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THE MEANING OF THE CIVIL WAR IN NORTHERN RELIGIOUS PERIODICALS, 1865-
1877

by

J. Mark Joslin

A thesis submitted to the Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts
History
Western Michigan University
August 2019

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1877

J. Mark Joslin, M.A.

Western Michigan University, 2019

The American Civil War had a profound effect on the minds of religious northerners during the Reconstruction Era that followed the war. Through church periodicals, members of the Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, and Seventh-day Adventist churches demonstrated and expounded the various meanings they understood the war to contain. This thesis examines each denomination's flagship newspaper in order to categorize, describe, and contextualize the major themes of meaning attributed to the war within each church. The major themes that emerge closely reflect each church's sense of identity and purpose, such as viewing the war as punishment from God, purification in creating a Christian republic, a sign of the coming apocalypse, or as an indication of God's providence, respectively. These findings show the similarities between and diversity of three distinct denominations, and provide insight into post-war religious understandings of the American nation and its destiny.

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INTRODUCTION

In the years following the Civil War, northern Protestant churches understood that they and their nation had undergone a harrowing event of divine proportions which, for good or ill, had ushered in a new era. From a “bloody and wasting war,” wrote a Methodist, “we [are] to rise up in our renewed strength and power like a young giant, shake the dust of sloth and indifference from our garment, and start anew the race of national greatness and Christian civilization.”¹ A member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church implored that “we, too, walked through the blazing furnace of civil war. The baptism of blood, the ordeal of battle fires, were for us; and freely we gave our loved ones as food for the sword.”² Conversely, while “the hearts of the American people are filled with rejoicing,” lamented a Seventh-day Adventist, “the sure word of prophecy tells us that we are in a time when the spirit of war is to predominate, and the nations are to become angry.”³ Such were the diverse and powerful meanings that Christians saw in the recent war, and the records they left in their church periodicals are revealing about the way they viewed their nation, their destiny, and their conceptions of God. This study examines the types of meanings that members of the Seventh-day Adventist (S.D.A.), Methodist Episcopal (M.E., referred to as Methodist), and African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) churches ascribed to the Civil War through their denominational newspapers.

Research Question

The origins of this thesis began with the question: what significance did religious northerners find in their, the Union’s, victory in the Civil War? The war, far more than a mere political or economic affair, had been religiously charged throughout, as “many Americans living

¹ “Letter from Charleston,” *Christian Advocate*, March 22, 1866.

² “Our Future,” *The Christian Recorder*, December 16, 1865.

³ William C. Gage, “Permanent Peace,” *Advent Review and Christian Herald*, June 6, 1865.

during the era saw God's hand in the war's origins, course, and outcome."⁴ How did it feel for religious northerners to believe that God had vindicated their side's principles? To examine this question and create an inquiry of manageable scope, this study investigates the three official and most influential periodicals in three respective northern Protestant churches, during the Reconstruction period of 1865-1877. At first glance these three denominations appear very dissimilar, which, of course, they were. Yet, they shared numerous similarities while also possessing unique identities, and an examination of their history offers an intriguing insight into a cross-section of post-Civil War, American religious thought.

The Churches

Each of the A.M.E., S.D.A., and M.E. churches receives a chapter in this thesis, where more specific information about their respective origins, structure, periodical publications, and history will be discussed. These three denominations were selected because they represent broad and illustrative case studies in northern religious meanings attached to the Civil War. Furthermore, the three have much in common that makes their study and comparison fitting. First, the three churches are all organized in a similar manner, based on the Methodist Church's hierarchical organization. The A.M.E. Church retained the organizational structure of the M.E. Church after its separation from the Methodist Church, in 1816, a separation led by Bishop Richard Allen. Many Seventh-day Adventists founding leaders had "migrated" from Methodist churches, including the most prominent S.D.A. figure, prophetess Ellen White. These churches shared a moderate approach to hierarchy among other Protestants, less rigid than Anglicans and Presbyterians and more so than Congregationalists and Unitarians. For the purposes of this study, the relatively lenient church organization meant that contributors and editors had somewhat more

⁴ George C. Rable, *God's Almost Chosen Peoples: A Religious History of the American Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 1.

freedom in articulating their beliefs in official church publications. As will be seen, this often led to contradictory religious conclusions about the Civil War.

