

The Revival in the Confederate Army

by Benjamin R. Lacy

The revival in the Confederate Army was a remarkable and important chapter in war history, marked by widespread conversions and a deepening of the faith of professors of religion.

Scripture: 2 Chronicles 7:14, Psalm 119:105, Proverbs 27:17, Matthew 28:19, 1 Corinthians 3:6, Ephesians 6:18, 1 Timothy 2:1, 2 Timothy 2:15, Hebrews 13:7, James 5:16

Topics: "Revival History", "Spiritual Awakening"

Description

Benjamin R. Lacy preaches about the remarkable and enduring revival that took place in the Confederate States of America armies during the Civil War, highlighting the unexpected spiritual awakening amidst the chaos of battle and the separation from home influences. The revival began in various locations, including Richmond, northern Virginia, Charleston, and the armies of the west, spreading rapidly and persisting even through significant battles like Fredericksburg and Gettysburg. The instrumentalities of the revival included fervent prayer, the distribution of Bibles and Testaments, godly leaders and officers, and dedicated chaplains and missionaries who worked tirelessly to spread the Gospel.

Transcript

The revival that took place in the armies of the Confederate States of America was among the most unusual recorded in history. War is generally a time of spiritual defection. The removal of men from their accustomed routines and from the influence of their home ties usually renders the development of the spiritual life and high moral standards difficult. Therefore, to find a great revival maintained over a period of years in a body of troops spread throughout a large territory is an interesting and instructive phenomenon.

The Development of the Revival

The work of grace first appeared in the camps and hospitals around Richmond. While the more notable movement was in northern Virginia, there were also reports of revivals near Charleston and in the armies of the west. Captain Kirkpatrick of Lynchburg gave an account of his unit wherein a few men began singing hymns around a campfire, then engaged in a conversation on religion until all but one declared themselves ready to turn to God. This scene was multiplied in the camps.

When the army moved to the Rappahannock, the revival was greatly accelerated. Before the battle of Fredericksburg, great religious interest prevailed. We have accounts of open-air services that even generals and their staffs attended.

Services were conducted through the week in the various units by chaplains and missionaries sent to the army by various denominations. There were no candles, so firestands were erected, and in the light of these flaming torches services were conducted throughout the brigades. After the service had been concluded, those concerned would gather around the firestands. Religious conversation would be continued for an hour or two, and frequently fifteen or twenty at a time were converted in these groups.

Even the battles and the subsequent march into Pennsylvania did not put an entire stop to the movement, for we find references to religious interest from men writing back from Chambersburg and other points in Pennsylvania. The disastrous effects of Gettysburg and Vicksburg, both culminating on the Fourth of July, 1863, dampened the ardor of the South but not that of the revival.

During the fall of 1863 and the spring and winter preceding Grant's attack on May 5, 1864, the revival reached its greatest heights, spreading from company to regiment, from regiment to brigade, from brigade to division, from division to army corps, until the entire Army of Northern Virginia was seriously affected.

General John B. Gordon, who actively participated in the revival, tells us that in every camp religious altars were erected around which ragged soldiers knelt and worshiped: "The religious revivals which ensued formed a most remarkable and important chapter in war history. Rocks and woods rang with appeals to holiness. Thousands became soldiers of the Cross."

The revival, however, was not confined to the armies of northern Virginia, though there it had perhaps its most striking manifestation. In January 1863, when the revival in Virginia was gaining momentum, there was apparent apathy in the Army of the West. A chaplains association was organized in that army, with Dr. B. D. McDonald of the Cumberland Presbyterian Church as president. One chaplain recalled how astounded they were at that time when Chaplain Winchester said that he believed they were "on the eve of one of the most glorious revivals ever witnessed on the American Continent." His colleagues caught fire from his zeal and went away resolved to work for such a revival.

A revival manifested itself soon in the forty-sixth Georgia Regiment, in which there were 140 converts in two weeks. A report to the Synod of Virginia stated: "There is a state of religion in the Army of Tennessee, quite as interesting as that in the Army of Northern Virginia. The Rev. Dr. Palmer says that he has never before seen so great a movement." Crowds of soldiers were recorded as attending preaching everywhere. The Christian Observer is filled with references to revivals in all parts of the army, including Vicksburg before their surrender and the soldiers of the Army of Middle Tennessee.

