

# Hymns in the Lives of Civil War Soldiers

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After extensive perusal of Civil War soldiers' writings Bell Irvin Wiley concluded that "The men who wore the blue, and the butternut Rebs who opposed them, more than American fighters of any period, deserve to be called singing soldiers." Union soldiers, he wrote, "sang individually as they puttered about camp. They sang in duets, trios, quartets and glee clubs; and sometimes the countryside at night was made to reverberate with thousands of voices uniting in strain of some cherished melody." (Wiley, 1952, p. 157-159) In letters home Minnesota soldier Thomas Christie mentions that he and his fellow soldiers were hungry for copies of any kind of music "Sacred, or mirthful, for our singing is about equally divided between the two, with a specimen of Sentimental thrown in once in a while." (Smith, 2011, p. 106)

Thomas Christie's mention of "sacred" music as a part of the song repertoire among fellow soldiers is common. Reports of hymn singing, not only in religious services and private Christian devotion, but also as recreational pastime are laced throughout soldiers' diaries, regimental histories, post-war reports, and period newspapers like *The New York Times* or *The Richmond Daily Dispatch*. A reporter following the New-Hampshire Third Regiment, for instance, observed that the men amused themselves on board the steamer Atlantic with the singing of hymns. "The number of hymns they know is wonderful--all Methodist. . . . They have good voices, and make music enough at night to set off some of their duty of the day." (*The New York Times*, October 21, 1861)

## Religion in America

How is it that Christian hymns were a significant part of the song repertoire of Civil War soldiers? The answer is found in an understanding of Christian faith and practice in antebellum culture. Significant study of the place and influence of religion in the American Civil War began with the 1998 book *Religion and the American Civil War*. Since then, authors such as Drew Gilpin Faust and Steven Woodworth have expanded our understanding of this most important and pervasive aspect of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century life in America.

One thing is clear: antebellum culture was heavily influenced by Protestant Christianity, an influence still in effect from America's founding generation which "brought with them into the New World," as Alexis de Tocqueville (1994) suggests, "a form of Christianity which I cannot better describe than by styling it as a democratic and republican religion." Writing in the 1830s, de Tocqueville says that "there is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America;" (p. 304) He recognized that while many sects existed, they fell under "the great unity of Christianity," and that all sects "preached the same moral law in the name of the same God." He concludes that this moral law directed "the customs of the community," (p. 303) and "by regulating the domestic life, [this moral law] regulates the state." (p. 304) In the years leading up to the Civil War Protestant Christianity had taken on a form remade from the old clothe of Puritanism by the evangelical ferment of the Second Great Awakening that swept the nation in the first decades of the 19th century. By mid century some of the fervor and the purity of Protestant faith had been watered down. Many

questions about their parents' faith had arisen in the minds of the soldiers who fought in the Civil War and some had abandoned Christianity or had at least grown cold toward it. But in spite of this drift these young men and their leaders had been "brought up in a culture where family, church, and school reinforced Christian lessons." (Rose, 1992, p. 38) And although adherence varied, the tenets of Protestant Christianity permeated society. These tenets, taken from the Bible which "still served as an essential point of reference for understanding their world" (Rose, 1992, p. 17), were the standard from which much of societal behavior was derived and by which it was measured.

In 1857 a significant movement began that would have a strong impact on the religious disposition of Americans. Corresponding to the financial panic of that year, what became known as the Prayer Meeting Revival or the Businessmen's Revival began in New York and spread to every part of the country and across all major Protestant denominations. Charles Finney, the most noted antebellum evangelist declared that

This winter of 1857-58 will be remembered as the time when a great revival prevailed throughout all the Northern states. It swept over the land with such power, that for a time it was estimated that not less than fifty thousand conversions occurred in a single week. (Finney, 1876, p. 442)

Revival, in fact, spread to the South as well where thousands joined churches (Woodworth, 2001, p. 25). Though it peaked in 1858, the renewal of faith and the emphasis on prayer meetings, evangelism, and cooperation between denominations set the stage for widespread Christian influence and revival in both armies during the war.