The three churches were all largely northern denominations, having few southern churches, and subsequently their members viewed the North's victory in the Civil War as a positive and godly outcome. The sectional identities of these churches can be observed in the fact that the Methodist Church split into North and South branches in 1844, and, reflecting the increasingly tense national climate, Methodists on both sides "borrowed concepts and language from the political sphere and adapted them to their own ecclesiastical conflict," such as rhetoric of unconstitutionality and secession.⁵ As an organization created and operated by African Americans, the A.M.E. Church was not welcomed by white southerners and made few inroads in the South until the close of the Civil War when freedpeople were able to openly join black institutions. The Seventh-day Adventists, fledgling and relatively tiny during the Civil War, were drawn mostly from former Millerites (a movement centered on the predicted return of Christ in 1844), which had been a northern phenomenon, and the main S.D.A. communities were northerly, in Michigan and New York. In any case, all three churches were abolitionist, which prior to and during the Civil War would have tended to preclude a fully national membership.

A more practical reason for the selection of these churches in this study is the fact that during the Reconstruction Era each denomination had a well-documented and consistent official periodical that served as a weekly connection for members to their church's center. These newspapers were the *Christian Recorder* for the A.M.E., the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* in the S.D.A. Church, and the *Christian Advocate* for Methodists. These organs formed a crucial

⁵ Mitchell Snay, *Gospel of Disunion: Religion and Separatism in the Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 130.

part of church life for members of these churches and are the basis of primary source analysis here.

Print Culture

Church periodicals in this period reflect the environment of printed media in the nineteenth-century United States. For reference, the growth of daily and weekly newspapers in the decade of 1870-1880 was “by far the largest such growth in any decade,” climbing to a count of 11,314 in 1880.⁶ This represented a 10 percent growth in the size of the “press” each year, compared to 5 percent each year from 1860-1870.⁷ The unprecedented expansion of the print industry grew to meet the demand of the American people, which had seen a “quicken public interest in news as a result of the Civil War.”⁸ These factors make clear that periodicals like the *Review*, *Advocate*, and *Recorder* were in a heyday of American consumption of print culture during the Reconstruction Era.

In keeping with the popularity of the mainstream press, the religiously-oriented sector “had forged a burgeoning print culture with a dual mission: *purity* and *presence* in the world.”⁹ The defining characteristics of the religious press, compared to the secular press, were the ideals of purity, “keeping that which they defined as sacred uncontaminated by the profane world,” and presence, “infusing the world with sanctifying influences,” according to print historian Candy Gunther Brown.¹⁰ The analyses of integrated religious and secular themes in the following chapters should be viewed with this in mind: that ecclesiastical writers, printers, and editors were

⁶ Ted Curtis Smythe, *The Gilded Age Press, 1865-1900* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2003), x.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹ Candy Gunther Brown, *The Word in the World: Evangelical Writing, Publishing, and Reading in America, 1789-1880* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 1. Emphasis in original.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

striving not to merely report the news or earn a profit, the supposed purview of the secular industry, but promote their beliefs and teachings among readers. Brown comments, “As evangelicals intensified their participation in the American print market, they worked through the relationship between the secular and the sacred, or between the things of this world and the things of the world to come.”¹¹ The newspapers of all three churches embodied this statement when, as they often did, they endeavored to assign a greater meaning and significance to the events of the Civil War.

A final word concerning the American print culture of the 1860s and 1870s: though literacy rates were substantial, a notable portion of Americans were not able to read or write. According to historian of journalism Ted Smythe, in 1870 20 percent of white Americans and 79.9 percent of black Americans were illiterate, though by 1880 these figures had decreased slightly to 70 percent for blacks and 17 percent for whites.¹² Therefore, the attitudes of each denomination’s newspaper were not necessarily the beliefs of each church member, or even known to each member. This essay uses a church’s periodical as a voice for the church as a body for the sake of simplicity, but literacy, circulation, and other limitations indicate that the more general statements should be read with an implied grain of salt.

