged “without trial” for each Yankee killed by Mosby's men.

Speaking with the two young men separately, Union Brigadier General William H. Powell informed them they were to draw straws to determine which man would die. Powell also informed Willis that he could claim a chaplain's exemption, if he so chose. Willis had not yet been ordained and did not believe he deserved such consideration. He refused Powell's offer. The two prisoners were brought back together and ordered to draw straws. Willis's unnamed companion drew the short straw and then burst into tears crying, “I have a wife and children, I am not a Christian and am afraid to die!”

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<sup>15</sup> J. William Jones, “Seven Days Around Richmond: Reminiscences of The Army of Northern Virginia,” *Southern Historical Society Papers*, IX October-December, 1881, 567.

Upon hearing those words, Willis spoke up: “I have no family, I am a Christian, and not afraid to die.”<sup>16</sup> Due to Willis’s willingness to stand in his stead, his companion was released. Within moments and after praying for his executioners, Albert Gallatin Willis was hanged. Today his remains rest inside a white picket fence in the tiny graveyard of Flint Hill Baptist Church in Flint Hill, Virginia.

This sort of remarkable bravery in the face of death is something that awes us still today. Death in 19th century America, even without war, was much more of an everyday event than it is to most Americans living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Witnessing family members pass was common as the sick and dying were most often cared for at home. The soldiers who fought during the Civil War were more accustomed to death than we are today. Even so, this reality did little to prepare them for the violent and sudden carnage they would witness on the battlefield. Such brutality would test the metal of many a young man. It was part of a chaplain’s duty to console, comfort, and encourage those who wavered in the face of death. One such incident is recounted in the memoirs of Union Chaplain Milton T. Haney of the 55<sup>th</sup> Illinois Infantry:

“It was soon understood that we were to assault the enemy in this stronghold . . . One of the boys, who was a brave soldier, came to tell me that he had a strong conviction if he went into battle he would be killed, and asked me what to do. He had been clearly converted, but had let go his hold on Christ. After reflection, I said: ‘You go down that ravine and pray till you get tremendously blessed, and come to me again, and if you then want to be excused, I will see your Captain and get you off.’ I knew we were to be there for a time. He obeyed orders and disappeared for an hour, perhaps, but when he reappeared his face was aglow with glory, and coming to me, he said: ‘Chaplain, you need not speak to the Captain now. I am all right,’ and went into the battle and came out without a scratch.”<sup>17</sup>

Stories similar to that of young Albert Willis and Chaplain Haney would be repeated over and over during the Civil War: men of faith doing their duty; self-sacrificing for others, ministering to and encouraging those in their charge—often without recognition and with many of their deeds going unnoticed or having been long forgotten. Retired Army Chaplain and historian John Wesley Brinsfield, Jr. offers a concise summary of the service rendered by Civil War chaplains:

“The contributions of these chaplains continued through the greatest war ever fought on the American continent. They performed heroic service for soldiers and for their country even when they were underpaid, underfed, and unappreciated outside of the army. They conducted the only real evangelistic and pastoral work available for more than 2.5 million soldiers on both sides, efforts which resulted in the rebuilding of

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<sup>16</sup> Mary Elizabeth Hite, *My Rappahannock Story Book*, (Richmond, VA: Dietz Press, 1950), 194. See also: John S. Salmon and Margaret T. Peters, *A Guidebook to Virginia’s Historical Markers* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 56.

<sup>17</sup> Maryniak and Brinsfield, pp 163-164.

hundreds of churches and missionary enterprises after the war. They also became church and community leaders in the latter half of the century with influence far in excess of their numbers.”<sup>18</sup>

And in so doing, these chaplains did a great deal of good.

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<sup>18</sup> John Wesley Brinsfield, Jr., *The Spirit Divided: Memoirs of Civil War Chaplains - The Confederacy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2005), xi.