The war brought a soldier's belief and behavior into clear focus. The presence of unrelenting death and terror had a way of forcing a stand on core issues of Christian faith. A Union chaplain observed that "one campaign is an ordinary life-time. In such circumstances character, good or bad, matures with wonderful rapidity." He summed up the state of the Union army through the lens of Christian faith by saying that

. . . strange contrasts are seen in the army, of gaming and psalm-singing, of prevailing sin and abounding grace, of prayer and profaneness,— such profaneness as we never hear at home, such prayer as the churches know nothing of. In the army there is such faithful, fearless piety, as we can scarcely find in the world beside. The truth is, virtue there has its hot-bed as well as vice. (Moss 1868, p. 201)

Some, like Henry Mathes, chose not to question their faith and commitment in the soldier's world that offered freedom and temptation to deviate. In a letter to his friend Annie, Mathes says that the preacher that day had preached from "first Timothy 4<sup>th</sup> chapter and 8<sup>th</sup> verse" and "encouraged us to live a life of godliness, although we were soldiers. For my part I am determined to do nothing while I am gone that I would not do at home." (Mathes, Camp Morton, No. 3, Indianapolis, Indiana April 28, 1861) Those who had grown cold toward or chose to rebel against Christian tenets did so with a knowledge of deviance. This is seen in the story of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., retold by Drew Gilpin Faust. As Holmes lay severely wounded at Balls Bluff, he wondered if his religious skepticism would

put him "en route for Hell." A "deathbed recantation," he believed, would be "but cowardly giving way to fear." With willful profanity he declared, "I'll be G-d'd if I know where I'm going."

Faust suggests that “Holmes’s worried acknowledgment of his failure to conform to the expected belief and behavior ironically affirms the cultural power of the prevailing Christian narrative.” (Faust, 2008, p. 24) Both Mathes and Holmes made choices in light of well-understood Christian tenets.

### **Hymns in American Life**

It is in this context that hymns and hymn singing played an important role. Remembering the tenets of faith through the singing of hymns has been a pillar of Christianity from the time of the apostles, as those who followed Christ were instructed in Scripture to “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord.” (Colossians 3:16 KJV) Hymn singing as practiced in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century America stemmed from the Protestant Reformation and was naturally and firmly planted in America from its founding. Consequently, hymns were omnipresent in the lives of the young men who would become soldiers, whether they took a serious interest in religion or not. The Reverend A. E. Dickenson suggests that the hymns in the Confederate soldiers’ hymn-book *Hymns for the Camp* would be “as familiar as household words everywhere.” (*The Richmond Daily Dispatch*, September 27, 1861) Hymn singing was a major part of the ubiquitous campmeeting revivals popular in all quarters of America; hymns were included in public school music books; hymn were typically the largest, usually the only genre in the instruction books used in singing school, a popular pastime in American culture dating from the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century; hymn books were present in the home as individuals owned their own hymn books and took them to church. In fact hymns as a staple in the song repertory of Americans persisted well into the World War I era where "O God our help in ages past" sits next to "Old Black Joe" in the index of the popular sing-along book *I Hear American Singing* (1917); and even as late as the 1940s "Holy, Holy, Holy" is just above "Home, Sweet Home" in the index of *The Golden Book of Favorite Songs* (1946).

The fact that soldiers, from the indifferent to the most ardent believer, sang hymns while marching or back to back with minstrel songs, helps explain the place and presence of hymns in American culture. And it was this natural practice of hymn singing that prompted Christian organizations to publish small collections of hymns for soldiers. To date I have identified twenty soldiers’ hymn collections published for the Union army and twelve published for the Confederate army. While the United States Sanitary Commission broadly commended the large selection of hymns in *The Soldier’s Friend* “to the soldier with the hope that they may be the means of elevating the thoughts and cheering his heart amid the conflicts and privations to which he exposed” (Read, 1865, preface), Christians denominations, North and South, along with Northern organizations like the YMCA and the United States Christian Commission published and distributed thousands of small collections of hymns to assist in the transdenominational evangelistic effort that resulted in widespread Christian revival in both armies. The purpose of pondering the words of the hymns is stated in specific evangelistic terms in the preface to *The Soldiers’ Hymn Book with Tunes* (1863): in times of peril “you need. . . a greater friend,” one that is “always near.” “Such a friend is Jesus.” After listing the benefits the soldier is asked “Could you ask for more? Then believe on Christ, and accept him, and all these things are yours.”

The drift from personal faith as it played out in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century life was evident to Christian pastors and lay leaders. The need was clear as was the opportunity, sharpened by death and the despair of war, to rebuild fervor and personal commitment to faith in Christ among soldiers in both armies; not that these soldiers were unaware of the

Gospel, but that they needed to be “reminded of their upbringing.” (Rhodes 1906, p. 260) There was no better aid in this effort than the singing of hymns that could remind the believer of his faith and the hope of heaven, promote Christian behavior, prompt courage in hard times, and give warning to the unbeliever.

