

1-1-1999

The Impact of the Civil War

Henry E. Webb

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Webb, Henry E. (1999) "The Impact of the Civil War," *Leaven*: Vol. 7: Iss. 4, Article 5.
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/leaven/vol7/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Religion at Pepperdine Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Leaven by an authorized editor of Pepperdine Digital Commons. For more information, please contact bailey.berry@pepperdine.edu.

The Impact of the Civil War

BY HENRY E. WEBB

Nothing disrupts the life of a nation quite like war. It impacts physical, social, economic, and psychological dimensions of national life. The United States has been involved in ten wars in the two and a quarter centuries of its existence as a nation. The most disastrous of these conflicts was the war between the states, commonly referred to as the Civil War. In this conflict there were more casualties, military and civilian, than in all of the other wars combined, and much more property destruction and economic disruption than in any other event in American history. The civic wounds from this conflict required the better part of a century to heal and are still reflected in schism in some religious communities.

It was once believed that the Stone-Campbell movement was the only major religious body that did not divide over the slavery issue.¹ Technically, this is true. There are several reasons cited in explanation. One is that we were a unity movement that maintained that division over matters not of “faith” was wrong. Slavery was not a matter of faith. As a matter of “opinion,” it was an issue that should not be permitted to sever fellowship. Another consideration rises from the fact that we were numerically concentrated in the border states (Indiana, Kentucky, Ohio, Tennessee, and Illinois), where radical views were not so common as they were in the Northeast or the Deep South. To be sure, there were some in the movement on both sides who held strong opinions; they were conspicuous but not repre-

sentative of the majority. A major reason for our failure to divide lies in the fact that we were a loosely organized people with no national body, other than a fledgling missionary society that was struggling to get started. In short, one reason that we didn’t divide was that we didn’t have anything to divide. To the above may be added the fact that most of our leaders held pacifist views and did not see resorting to arms as a viable means of dealing with the problem.²

Slavery was an issue that troubled virtually every religious body in the nation. As an institution, slavery antedated the formation of our nation from the thirteen independent colonies. It proved to be a troublesome issue for the Constitutional convention on the matter of determining representation in Congress. A compromise was reached to count five slaves as three white persons for fixing representation in the House. Very early, Congress outlawed the importation of slaves, and gradually all of the states joined in the ban. It was generally believed that slavery would die out. Slaveholding was not profitable except in a few places, like Virginia, for tobacco cultivation, and South Carolina, for indigo—but the market for those two products was limited, and exports were not extensive. The picture changed radically with the invention of the cotton gin, in 1790, by Eli Whitney. Prior to that, the cultivation of short-fiber cotton (the only kind that can be grown in the United States) was not profitable, because of the labor involved in extracting the seeds. The cotton gin made short-fiber cot-

Campbell held a position
on slavery that was
somewhat ambiguous,
very rational, and not
widely understood.

ton a profitable commodity and opened up a huge market for the product, especially in England, where the flourishing textile industry had led in the industrial revolution. The vast Southland was ideally suited for growing cotton, provided that adequate labor could be secured. Africans were more suited for cotton cultivation than whites. This was reflected in a sharp increase in the demand for good slaves and a corresponding increase in the price they brought on the market. Nonetheless, entrepreneurs were quick to develop the plantation system in the South, and the region moved to a one-crop economy. Slave smuggling and slave breeding became profitable enterprises. The South was committed economically and psychologically to an economy based on slave labor. "Practically every Southern gentleman looked upon slavery as an evil, but a necessary one; in time it became so necessary that it ceased to appear evil."³ Commitment to the slave economy soon found justification in many Southern pulpits, whose occupants spoke out in defense of slaveholding, understanding it to have biblical sanction. Martin Marty points out that this religious apologetic of slaveholding resulted in a regional biblical hermeneutic that was very literal and orthodox. It would survive the war by many years.⁴

Alexander Campbell, the most articulate and respected leader in the movement, held a position on slavery that was somewhat ambiguous, very rational, and not widely understood. He was convinced that slavery was wrong, but he could not bring himself to condemn what was not condemned in the Bible (he seems not to have appreciated the vast difference between slavery in the ancient world and chattel slavery in North America). He took into consideration two very important factors that are often overlooked. One was the cruelty involved

in a precipitate emancipation of slaves who were wholly unprepared to survive on their own. The subsequent suffering of thousands of freed slaves following the war proved how wise he was on this point. A second factor was the economic upheaval that would be imposed on the South were slavery to be abruptly ended. He held, instead, that after a given period slaves should earn their freedom. Then they ought to be taught a trade so as to be able to provide for themselves (which Campbell did when he freed the slaves he had inherited). He suggested that the surplus in the federal treasury (incredible in our times) should be used to indemnify slave owners for their loss. It is apparent that this solution to the nation's slave problem was much too rational once passions were aroused and common sense disappeared.⁵ So the nation drifted inevitably into a tragic war.