Methodology

This thesis analyzes church periodicals in an attempt to determine overarching categories or themes of thought for each denomination. Each substantive reference to the Civil War attaches some level of meaning to the war in the author’s process of making his or her point. For example, one of the most famous meanings attributed to the war was that of Abraham Lincoln, as articulated in his Second Inaugural Address, that if God willed “the mighty scourge of war” to

¹¹ Ibid.,

¹² Smythe, *The Gilded Age Press*, 40.

continue “until every drop of blood drawn with the lash, shall be paid by another drawn with the sword . . . so still it must be said ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.’”¹³

Like Lincoln, the churches examined here would express beliefs in the war as a punishment for the nation’s sins. Other meanings they ascribed to the war included viewing the war as an obstacle in becoming a great Christian republic, as a sign of the country’s descent into moral depravity, as a source of unity, or even as a metaphor for the rebellion against God in each person’s heart. Each of these themes appeared in multiple articles, and in the explanation of each theme representative selections have been provided.

Historians of religion have found it useful to integrate a plethora of evidences into archetypal themes, to cognize the important strains of meaning among the multitude of interpretations. Sean A. Scott utilized these methods in his study, *A Visitation of God: Northern Civilians Interpret the Civil War*, uniting many sources into three major themes. These themes were a comprehension by religious northerners of God working in the world to reveal his will or judgment, a belief that God was chastising the nation for the sin of slavery, and ultimately that the Union was sacred as ordained by God.¹⁴ Historians like Scott blend many differing strands of meaning to create a comprehensible picture of the religious atmosphere of the time. In this thesis, religious northerners continued to understand the war as part of their own religious and national self-identity and narrative. Brown observed that the religious press consistently used its respective spiritual perceptions to explain new events according to their metaphysical narrative,

¹³ Abraham Lincoln, “Second Inaugural Address,” March 4, 1865.

¹⁴ Sean A. Scott, *A Visitation of God: Northern Civilians Interpret the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

using “words incarnated in the print market to transform the world by performing core narrative structures.”¹⁵

In categorizing and interpreting the themes that the *Recorder*, *Review*, and *Advocate* provide, care has been given to placing the sentiments contained therein in their proper historical contexts. This essay has tried to embody Clifford Geertz’s proscription that researchers should endeavor to enter the “conceptual world in which our subjects live so that we can, in some extended sense of the term, converse with them.”¹⁶ Therefore, no effort to evaluate the truthfulness or accuracy of the claims made in the following primary sources has been made, except to compare claims within the same source for internal consistency. Asking after meaning is by nature a subjective inquiry, so accordingly here the emphasis has been placed on those attributing meanings to the war, not the veracity of the meanings themselves.

Religious Context

Each chapter provides the historiographical and historical context for its case study, but a brief overview of the religious backdrop of Civil War- and postwar-America offers a constructive beginning to those more detailed discussions. In his expansive study of the religious history of the Civil War, George C. Rable sets the scene for the next phase of American religiosity in Reconstruction:

However much the problems and contradictions might weigh on historians studying wartime religion, many people of the Civil War generation simply looked to their religious faith for consolation, if not understanding. To ask whether the war shattered millennial hopes or even weakened religious faith is to pose the wrong question. Both in the short term and even by the end of the war, a providential interpretation of events with millennial overtones showed remarkable staying power.¹⁷

¹⁵ Brown, *The Word in the World*, 21.

¹⁶ Clifford Geertz, *Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays by Clifford Geertz* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 24.

¹⁷ Rable, *God’s Almost Chosen Peoples*, 5.

Rable portrayed the Civil War as the highpoint of American spirituality and afterward faith remained prevalent, but never to the same degree. He wrote, “The Civil War had in fact been the ‘holiest’ war in American history. Never before and likely never again would so many ministers, churches, and ordinary people turn to their faith and Bibles to explain everything from the meaning of individual deaths, to the results of battles, to the outcome of the war itself.”¹⁸ This seems to be the consensus among historians. “The Civil War represented the heyday of Protestant America,” said historian David Mislin, “But war is by definition a liminal experience, and the intensity of faith commitments demonstrated at the height of combat proved impossible to sustain in the normality of peacetime.”¹⁹ Jonathan Butler reflected the same assessment: “The Civil War, however, was a watershed between an earlier and later America in which Protestantism began to lose its firm grip on the nation and became just one hand among many that reached for a hold on American life.”²⁰ The period of this essay, 1865-1877, then, marked a period of transitioning to the postwar nation when religious attitudes toward God’s hand in everyday events and God’s destiny for the nation began to change.