### **Hymns and the Prevailing Christian Narrative**

In his comprehensive and well documented book *While God is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers*, Steven Woodworth points out that the core of Protestant religious thought as seen in the writings of Civil War soldiers centered on four tenets derived from Scripture: 1) that God is sovereign, 2) that there is a life to come, 3) that Christ is the way of salvation, and 4) that the Bible says something about the way a Christian should live. (Woodworth, 2001) It is hard for 21<sup>st</sup> century Americans to fully comprehend the influence of these tenets on the lives of mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Americans, perhaps projecting modern notions that religious faith is peripheral.

Much of the study on religion during the Civil War has focused on a tangled web of belief that both justified and resisted slavery or was used to prop up the fury on both sides of the conflict. The link between God and nation, for instance, can be seen in the inscription on the cover of the more than one Union hymn collection:

For right is right, since God is God;  
And right the day must win;  
To doubt would be disloyalty,  
To falter would be sin.  
(Frederick William Faber, 1849)

But there is also strong evidence that the four tenets identified by Woodworth formed a foundation that greatly influenced individual belief and behavior, a “prevailing Christian narrative” (Faust, 2008, p. 24) that prompted, as I have already pointed out, a choice to either follow or turn away.

The power of the prevailing Christian narrative is clearly seen in letters to the bereaved upon the death of a soldier. In striking similarity to the tenets of Christianity outlined by Woodworth, Drew Gilpin Faust describes the elements of “The Good Death” as seen in these letters:

[Descriptions of] soldiers’ last moments on Earth are so similar, it is as if their authors had a checklist in mind. In fact, letter writers understood the elements of the Good Death so explicitly that they could anticipate the information the bereaved would have sought had they been present at the hour of death: [1] the deceased had been conscious of his fate, [2] had demonstrated willingness to accept it, [3] had shown signs of belief in God and in his own salvation, and [4] had left messages and instructive exhortations for those who should have been at his side. Each of these details was a kind of shorthand, conveying to the reader at home a broader set of implications about the dying man’s spiritual state and embodying the assumptions most Americans shared about life and death. (Faust, p. 17)

Faust illustrates aspects of the prevailing Christian narrative as seen in the “Good Death” with a typical letter, sent by Frank Batchelor to his wife informing her of her brother George’s death. Faust states that Batchelor

. . . worked hard to transform the deceased into a plausible candidate for salvation. Batchelor admitted that George 'did not belong to the visible body of Christ's Church,' but cited his 'charity,' 'his strong belief in the Bible,' and his rejection of the sins of envy hatred and malice' to offer his wife hope for her brother's fate. Batchelor confirmed himself 'satisfied' that George was 'a man of prayer' and had no doubt at last 'found the Savior precious to his sole' before he died. 'This being so,' Batchelor happily concluded, his wife could comfort herself with the knowledge she would meet her brother again 'in the green fields of Eden. (Faust, 2008, p. 23)

The hymns soldiers sang supported every aspect of the tenets of Christianity as outlined by Woodworth and seen in the related elements of the "Good Death." That God is sovereign, that we are in God's hands in life and in death (Faust calls this a willingness to accept one's "fate") is seen in the popular hymn by Edward Perronet, "All hail the power of Jesus' name! . . . and crown him Lord of all," or in the first line of the "Doxology" (Hymn #151 in *Hymns for the Camp*) often sung at the end of Christian services, "Praise God from whom all blessings flow," or this hymn by William Cowper, the first couplet of which became a common maxim still used today:

God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea  
And rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs  
And works His sovereign will.  
(hymn #116 in *Hymns for the Camp*).

and quite explicitly in this quatrain by Benjamin Beddome

My times of sorrow and of joy,  
Great God, are in thy hand;  
My choicest comforts come from thee,  
and go at thy command  
(Hymn #71 in *Hymns for the Camp*)

Furthermore, the belief that God is gracious in carrying out his sovereign will and that God guides the believer throughout life is seen in words like:

In every condition, in sickness, in health;  
In poverty's vale, or abounding in wealth;  
At home and abroad, on the land, on the sea,  
As thy days may demand, shall thy strength ever be.

Fear not, I am with thee, O be not dismayed,  
For I am thy God and will still give thee aid;  
I'll strengthen and help thee, and cause thee to stand  
Upheld by My righteous, omnipotent hand.

When through the deep waters I call thee to go,  
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;

For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,  
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.

