

Diverging Loyalties: Baptists in Middle Georgia During the Civil War

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Review

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Gourley, Bruce T. *Diverging Loyalties: Baptists in Middle Georgia During the Civil War*. Mercer University Press., \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-88146-258-6

Religion and the Civil War

During the Civil War, southern Baptists uniformly supported the Confederacy—or so the story goes. *Diverging Loyalties* revises this historical assumption by examining the complexities, nuances, and divisions existing among Baptists in Middle Georgia. Author Bruce Gourley brings a unique set of qualifications to this study. He is the executive director of the Baptist History and Heritage Society and the developer of the impressive online resource, CivilWarBaptists.com. Throughout his book, Gourley reveals his keen sense of this subject matter. He makes ample use of the historiography, both adding his voice to this conversation and using it to contextualize his research, most of which comes from Mercer University's Special Collections. The resulting "ground level narrative" richly illustrates a religious people struggling with major social, cultural, political, and theological questions brought about by the war (5).

Chapter One charts the development of Baptist views on the interplay between God's will, human will, and the southern cause. In 1845, southern Baptists followed the lead of Presbyterians and Methodists and split from their northern counterparts over slavery. As secession neared, Baptists deployed their defense of slavery born from this schism in supporting southern political ends. "Both Christianity and Slavery are from Heaven," preached Macon pastor Ebenezer W. Warren, "both are blessings to humanity" (19). With the war in progress, however, providential rhetoric assumed a more varied tone. For example, some Baptists viewed wartime woes as a divine punishment for a collective lack of moral virtue. Near the end of the war, Samuel Boykin, editor of the *Christian Index* in Macon, opted for humility. He called upon southerners to "bow in submission to God's chastisements, and seek . . . to gain his favor and

procure for our sorely tired land the benefits of his blessing and forgiveness" (50).

Boykin is a steady presence in Gourley's book, and with good reason. The *Christian Index* was the largest Christian newspaper in the South. And Boykin was a staunch supporter of the Confederacy. But readers did not march in lockstep with the editor, particularly when it came to matters of church-state separation, the subject of Chapter Two. Gourley explains that since the age of Roger Williams, Baptists had made the separation of church and state a top priority. But during the Civil War, this core tenant of Baptist identity faded away in some discussions, but stayed strong elsewhere. Most Baptists supported the imposition of Sabbath laws, arguing that legal enforcement of this religious practice was necessary for the Confederacy to remain in God's favor. Yet, Baptists were reluctant to supply chaplains to the Confederacy, as pastors bristled at the idea of accepting government funds for their services.

In the pages of the *Christian Index*, Boykin fruitlessly beckoned Baptists to supply more chaplains, while he also promoted missions to the soldiers. Chapter Three focuses on wartime missionaries. Before the war, Benjamin Murrow was a noted missionary to the Indians. When the war began, though, Murrow turned his attention to Confederate soldiers. He also convinced members of his association to follow suit. Other associations joined the cause in a similar fashion. Meanwhile, in Middle Georgia, people took an active interest in these missionary endeavors. Some observers conflated the success of missions with the success of the South. Battlefield losses, though, led to more talk of saving individual souls rather than saving the Confederacy from defeat.

Chapters Four and Five continue a careful examination of the relationship between the home front and the battlefield. While Middle Georgians sometimes glorified the piety of Confederate soldiers and extolled the benefits of revivals, Gourley's reading of the records of soldiers tells a different story. "While references to God and scripture periodically appear in their writings," the author summarizes, "observations of camp life and conditions, descriptions of battles, longings for family and friends, and discussion of news and happenings at home typically occupied soldiers' thoughts" (154-55). There was, then, a gulf separating the realities of the battlefield from the imaginations of Middle Georgians. A similar gap between the ideal and the real influenced the moral landscape of churches on the home front. Here, white women gained unprecedented authority, prompting anxiety from the remaining white men.

Meanwhile, black Baptists assumed a degree of autonomy that foreshadowed the creation of their own churches in the wake of emancipation.

The final chapter dwells on the tensions embedded in Boykin's 1864 criticism of rural Baptists for their apparent lack of patriotism. This dispute reflected a significant difference between urban and rural Baptists. Rarely did a rural minister comment on the war from the pulpit, choosing instead to preach about personal morality and individual salvation. In urban locales, however, ministers were far more vocal in supporting the Confederacy. When viewed in tandem, Gourley sees the "conundrum facing all Baptists congregations." While some translated the southern cause through a Christian lens, others tenaciously clung to a Baptist faith "defined by distinctions drawn between worlds secular and sacred" (238).

Diverging Loyalties is successful because Gourley develops his argument on a number of fronts, each demonstrating that Baptists rarely spoke with a single voice. This thesis becomes even more convincing as a result of the author's lucid presentation, exhaustive research, and familiarity with the subject. Additionally, because this book operates at a sub-state level, Gourley opens a door for more studies of this sort, looking at different regions and even different denominations. Indeed, this is essential reading for scholars interested in religion and the Civil War, southern religious history, and Baptist history.

Arthur Remillard is Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at Saint Francis University (Loretto, PA). He is the author of Southern Civil Religions: Imagining the Good Society in the Post-Reconstruction Era (University of Georgia Press, 2011) and the book review editor for the Journal of Southern Religion (<http://jsr.fsu.edu>).