Religiously, “the incarnation of a national American civil religion may have been the final great legacy of the Civil War.”²¹ A significant portion of the periodicals examined here discuss the relationship between Christianity and the nation, using the religious lightning rod of the Civil War as an opportunity to debate what the future might hold for them. By the end of the Reconstruction Era, “Protestantism presented a massive, almost unbroken front in its defense of

¹⁸ Ibid., 397.

¹⁹ David Mislin, *Saving Faith: Making Religious Pluralism an American Value at the Dawn of the Secular Age* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015) 3, 4.

²⁰ Jonathan Butler, “When America was ‘Christian,’” *The World of Ellen White*, ed. Gary Land, 97-112 (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 1987), 104.

²¹ Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the American Civil War* (New York: Viking Press, 2006), 459.

the social status quo.”²² Henry May’s argument here is apt, and in the case studies to follow, the fact that the respective churches found a great sense of identity in common with or in opposition to the American nation should not be underestimated. Before and after the war, there were imposing intersections of nationhood, divine destiny, religious identity, and memory of the past. This study aims to show that these intersections can be well illustrated by examining how the Methodist, African Methodist Episcopal, and Seventh-day Adventist churches interpreted and discussed the Civil War.

²² Henry F. May, *Protestant Churches and Industrial America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949), 91.

CHAPTER 1: THE METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

The Methodist Episcopal (M.E.) Church's official periodical, *The Christian Advocate*, frequently printed articles in the postwar period that attached many different kinds of meaning to the recent Civil War. This chapter will examine the broad categories of meaning that the *Advocate* reflected and the implications of that meaning for Methodists' conceptions of government, divine providence, and their church. To understand the context of the Reconstruction-Era Methodist world, this chapter will briefly discuss the history of the Methodist movement in the United States and the *Advocate*, as well as the denominational demographics of the church in the 1860s, 1870s, and 1880s. Within this context, the distinct threads of meaning associated with the Civil War recorded in the *Advocate* will become apparent: Methodists, to the extent their beliefs were portrayed in the *Advocate*, saw the past war as an indication of God's desire that they build a righteous nation, as a form of punishment meted out for the sins of the nation, as evidence for or against repairing the denominational schism, and as an impetus for evangelism. These themes are not each equally represented in the *Advocate*, but all are present substantially enough to begin to understand more clearly the place of the Civil War in the minds of northern Methodists.

History of the Methodist Church in the United States

The Methodist movement originated in England under the leadership of the charismatic evangelist, John Wesley, and the American Methodist Church was organized in 1784 by a conference of Methodist preachers.²³ Methodism quickly grew into the largest Protestant Christian denomination in the United States, and by the Civil War the church "had come to

²³ James E. Kirby, *The Methodists* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), 7.

increasingly represent the nation's stable middle class."²⁴ Methodists were the most numerous and most influential of any Protestant denomination, and, accordingly, the significance they attached to current affairs had widespread importance. To put the Methodist Church in perspective, historian David Hempton described that

in 1776 Methodists accounted for only 2.5 per cent of religious adherence . . . whereas by 1850 the Methodist share was 34.2 per cent which was almost double the proportion of Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Episcopalians put together. In a period of remarkable demographic expansion, Methodist growth rates considerably outstripped those of the population as a whole.²⁵

Unlike the Seventh-day Adventist and the African Methodist Episcopal Churches examined in following chapters, the M.E. Church, reaching three million members in 1900, can be creditably understood as a very influential source of American Protestant thought in the mid- and late-nineteenth century.²⁶

Church historian and former minister Ralph W. Sockman stated that the M.E. Church was “organized at about the time the United States Constitution was adopted, [and] the Methodist Church parallels rather uniquely the pattern of American government.”²⁷ Church structure was democratically structured with elected officials and different branches of church government. The individual conferences (regional groupings of churches) elected members to the Council of Bishops, which held executive power. Legislative power rested in the General Conference, a denomination-wide gathering of elected representatives from each conference every four years,

²⁴ Nathan O. Hatch, “Introduction” in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2011), 17.