When through fiery trials thy pathways shall lie,  
My grace, all sufficient, shall be thy supply;  
The flame shall not hurt thee; I only design  
Thy dross to consume, and thy gold to refine.

Even down to old age all My people shall prove  
My sovereign, eternal, unchangeable love;  
And when hoary hairs shall their temples adorn,  
Like lambs they shall still in My bosom be borne.  
("How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord,")

or in William William's

Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,  
Pilgrim through this barren land.  
I am weak, but Thou art mighty;  
Hold me with Thy powerful hand.  
Bread of Heaven,  
Feed me till I want no more;  
("Guide me, O thou great Jehovah.")

The concepts that Christ is the way of salvation through the blood of Christ is laced throughout the entire hymn repertoire and especially in the words

Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
Let me hide myself in Thee;  
Let the water and the blood,  
From Thy wounded side which flowed,  
Be of sin the double cure;  
Save from wrath and make me pure.  
("Rock of ages cleft for me")

and in these words by William Cowper:

There is a fountain filled with blood  
drawn from Emmanuel's veins;  
And sinners plunged beneath that flood  
lose all their guilty stains.

E'er since, by faith, I saw the stream  
Thy flowing wounds supply,  
Redeeming love has been my theme,  
and shall be till I die.  
("There is a fountain filled with Blood")

The hope of heaven for those who trust in the atonement of Christ for sin is spoken about specifically with words like

When I can read my title clear  
to mansions in the skies,  
I bid farewell to every fear,  
and wipe my weeping eyes.

Let cares, like a wild deluge come,  
and storms of sorrow fall!  
May I but safely reach my home,  
my God, my heav'n, my All.  
("When I can read my title clear")

or in the popular hymn sometimes sung by soldiers on the march

There is a happy land,  
far, far away,  
Where saints in glory stand,  
bright, bright as day.  
Oh, how they sweetly sing,  
worthy is our Savior king,  
Loud let His praises ring,  
praise, praise for aye.

Come to that happy land,  
come, come away;  
Why will ye doubting stand,  
why still delay?  
Oh, we shall happy be,  
when from sin and sorrow free,  
Lord, we shall live with Thee,  
blest, blest for aye.  
("There is a happy land")

Hymns of warning and invitation to those who fail to heed the call of grace include Joseph Hart's

Come, ye sinners, poor and wretched,  
Weak and wounded, sick and sore;  
Jesus ready waits to save you,  
Full of pity, love and pow'r:  
He is able, He is able,  
He is willing, doubt no more.

Come, ye needy, come and welcome;  
God's free bounty glorify;  
True belief and true repentance,  
Every grace that brings us nigh,  
Without money, without money,  
Come to Jesus Christ and buy.  
(Hymn #43 in *Hymns for the Camp*)

or in this summative stanza:

Just as I am, without one plea,  
But that Thy blood was shed for me,  
And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,  
O Lamb of God, I come, I come.  
("Just as I am, without one plea,")

and in this pointed hymn

Hasten, sinner, to be wise!  
Stay not for the morrow's sun:  
Wisdom if you still despise,  
Harder is it to be won.

Hasten, mercy, to implore!  
Stay not for the morrow's sun,  
Lest thy season should be o'er,  
Ere this evening's stage be run.  
(Hymn #62 in *Hymns for the Camp*)

Hymns that speak of the nature of the Christian's life on earth include words like these by Isaac Watts:

When I survey the wondrous cross  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.  
Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a present far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all.  
("When I survey the wondrous cross")

or in another by Watts that was often related to the present war though it was written at the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> century:

Am I a soldier of the cross,  
A follower of the Lamb,  
And shall I fear to own His cause,  
Or blush to speak His Name?

Must I be carried to the skies  
On flowery beds of ease,  
While others fought to win the prize,  
And sailed through bloody seas?

Are there no foes for me to face?  
Must I not stem the flood?  
Is this vile world a friend to grace,  
To help me on to God?

Sure I must fight if I would reign;  
Increase my courage, Lord.

I'll bear the toil, endure the pain,  
Supported by Thy Word.

Thy saints in all this glorious war  
Shall conquer, though they die;  
They see the triumph from afar,  
By faith's discerning eye.  
("Am I a soldier of the cross")

That the Christian is a sojourner on earth looking ultimately toward a heavenly home is spoken of in this popular hymn

I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger,  
I can tarry, I can tarry but a night.  
Do not detain me, for I am going  
To where the fountains are ever flowing.