By hindsight, it appears clear that the South could not have won the war. Modern wars require an industrial base. In 1860 almost all of the nations' factories were located in the North. Likewise, almost all of the railroads were in the North. Significantly, the North had a larger population. It also possessed the navy, which was able to blockade the South, greatly curtailing its export of cotton and its import of arms. It is generally recognized that the South had superior fighting men and far superior generalship, but in time this advantage could not outweigh the other factors noted above. After four years of horrible destruction and exhaustion came the surrender. The South was devastated; the long, difficult, and bitter period of Reconstruction began. Added to the agonizing losses of men killed and wounded was the depressing reality of defeat and the suffering caused by a ruined economy. Currency was worthless, and Southern bonds were valueless. There was no tax base to finance recovery. States were forced to sell bonds at discount, thereby ensuring impoverishment for decades into the future. There was no Marshall Plan in that day to revive the economy of the defeated. The South had to go it alone and struggle with poverty well into the next century.

It was quite otherwise in the North. Except for Lee's foray into Pennsylvania, no fighting took place on Northern soil. Wartime needs stimulated expansion of Northern industry. Railroads, which were taken over by the government during the war, were returned to their owners after the war with generous compensation and in

better condition than when taken. With generous subsidies in federal lands, railroad planners soon began to reach for the West Coast. Prosperity prevailed, and expansion was in the air. By way of contrast with the South, the North enjoyed a time of prosperity and enthusiastic optimism.

These sectional differences were not long in manifesting themselves in the lives of the churches. Even while the war was in progress, the American Christian Missionary Society was able to hold its annual meetings. People from the South were unable to attend because of the conflict. While the purpose of the society was to send missionaries abroad (Dr. James Barclay had been sent to Jerusalem), it was inevitable that a motion would be introduced with reference to the war. Such was the case in 1861, but the motion was ruled out of order. However, as casualties mounted and feelings grew more intense, it was not possible to block a pro-North resolution at the meeting in Cincinnati in 1863. The resolution that passed called upon the people of the churches to pray for "our brave soldiers in the fields who are defending us from the attempts of armed traitors to overthrow our government."⁶ This ill-advised measure was not suited to fostering reconciliation once the conflict ended. It convinced the Southern churches that "missionary societies" were dangerous to the welfare of the cause, and subsequently, congregations in the South would have nothing to do with such "unscriptural" innovations as extracongregational societies.

Less than a year after hostilities ceased, in a moment of euphoria, Moses E. Lard wrote the editorial that was often quoted in later years to the effect that while other Protestant bodies divided over slavery, the Disciples did not.⁷ Historians today accept this only with reservations. It is true that the Stone-Campbell movement did not divide prior to 1860. It is also true that the seeds of division were well in place by 1865. Slavery was not the cause; it was a moot issue after the war, when the Disciples divided. But other issues were plentiful. It must not be forgotten nor overlooked that Christians in the Stone-Campbell movement shared in the suffering caused by the war fully as much as anybody else and were victimized by the intense sectional hatred as deeply as any of their denominational neighbors. It is naive to suppose that Disciples were able to pick up the bonds of inter-sectional relations and fellowship in 1866

just as though the war and the devastation of the previous five years had never happened. No other religious body was able to do so; how could we? Slavery could no longer divide, but other issues would be found to justify schism along sectional lines created by the late war.

Changes were taking place in the lives of the churches in the North, due largely to postwar prosperity. Older buildings were being replaced with up-to-date structures, often of brick construction, and with factory-made pews, stained-glass windows, and instruments of music. With few exceptions, such changes were denied the Southern churches and, quite naturally, became subjects of censure and symbols of departure from the faith. In addition, there was the innovation of the single pastor who was college bred in place of the lay-elder preacher, clearly a practice that "aped the denominations." As early as 1869, Moses E. Lard alerted the brethren to dangerous and ruinous changes, warning them that "the Devil is not sleeping."⁸ Conflict was imminent. Schism was inevitable. It would develop largely along the lines of the wartime division of the nation.

Slavery could no longer
divide, but other issues
would be found to justify
schism along sectional
lines created by the late
war.

