

# Combat Chaplain: The Life and Civil War Experience of Rev. James H. McNeilly, Army of Tennessee

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## Review

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**Cathey, M. Todd.** *Combat Chaplain: The Life and Civil War Experience of Rev. James H. McNeilly, Army of Tennessee.* Mercer University Press, \$35.00 ISBN 9780881466379

More books have been written about the Civil War than any other event in American history. Of these some 60,000+ volumes, there is no shortage of diaries, biographies and studies of both legendary figures and virtual unknowns who played their unique roles in America's most deadly war. While Lincoln books perhaps dominate the field, there is a plethora of titles on generals, unit commanders, artillerymen, infantrymen – and of late, more about key 19<sup>th</sup> century figures from wider societal perspectives. But of all the books published, perhaps some of the most ignored people, both during the Civil War and in postwar chronicling, have been the unit and regimental chaplains.

A small number of fine books are available which relate the truly fascinating stories of these oft-ignored figures. They come from both Union and Confederate perspectives, and reflect quite well most major religious denominations active at that time. Some of these diaries and memoirs are extremely well-written, such as those of Confederate chaplains James Sheeran (*14<sup>th</sup> LA*) and Charles Quintard (*1<sup>st</sup> TN*), and Union chaplain William Corby (*Irish Brigade*). Some are almost hagiographic in their retelling (J. William Jones, *Christ in Camp*); while an increasing number are available only in on-line formats. Other journals, although fascinating reading, lack the contextual benefit of additional commentary or editing, simply reprinting the chaplain's original words.

It is therefore a true blessing to find a new Civil War chaplain's story which is well-written in literary style, compelling in its basic narrative, and moving in its encompassing, accurate portrayal of what one wartime chaplain experienced. Todd Cathey's biographical recounting of Presbyterian chaplain James H. McNeilly's service with the 49<sup>th</sup> TN (CSA) is a most welcome addition to the field. Serving nearly continuously from the fall of 1861 until near-blindness forced him into non-regimental chaplaincy in January 1865, James McNeilly was indeed a remarkable man in his education, dedication to companions, and effectiveness in ministry with all levels of people he dealt with.

In America's antebellum Christian world, Presbyterians were considered the evangelical "educated elite." Together with Baptists and Methodists, they dominated the southern religious scene as the war began. 94% of people in the seceding states belonged to one of those three denominations. As a well-educated, erudite man, and prolific post-war writer, McNeilly fits the archetypal Presbyterian mold well. Yet in wartime, he combined with those skills a fine sense of humor, a creative even artful side in surviving wartime difficulties, a dedicated work ethic in his chaplaincy, and very realistic insights about the Confederacy as it neared its dénouement in mid-1864.

Fresh from the seminary, 27-year old James McNeilly enlisted in the fall of 1861 at Ft. Donelson, not as a formal chaplain but as a private in the 49<sup>th</sup> TN, which was composed of many he already knew, including his brother. He was not appointed chaplain until a year later though, after a stint as a pastor in Louisiana, and the exchange and subsequent reforming of his regiment following its defeat at Fts. Henry and Donelson. A hard-working, fastidious, teetotaling chaplain, McNeilly was a small man physically, yet always suffered with his men, rarely taking advantage of clergy "privileges," which an educated wartime pastor might have had at that time.

For example, he chose not to wear clerical garb, opting rather for the common soldier's attire – "gray roundabout and trousers, brogans shoes and a checked shirt." When asked to guest-preach occasionally, he would borrow a suit from a local pastor. Formally a member of the medical staff (as all chaplains were), McNeilly's chaplaincy work is well summarized in Cathey's biography, with its most noteworthy section being his ministry during the religious revival which broke out among both Western armies in Dalton GA before what is now known as the Atlanta Campaign. McNeilly would later comment of this time that "though many turned out in vain ... a large majority were actually converted and showed it throughout their lives, becoming active members of churches, living and dying in the faith."

As the fateful 1864 wore on, McNeilly faced the same challenges which most in the Confederate Army of Tennessee confronted. As their Army (under Gen. Joseph Johnson) slowly retreated to Atlanta before Sherman's greater numerical forces, difficulties for McNeilly slowly compounded. Food and hunger concerns grew (he went without food for three days at Nashville), and he was nearly killed himself on one occasion. He lost loved ones (his brother Tom, also his closest friend), and ultimately faced what he called the "ultimate death knell" of the Army at Nashville and Franklin. Though "their organization ceased" (in McNeilly's words) after Franklin in December 1864, the 49<sup>th</sup> TN continued on in name to Tupelo MS, with only 6 men left on the formal rolls. Yet chaplain McNeilly never lost his

equanimity, wry humor or dedication, and the stories Cathey chooses to relate here capture those qualities extremely well.

Reading Cathey's biography, one cannot help but be struck by a sense of "being there" with McNeilly during many poignant periods of his life. Both Cathey's writing style and McNeilly's later written War-time memories bring these to life with particular color. This reviewer was struck by the "smallness" of the prewar Tennessee universe, as McNeilly continually runs into people he either studied with, lived near, or associated with somewhere in his career. The incredibly difficult "final" days of the Army of Tennessee are captured with painful poignance, as the 49<sup>th</sup> TN faced virtual annihilation under Hood's aggressive tactics, such as their brigade losing 515 of 900 men at Ezra Church (July 1864), and the effective end of the Army after Franklin (December 1864).

Despite entering 1865 nearly blind from exposure, having the appearance of a "dirty beast" (as one longtime friend described him), Chaplain McNeilly benefitted from many kindnesses given him by strangers and friends as the War finally ended. After a long and eventful journey, he arrived back at his Dickson County TN home to find everything gone, except one slave, who they soon set up on her own, and supported for many years. McNeilly would go on to 48 years of marriage, five children, a prolific post-war writing career, and pastorates in every Presbyterian church in two Tennessee counties by the time of his 1922 death.

As with the topic of religion in the Civil War in general, the story of chaplains during America's most deadly conflict is rarely told. This fine biography, aptly called *Combat Chaplain*, is an excellent and enjoyable read, a well-written and adequately footnoted addition to this oft-neglected field. Being himself a pastor and a Civil War enthusiast, Cathey brings a unique discernment and insight to this topic, drawing out nuances and flavors usually missed by more secular historians. Though perhaps slightly more time than needed is devoted to early history and the extended McNeilly family (three of ten chapters in all), still the descriptions do add background to the strong faith and family focus which was James McNeilly's underpinning throughout the Civil War and his subsequent life.

James McPherson commented on the important role of faith and religion in the Civil War when he wrote that "the Civil War was not a war of religion; it did not pit one faith against another ... But religion permeated the war effort on the battlefield and the home front." Of the post-1863 role of religion in both armies, historian Stephen Woodworth comments that "it really is more accurate to think of it as a single large revival, approximately two and a half years along, occasionally interrupted by military operations." Truly, when the approximately 2.75 million soldiers faced the horrors of Civil

War battles, injuries and sudden death, questions of God and ultimate things rose quickly in priority among the things that mattered most. Along with some 3,500 other recognized chaplains of that great American conflict, James McNeilly helped answer some of those vital questions when they mattered the most.

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