²⁵ David Hempton, *The Religion of the People: Methodism and Popular Religion c. 1750-1900* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 9.

²⁶ Frederick A. Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism: A History of the United Methodists and Their Relations* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974), 254.

²⁷ Ralph W. Sockman, “What Is a Methodist?” in *Religions in America: A Completely Revised and Up-to-Date Guide to Churches and Religious Groups in the United States*, ed. Leo Rosten (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), 129.

while judicial authority lay in the Judicial Council, whose members were appointed by the General Conference.²⁸ These democratic governing procedures meant frequent engagement in and high awareness of both church and civil governments by Methodists. Ironically, this relative lack of centralized authority led to the schism of the Church into North and South churches in 1844, over a “disagreement on the twin issues of slavery and episcopacy.”²⁹ The two did not reunify until 1939, and this chapter is concerned only with northern Methodists, as the primary readership of the *Advocate*.

In 1868, President Ulysses Grant remarked that there were “three great parties in the United States: the Republican, the Democratic, and the Methodist Church.”³⁰ The M.E. Church, “if only because of its predominant size,” also played a large role rallying support for Lincoln and Unionism.³¹ During the war, the northern Church made no secret of where its loyalties lay, as “conferences passed patriotic resolutions, administered oaths to themselves and to their probationers, brought the flag into their sessions, encouraged the war effort and Methodist participation therein, supported chaplains, demanded stronger national action on slavery, and denounced the secessionists.”³² All of these factors meant that by the postwar period, Methodists had invested substantial resources into supporting the U.S. government in the Civil War. Thus, the meaning that Methodists attached to the Civil War had dramatic implications for their vision of the future of the nation, especially because before and after the war they were accustomed to merging the political and religious spheres.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 129-130.

²⁹ Kirby, *The Methodists*, 377.

³⁰ Richard J. Carwardine, “Methodists, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War” in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, eds. Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 309.

³¹ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 242.

³² Kirby, *The Methodists*, 121.

Historiography of Methodism of the 1860s and 1870s

Despite the prominence outlined above, the historiography of the M.E. Church in the postwar Reconstruction Era is small. Religious historian Nathan O. Hatch wrote, “What I find surprising is the lack of interest in studying American Methodists, both among religious historians and the broader historical community.”³³ For Hatch, “most American historians predictably treat Methodism blandly and uninspiringly,” ignoring its place as the “most powerful religious movement in American history” and its side-by-side growth with the emergence of the American republic.³⁴ Historians seem to be more drawn to religions of the disenfranchised and exotic, and not middle-class Methodism. However, it is precisely the middle-class nature of Methodism which brought about the powerful conjoining of national and religious imagery for its members, also known as civic religion, helping to lead to the notion of an “In-God-We-Trust” Christian Republic in the twentieth century. Therefore, the historians that have informed this chapter spoke to the M.E. Church’s postwar memory of the war usually only as a secondary or tangential argument in their histories of Methodism in America or Methodists and the Civil War. Through the *Advocate*, and other means, “Methodists injected vernacular Christianity into the bloodstream of America - faith incarnate in popular culture. . . . The United States became characterized by populist forms of Christianity.”³⁵

Despite Hatch’s appraisal of the limited Methodist historiography, a handful of historians have undertaken writing about the postwar Church. Though describing the Methodist mentality before and during the war, much of Richard J. Carwardine’s essay, “Methodists, Politics, and the

³³ Nathan O. Hatch, “The Puzzle of American Methodism” in *Methodism and the Shaping of American Culture*, edited by Nathan O. Hatch and John H. Wigger (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 25.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 25, 26.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

Coming of the American Civil War,” can illuminate the Church’s understanding of the war in retrospect. Carwardine stressed that Methodists looked toward a closer integration of their faith and the government, explaining that many northern Methodists, which he called “triumphalist Republicans” were “nourished by a postmillennialist creed that celebrated conscience, obedience to a higher law, and a strong sense of social responsibility - who had traveled furthest from the outlook of their church’s first apolitical generation by identifying the arrival of the kingdom of God with the success of a particular political party.”³⁶ Rather than promote unity in the antebellum U.S., the M.E. Church, North, became a “principal channel of sectional alienation,” due to its views on Christian duty in the state, specifically manifested in abolition.³⁷ By the opening of the Civil War, the northern M.E. Church had already begun to act on this belief in earnest, wrote Carwardine, as Methodists viewed “the state as a moral being and [believed] that Christians as active citizens had to take responsibility for ensuring that the highest standards of virtue flourished in civic life.”³⁸ Through such a lens, the perception of the war as a struggle to create a truly Christian republic, as the *Advocate* reveals, was partially an outgrowth of prewar emphases on social involvement as Christian duty.