In fact, the reports of the revival read like a roster of the Southern army, with such units and places as the following mentioned: the twenty-sixth Alabama, General Hardy's corps, the Texas Rangers, General Bragg's army, Ransom's brigade, the North Carolinians, the Second South Carolina Rifles, General Johnston's army, Mahone's brigade, and such far-scattered points as northern Virginia, Florida, Texas, and Mississippi. Of the eleventh Georgia Regiment, it was recorded, "A great revolution has been wrought in the moral tone of the brigade," and a soldier returning from prison, after walking through his regiment awhile, exclaimed, "What is the matter? Has all the regiment been converted?" He heard no oaths and was surprised.

The Rev. B. T. Kavanaugh gave an account of the revival in General Price's force which fought first in Mississippi and then in Arkansas and experienced revivals on both sides of the river. The revival in this unit was the most extensive between June 10 and September 10, 1864, when the large majority of two brigades were converted. There were like meetings in other camps, yielding an estimated thousand

converts. After the army was disbanded, Kavanaugh went through Arkansas and Texas and found these men still true to their profession.

One would imagine that with the flanking movements of Grant against Lee, and Sherman against Johnston, which began in the spring and early summer of 1864, there would have been an end to the revival movement. Of course it slackened. The Confederate armies were being depleted, and the men were hard-pressed. Religious interest, however, persisted to the very end.

Even in the early months of 1865, as the desperate struggle around Petersburg drew to a close, Pickett's division experienced a great blessing. A letter from a soldier, published in the Christian Observer of January 26, states that a stranger would have to conclude that the army was very religious because there were log churches every six or eight hundred yards, with prayer meetings twice a week and preaching services twice on Sunday. The soldier concluded by saying that he was more than ever determined, after four years of fighting, to give his life for God and his country.

The Instrumentalities of the Revival

1. Prayer. On reading contemporary Confederate literature, one is impressed with the sense of prayer that pervaded it. Their spiritual urgency appears to have grown out of a sense of danger. These people wanted their sons to be saved. They felt that death was imminent and that death without Christ was a fearful thing. Added to this was a sense of need created by the consciousness that they were a part of a weaker force pitted against a mighty enemy. Their alternating victories and defeats emphasized their need of divine help.

Public fasts and prayers were ordered by the government and followed each other in rapid sequence. Private prayer prevailed at home. Said General Gordon of the women as they worked, "Every click was a prayer; every stitch a tear." Prayer meetings were a feature of the camps, and diaries, letters, and articles in the papers show how prevalent they were. The church courts at home and the chaplains' meetings on the front were largely devoted to prayer. While the prayers for ultimate victory were unanswered, yet the presence of the Holy Spirit was felt in the hearts of those for whom such urgent prayer was offered.

2. Bibles and Testaments. The Word of God was hungrily sought by the Confederate soldiers, and great efforts were made to provide Bibles from the printing presses in Nashville and other Southern cities and by importation from Great Britain. Dr. Moses D. Hoge of Richmond risked his life in running the blockade from Charleston, and later into Wilmington, in order to secure copies from the British and Foreign Bible Society. That organization was impressively generous. He went to purchase, but he returned with a gift of 15,000 Bibles, 50,000 Testaments, and 250,000 copies of the Gospels and Psalms bound together. That they were needed is attested by the incessant demand for them on the part of the chaplains and missionaries with the forces.

3. Godly leaders and officers. In the navy there was a contrast between "happy ships" and "hell ships." The former were commanded by upstanding, godly men and the latter by slovenly officers. The influence of the large number of Christian men in high places in the Confederacy, but especially in the army, had its effect.

While we do not hear much about him today, yet the faith and Christian character of Confederate President Jefferson Davis were keenly felt during the war. The vast majority of the general officers of the Confederate army were men of honor and integrity, and a large proportion of them were definitely

evangelical in their attitudes and practices. General Lee facilitated all religious efforts in his army and was deeply moved when he heard of the success of the revivals. Lieutenant General Leonidas Polk of the Army of the West was a bishop in the Protestant Episcopal Church, and General Pendleton was a minister of the same denomination.