The *Millennial Harbinger*, which had been the guiding influence in the brotherhood prior to the war, was in decline. Failing health stilled Alexander Campbell's voice during the conflict, and his death came in 1866. The resulting leadership vacuum was largely filled by two new journals, and these served to exacerbate the polarizing tendencies. The *Christian Standard* was launched in 1866 when fourteen Northern businessmen met in the home of T. W. Phillips Sr. in Newcastle, Pennsylvania. One of the organizers was James A. Garfield, a general in the Union army and, later, president of the

United States. The editor was Isaac Errett, who had chaired the Missionary Society meeting when the infamous loyalty resolution had been passed (as chairman, he had ruled it out of order but had been overruled). These factors made it obvious that this journal would have only a limited appeal in the South. The *Christian Standard* was a weekly and reflected the progressive spirit of the prosperous North. The other significant journal was the *Gospel Advocate*. It appeared briefly prior to the war and was reconstituted in Nashville after the war, with Tolbert Fanning and David Lipscomb as editors. The *Gospel Advocate* followed an avowedly pro-Southern policy⁹; it thus had great appeal to the churches in the South and came to wield much influence in that region. So the polarizing tendencies of sectionalism were augmented by two journals that became influential in leading the churches in different directions. A study of these two journals reveals that they generally took opposing positions on the plethora of issues that arose after the war in what has been called “an era of controversy.”¹⁰ The resulting schism required several decades to accomplish, but when it was finalized, it clearly reflected the sectional division of the nation caused by the war. This is obvious in Edwin Gaustead’s *Historical Atlas of Religion in America*,¹¹ which shows that the great concentration of non-instrument Churches of Christ was located in the states of the old Confederacy, while the Christian Churches were concentrated in areas that had remained loyal to the Union. That is still the case today, despite migration and church-planting efforts in the North. The sectional division is dramatically apparent in Tennessee. Middle and West Tennessee were aligned with the South, and almost all of the churches in that area were inclined to reject fellowship with churches using instruments. But East Tennessee was decidedly pro-Union, and all of the churches there had no difficulty accepting the instrument, even when few could afford one. Most of the non-instrument churches east of Knoxville are postwar mission efforts with connections to churches outside the area.

Why should it be thought strange that the Stone-Campbell movement could be affected by such a traumatic event as this terrible war? Actually, it would be strange if it had been otherwise. Historians of the movement are becoming more aware that religious postures and attitudes do not develop in isolation from other vi-

tal factors in people’s lives. A series of events as devastating and widespread as the great war and the suffering that followed in its wake leaves no life untouched. All are profoundly affected. When an obvious sectional division occurs, one may suspect that the ostensible reasons given for the division conceal the real causes. Divisions in the body of Christ are seldom caused by a single factor. They are usually quite complex, with a number of factors working together to produce schism. More often than not, those involved are inclined to view the conflict as one of a purely religious nature and are not aware of the complexity of causative factors that are obscured by the fervor of religious devotion. It is a sign of maturity and an omen of hope that a broader perspective of our post-Civil War schism is gaining wider recognition by historians in all branches of the Stone-Campbell movement. A serious reappraisal of the dynamics at work in this era of our history could give new meaning to the old slogan *In faith, unity; in opinion, liberty; in all things, love*. A frank recognition of the geographic nature and the contextual significance of the developments of a century ago could help to make the twenty-first century an exciting new opportunity for the heirs of the Stone-Campbell movement.

HENRY E. WEBB is professor emeritus of church history of Milligan College in Milligan College, Tennessee, and guest editor of this issue of *Leaven*.

Notes

¹ This viewpoint was given classic expression by Moses E. Lard in an editorial often quoted. See Moses E. Lard, “Can We Divide?” *Lard’s Quarterly* 3 (reprint, Kansas City, Mo.: Old Paths Book Club, 1950): 330–36. This view was shared by William T. Moore, *A Comprehensive History of the Disciples of Christ* (New York: Revell, 1909) and W. E. Garrison and A. T. DeGroot, *The Disciples: A History* (St. Louis: Christian Board of Publication, 1948).

² For a good summary, see Garrison and DeGroot, 330–32.

³ S. E. Morrison, H. S. Commager, and W. E. Leuchtenburg, *The American Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1960), 1:219.

⁴ Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: Dial, 1970), 63–64.

⁵ See Robert O. Fife, “Alexander Campbell and the Christian Church in the Slavery Controversy” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1960). See also Robert Tibbs Maxey, *Alexander Campbell and the Peculiar Institution* (El Paso:

(Notes continued on pg. 211)