Chorus  
I'm a pilgrim, and I'm a stranger,  
I can tarry, I can tarry but a night.

Verse 2  
There's the city to which I journey;  
My Redeemer, My Redeemer is its light!  
There is no sorrow, nor any sighing,  
Nor any sin there, nor any dying!  
("I'm a Pilgrim,")

or in this text adapted to the tune of the wildly popular song, "Home, Sweet Home:"

While here in the valley of conflict we stay,  
O give us submission, and strength as the day;  
Soon, free from afflictions, to Thee we shall come,  
For aye dwell with Thee in that glorious home.

We wait, blessed Lord, in Thy beauties to shine,  
To see Thee in glory --- the glory divine;  
With all Thy redeemed, from the earth, from the tomb,  
To join in Thy praise, blessed Saviour, at home.  
("Mid scenes of confusion and creature complaints.")

And finally, two "sojourner" hymns stand out as potentially comforting to soldiers facing the prospect of death in battle:

My days are gliding swiftly by;  
And I, a pilgrim stranger,  
Would not detain them as they fly,  
Those hours of toil and danger.

Refrain  
For, oh! we stand on Jordan's strand;  
Our friends are passing over;

And, just before, the shining shore  
We may almost discover.

We'll gird our loins, my brethren dear,  
Our distant home discerning:  
Our waiting Lord has left us word,  
Let ev'ry lamp be burning.

Should coming days be cold and dark,  
We need not cease our singing:  
That perfect rest naught can molest,  
Where golden harps are ringing.

Let sorrow's rudest tempest blow,  
Each cord on earth to sever:  
Our King says, "Come," and there's our home,  
Forever, oh! forever.  
("My days are gliding swiftly by")

and this hymn written by Thomas Hastings:

Gently Lord, O gently lead us,  
Through this lonely vale of tears,  
Through the changes thou'st decreed us,  
Till our last great change appears.

When temptation's darts assail us,  
When in devious paths we stray,  
Let Thy goodness never fail us,  
Lead us in Thy perfect way.

In the hour of pain and anguish,  
In the hour when death draws near,  
Suffer not our hearts to languish,  
Suffer not our souls to fear;

When this mortal life is ended,  
Bid us in Thine arms to rest,  
Till, by angel bands attended,  
We awake among the blest.  
("Gently Lord O gently lead us")

One hymn, "O sing to me of heaven," contains in one place the elements of the Good Death such as the singers consciousness of his fate and a willingness to accept it ("O, sing to me of heav'n,/When I am called to die"); that he had shown signs of belief in God and his salvation (When the last moment comes,/O, watch my dying face,/And catch the bright, seraphic gleam/Which on each feature plays."); and the deathbed scene that was so important to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Americans but was often not possible as men were sometimes killed instantly in battle (Then round my senseless clay/Assemble those I love,/And sing of heav'n, delightful heav'n,/My glorious home above).

Descriptions of deathbed scenes often mirror bereavement letters in their inclusion of elements of "the Good Death" and often included the singing or reciting of hymns that

specifically reflect essential Christian tenets and support deathbed rituals. Perhaps this is because, as Rev. A. E. Dickenson suggested, hymns were “as familiar as household words” to these American soldiers. Southern chaplain William Bennett, for example, tells of a letter from a woman serving in the hospital at Culpeper Courthouse who had lost four patients. She pointed out that three of them “died rejoicing in Jesus.” She said that “They were intelligent, noble, godly young men.” One of them said to her as he was dying, “Sing me a hymn,” so she sang “Jesus, lover of my soul” after which he remarked, “Where else but in Jesus can a poor sinner trust?” He looked up and said as he was passing away, “Heaven is so sweet to me;” and “to the presence of Jesus he went.” Another soldier from South Carolina “seemed very happy, and sung with great delight, ‘Happy day, when Jesus washed my sins away.’” She relates that he “was resigned, and even rejoiced at the near prospect of death” and sang at the end “‘How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord.’” She reported that “his end was peace.” (Bennett 1877, p. 60)

Hymns served as a compendium of Christian doctrine in support of a “prevailing Christian narrative” that was generally accepted in the era of the Civil War and that profoundly affected public and private morals. The compact, salient Christian doctrine regarding salvation and heaven contained in them came to mind first in time of need. A true conception of the Civil War era must include an acknowledgement of the place and purpose of hymns within the larger context of prevailing religious belief and practice. Without singing in general and hymn singing in particular, a gap exists in a full picture of soldiers’ lives.

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