Historian Donald G. Jones continued this thematic thread in the history of the postwar M.E. Church. The war had been a stepping stone to building the nation that Methodists believed God wanted them to create:

The story of the Methodist Episcopal Church during the period following the Civil War is not the tale of . . . a “spiritualized” church interested only in fitting born-again Christians for heaven . . . It is a story of a confident and aggressive form of Christianity engaging American society and political structures with a highly disciplined institution, and with a gospel whose social relevance was assumed. This old-time religion did not

³⁶ Carwardine, “Methodists, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War,” 341.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 331.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 314.

proclaim a Christ against culture. Indeed, it was a kind of political religion rooted in a traditional faith.³⁹

So strong was this conviction that the standard Protestant “evangelical individualism gave way to corporate understandings and approaches,” wrote Jones, and that God, through his “providential chastisements,” was “recalling the nation to its proper vocation.”⁴⁰ The Methodist narrative, in this sense, seems to have been that the nation had fallen away from its lofty and unique purpose, and needed the war to purify itself before could it achieve its divinely-ordained future. Jones concluded that after the war, “the war was understood as a providential means of national redemption” and the expansion of the government’s power to do good in Reconstruction “came to be understood as a new phase of the same operation.”⁴¹

Other histories have described the Methodists’ faith in the American kingdom of God as somewhat naïve and romantic. In his *Story of American Methodism* (1974), Frederick A. Norwood suggested that “in many ways Methodism at the end of the Civil War was living still in an age of innocence - innocent, that is, of the complexities of modern industrial technological society.”⁴² Norwood seems to attribute a simplicity, or perhaps optimism, to hopes that a government in the modern era could ever rule with the kind of divine mandate that Methodists appeared to have wished for. Such a conception was profoundly influenced by a memory of the Civil War. The Church, from its experiences in the war, was “busy building an ecclesiastical kingdom which threatened now and then to become an empire,” as the nineteenth century progressed.⁴³ As is further discussed in the “Methodist Reconciliation and Evangelism” section

³⁹ Donald G. Jones, *The Sectional Crisis and Northern Methodism: A Study in Piety, Political Ethics and Civil Religion* (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1979), 2.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 82, 88.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁴² Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 253.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 258.

of this chapter, Norwood ultimately found that the failure of the concept of a purifying war to heal the North/South fracture in the M.E. denomination would steadily erode Methodist faith in a beneficent American nation. The *Advocate* reflects this tension that Norwood articulated: the ideals of a Christian republic failed to even unify a single denomination as northern Methodists simultaneously kept estranged southern Methodists at a respectful, but careful, distance.

The Christian Advocate

The *Advocate* had been the official M.E. Church newspaper since 1826 and was one of the most widely circulated weeklies in the country during the nineteenth century. Though there were numerous local *Advocates*, such as the *Northwestern Advocate* or the *Tennessee Advocate*, the *Advocate* used here was published in Chicago, and had a variety of contents.⁴⁴ A single issue of the *Advocate* might contain poems, sermons, news, book reviews, conference minutes, letters, editorials, speeches, or reprints of government materials such as laws or proclamations. Though editors controlled what would be printed, most of the items came from submissions from local church members or ministers. The editors did not shy away from printing controversial material, but sometimes included disclaimers in fiery articles like “Suggestions,” written by an anonymous “K.” Following K.’s critique of church practices, the editors wrote, “We print the above, as we do many other things, not because we approve of its suggestions, but to give the writer the opportunity to ventilate his thoughts.”⁴⁵

The *Advocate* did not qualify its support for the Union cause, however, and “played a significant role in formulating and giving publicity to moral judgments on the war,” though these judgments took a number of forms.⁴⁶ The anonymous author “M.” used no uncertain terms: “The

⁴⁴ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 312.