The influence and interest these men took in the work of Christ was notable. Dr. Stiles, writing to the Christian Observer, stated: "It has been delightful to occasionally have some high standing Colonel kneel down before a thousand men and lead them, not upon the field of battle, but in holy prayer, and sometimes so ably, humbly, and piously as to make you rejoice at the thought that so many of our soldiers had so good a man to go before them."

4. Chaplains and missionaries. The regulations for the army of the Confederate states specified that the War Department would appoint chaplains upon the recommendations of the commanding officers of post or regiment, and that the pay would be \$80.00 a month. The rations were the same as a private, which were commuted at twenty-five cents a day when with a unit and sixty cents a day when on detached duty.

The appointment and effectiveness of chaplains depended in a great measure upon the regimental commanders, but certain general officers were most zealous in securing chaplains for the units under their command. This was particularly true of General Jackson, as evidenced by the memorial prepared by B. M. Palmer for the Assembly of 1863, when that body learned of General Jackson's death. "The evidence is cumulative before this Assembly of his zeal for the religious needs of his soldiers, and of the yearnings of his soul for the evangelization of the army and of the country at large."

Many pastors worked as part-time missionaries in the army. The government allowance for chaplains being inadequate, their pay was supplemented by the church. In fact, a hundred ministers were put into the field who received part or all of their support from the church. The whole number of Presbyterian ministers in the army was placed at 130. This was approximately one-fourth of all of the ministers of that denomination in the territory outside the enemy's lines.

Stimulated by the chaplains, YMCAs were organized, Bible classes developed, and army churches started. When the troops went into winter quarters along the Rapidan, or were besieged at Petersburg, enthusiastic soldiers erected large log churches that would seat from three hundred to five hundred soldiers. They were utilized for prayer meetings during the week and religious services on the Sabbath. Thirty-seven such structures were erected along the Rapidan, and we are told that there was one at least every quarter of a mile inside the lines at Petersburg.

One makes a grievous mistake if he imagines that the revivals were the effects of emotional preaching and the psychological enthusiasm of high-strung soldiers around their campfires. They were results of patient Bible study, prayer meetings, the diligent personal reading of the Bible and tracts, and the continued personal work of soldiers, officers, missionaries, pastors, and chaplains.

The Results of the Revival

1. Deepening of the faith of professors of religion. As in every age, a large proportion of the church members who entered the Confederate army were not deeply pious. Many of these had new experiences of grace while serving in the forces. Evidence of this is too widespread for us to examine it here. One illustration must suffice.

Lieutenant Colonel L. M. Coleman was formerly a professor of Latin at the University of Virginia. Before the war, he was a Christian but was unwilling to lead in prayer or engage in public religious activities. Seeing the spiritual and moral needs of his men, however, and having no one else qualified to meet them, he assumed the responsibility himself. In camp, on the march, and before battles, he would lead his command in eloquent prayer, invoking God's blessing and protection. "He became," says the Southern Presbyterian, "a minister in everything except the formalities of the office--licensure and ordination--and he had decided, if his life was spared until the return of peace, to take his place in the Baptist pulpit." Clearly, the war played a major part in deepening the spiritual life and turning the hearts of many men toward the ministry.

2. The conversion of officers and men in the ranks. This was the most spectacular result of these revivals. Estimates of the number of those who made a public profession of their faith while in the camps vary greatly. Some have indicated that possibly as many as 150,000 men who wore the gray gave their hearts to Christ as a result of this movement. This number may be exaggerated, yet we find that the records of church courts indicate that in one winter 12,000 to 15,000 accepted Christ in the Second and Third Army Corps under Lee's command. Thousands of these men fell in battle. Surely their deaths were precious in the sight of the Lord.

Rev. Charles H. Dobbs, the Presbyterian chaplain of the twelfth Mississippi, commented on the fact that so few of his church members survived the war. They may, he suspects, have been more fearless than their comrades. Doubtless a vast number of recent converts were among the innumerable company of young Confederates who "stormed the thousand gates that lead to death."

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