

# A Kingdom Divided: Evangelicals, Loyalty, and Sectionalism in the Civil War Era

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## Review

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**Holm, April E.** *A Kingdom Divided: Evangelicals, Loyalty, and Sectionalism in the Civil War Era.* Louisiana State University Press, \$47.50 ISBN 978087167717

Even as the Civil War still raged, interested observers knew that religion had brought on and sustained the conflict, a view that a trove of more recent scholarship has sustained. In more recent years, Civil War era scholars have turned to studying the border between the United States and the Confederate States to further elucidate the nature of union and secession in ways that complicate a simpler binary of north versus south. Holm's splendid monograph combines these two vital areas of study revealing many important and ironic ways in which border religion at once sought to mitigate disunion impulses, but then nurtured both sectional separation and continued ecclesiastical disunion long after Appomattox. In the process, the apolitical stance which focused on the spiritual mission of the church adopted by border state Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists reshaped and redefined the understandings held by white southerners in the Confederate South as the proper relationship between church and state, refining and sharpening a regional claim of embodying a distinct and purer expressions of these once national faiths. The result was a southern ecclesiastical militancy about the true nature of the church that preserved and enlarged a sense of an uncorrupted faith, a cause not lost but strengthened by Confederate defeat, serving as the theological bulwark of continued southern denominational separation, long after sectional reconciliation had supposedly occurred.

Holm focuses on the slave states stretching from Delaware to Missouri, giving special attention to Kentucky and Missouri, which became contested ground in the fight over the spread of slavery and then over secession. To prevent a rupture in the communities of faith, even as the secular nation descended into Civil War, border churches adopted a politically-neutral stance on public matters as a way to maintain ties with religious brethren north and south, even as antebellum denominational schisms resulted in sectional denominations. But this neutrality offended United States officials during the war and northern church officials during the era of religious reconstruction afterward. As a result, many border state leaders and laity became more pronounced in their southern identity after the Civil War than they were before secession, as they resented external intrusion on their right to frame their own theological beliefs and ecclesiastical stances, free of secular interference or demands.

Holm takes seriously the ways in which ministers and lay people understood and articulated their beliefs about ecclesiology and theology. No doubt these ideas intersected with other tenets and interests, but they absolutely informed how church members thought and acted as members of a community of faith within and without the walls of a church building. Before and during the war, many border evangelicals did not want to identify with those they considered

schismatics and focused on the religious mission of their churches; when pressures of wartime—and often Federal occupation—demanded affirmative endorsement of secular patriotism, many border church members expressed offense and blamed Unionist sentiments and the northern branches of their faiths for the discomfort, a trend that continued when northern Presbyterians and Methodist sought to insure that church building were assigned to overtly loyal ministers, and not to neutral parsons and congregations, once the war ended. Ironically, Confederate defeat freed Southern Baptists, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Presbyterian Church in the United States from the need to endorse a state; hence, in comparison, these erstwhile politically-aligned churches now appeared as communities of faith focused exclusively on a spiritual mission, and scores of border state congregations, synods, and conferences shifted their formal affiliations southward. This realignment southward occurred simultaneously with the emergence of the Lost Cause mentality which downplayed, if not outright ignored, slavery as a cause for secession and war. Border state church members had typically regarded slavery as a secular political issue, outside of their spiritual concerns, and now that the southern denominations no longer had slavery to defend, these bodies were additionally attractive as denominational partners. As a result, deep south and southward leaning border state church members engaged in a collective rewriting of history, denying that slavery was the cause for denominational schism, and in the reinvigoration of southern denominations around a spiritual, and apolitical mission.

But of course this mission was hardly apolitical in the sense that it had no secular implications. It allowed white southerners an ecclesiastical harbor in which they could sustain a self-image of godly people pursuing a higher calling of faith, even as poverty and white supremacist racism wreaked hardship on marginal whites and virtually all blacks. And from this haven, white southerners felt themselves the victims when other religious and secular voices called them to task for their lack of ecclesiastical concern about pressing secular problems. They were, after all, following the dictates of their faith as they understood it.

Holmes phenomenological approach and insightful analysis provides a deeper understanding of how religion shaped sectionalism, the Civil War, and regional reconciliation. It complicates the narrative of the formations of distinctly northern and southern churches prior to the Civil War. It also demonstrates how religious beliefs empower and inform choices believers make in times of moral crisis, using doctrine and ecclesiastical ties to preserve what they consider to be of ultimate importance.

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