⁴⁵ “Suggestions,” *The Christian Advocate*, February 20, 1868.

⁴⁶ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 243.

record of our Church through the war is clear and always and fully on the right side.”⁴⁷ Its practice of assigning religious meaning to political events continued after Appomattox, and even “after the war was over, it went on in the Methodist press.”⁴⁸ For decades afterward, various articles would make claims regarding the import of the Civil War for the nation, Christianity, the M.E. Church, and individuals. Of these attempts at meaning, the most visible was the association of Christian values and purpose with the national destiny.

A Christian Republic and the Kingdom of God

The intertwining of Christianity, the United States, and a glorious destiny was common practice for most nineteenth-century Methodists. The appeal of this belief was evident if one was an American, because it assured hope in the future, justified trust in the U.S. government and mistrust of outsiders, and secured a grand identity. Following the Civil War, the preexisting belief in the chosenness of the United States, the “city on a hill,” coincided with the triumph of the free North over a stratified and slaveholding South. Progress seemed inevitable. As Jones explained,

The key to understanding the commingling of religious impulses and nationalistic consciousness that brought together the mission of the Church and national destiny is found in the Methodist belief in Providence The new Republic and American Methodism were thought to have been the chief agents for the fulfillment of Divine purposes. These purposes and the means of achieving them had, for Methodists, *become* manifest in the struggle and the agonizing climax of the Civil War.⁴⁹

Therefore, victory in the Civil War demonstrated to the entire globe that the nation had a religious destiny ordained by God. This strain of meaning given to the war “unites [the world] in our *paeans* [songs of triumph] of victory, and the inevitable necessities of crowned heads and statesmen abroad compel them to regard our grand constitutional freedom as their most attractive

⁴⁷ “St. Louis Correspondence,” *The Christian Advocate*, July 25, 1867.

⁴⁸ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 246.

⁴⁹ Jones, *The Sectional Crisis and Northern Methodism*, 146.

model, let us be foremost in regarding our noble Republic *as a study* [the prime example].”⁵⁰ In short, Methodists were foremost among American Christians in believing, along with Abraham Lincoln, “that this nation was ‘the last best hope of mankind.’”⁵¹

The *Advocate* is replete with references to the glorious destiny of the United States, as evidenced by depictions of the religious significance of the Civil War. Speaking on behalf of the General Conference in his address to the Council of Bishops, a Bishop Andrews declared that to “the American Christian his own land and time seem to have been designed for peculiar illustrations of the divine kingdom, and for special and large contributions to it.”⁵² True Christian patriots, in Andrews’ conception, interpreted all countries by their relation to the “kingdom and glory of Christ.”⁵³ Unsurprisingly, his Church had the grandest role, having “been a powerful auxiliary of the Republic, and perhaps the indispensable condition of its success.”⁵⁴ After all, it had been Lincoln himself who said that “the Methodist Church ‘sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospitals, and more prayers to heaven than any other.’”⁵⁵

The Civil War had a magnificent meaning in this portrayal of a national destiny. Methodists of that time were not able to evaluate great events, due to their proximity, asserted another *Advocate* article. But, “at length, when calmer times shall come, later generations will see our age rising higher and higher above the level of the ages, as some great mountain peak seems to grow more lofty as one recedes from its immediate base”⁵⁶ Only then would people be

⁵⁰ “The Great Republic as a Study,” *The Christian Advocate*, April 29, 1869. Emphasis in original.

⁵¹ Jones, *The Sectional Crisis and Northern Methodism*, 2.

⁵² “Centennial Address of the Bishops,” *The Christian Advocate*, May 11, 1876.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ “The War and the Revolution,” *The Christian Advocate*, September 15, 1870.

able to “appreciate the relative greatness of our times.”⁵⁷ The magnitude of the times, elaborated a Colonel Ingersoll in an 1877 speech printed in the *Advocate*, culminated in the virtue of the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. According to Ingersoll, when Lincoln wrote the Proclamation, “he simply declared the will of the nation.”⁵⁸ The “greatest part of the honor belongs to the nation,” he said, rather than Lincoln.⁵⁹ Readers of the *Advocate*, most staunch Unionist northerners, likely would have felt those words applied directly to themselves.

This paradigm continued into the postwar setting, too. If the country had a lofty future and if Methodists had helped to secure part of that future through participation in northern victory, then, accordingly, the legacy of Civil War meant that Methodist actions would help the nation continue to achieve its destiny. An author using the pseudonym “Nimrod” (a mighty biblical figure) described the situation in 1866: “We are standing upon the threshold of a new world We have just emerged from a bloody and wasting war.”⁶⁰ The author asked, “Are we to rise up in our renewed strength and power like a young giant, shake the dust of sloth and indifference from our garment, and start anew the race of national greatness and Christian civilization?”⁶¹ The impetus of the war “must inaugurate a new era of prosperity, happiness, and glory for the American people,” he concluded. American Christians would not procure this future by waiting for Providence, this narrative implied, but by taking matters into their own hands.

Many articles encouraged readers to act in the present for the good of the moral character of the nation. “One of the results of the civil war,” wrote Methodist minister D. A. Whedon, “is

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ “Freedom of Thought,” *The Christian Advocate*, December 13, 1877.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ “Letter from Charleston,” *The Christian Advocate*, March 22, 1866.

⁶¹ Ibid.

that the business of government is now in the hands of the people as never before in our national history.”⁶² Another contributor, C. C. North, compared the postwar devotion to that of wartime, asking “Shall not the love of our Church be equal to our patriotism? Shall a gift less noble be laid on her altars than we cheerfully offered to our country?”⁶³ Some focused on the institutions of churches and schools as “the chief and cheapest defenders of the Republic” and protection against moral decay, while others thought resistance against Catholics, who “refused to enter the armies of the Union,” would be the safeguard of national purity.⁶⁴ Even the power of money, so often considered a source of temptation by Christians, was praised for “standing sponsor for the nation in its terrible baptism of blood.”⁶⁵

Methodists were chiefly supposed to take political actions, however. Though “The Church and the civil government have their separate spheres . . . they are both delegations of power from the same sovereign Lord,” stated the *Advocate*.⁶⁶ Thus, it was the “first duty of the citizens to choose and to elect such men to rule over them as fear God; men of known character for justice, probity, and truth, whose moral worth shall offer to the people a guaranty of righteous government” – that is, Christians.⁶⁷ During and after the war, northern Methodists would continue to view the meaning of the war with a “social ethic” of civic involvement, resting on the “the conviction that America was a Christian Idea incarnate.”⁶⁸ The meaning of the Civil War, then, was the beginning of the nineteenth-century Methodists’ endeavor to build the Christian Republic.

⁶² “Senator Wilson on National Education,” *The Christian Advocate*, January 12, 1871.

⁶³ “Centenary Offerings – How Much?” *The Christian Advocate*, August 30, 1866.

⁶⁴ “The Suffrage and Its Dangers,” *The Christian Advocate*, May 19, 1870; “Rome and the Freedmen,” *The Christian Advocate*, July 18, 1872.

⁶⁵ “Consecration of the Money Power,” *The Christian Advocate*, January 16, 1873.

⁶⁶ “Report on the State of the Country,” *The Christian Advocate*, August 6, 1868.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ Jones, *The Sectional Crisis and Northern Methodism*, 301, 157.

The War as Punishment

The narrative of an emerging Christian Republic both corresponded to and opposed a second conception of the Civil War as a divine punishment for national sins, especially slavery. Guilt could even lead to more political efforts, for as Jones observed, “The dimension of guilt in the self-understanding of Methodists [was] clearly a dominant impulse for religious and social action following the war.”⁶⁹ Like the other themes that the *Advocate* reveals, the themes of destiny and punishment were not exclusive, though the emphasis placed on the future or on the past, respectively, is significant. The purification of a rotten nation motivated many of the items concerning the meaning of the war that appeared in the *Advocate*. Yet, like the belief in the Christian destiny of the nation, even understanding the Civil War as God’s punishment carried a note of hopefulness: once the chaff had been burned away, the harvest could be gathered.

In an exhortation to the *Advocate*’s readership, one article claimed that the Civil War came as a result of Christian laxity: “Had they done their duty we never should have had that civil war; we never should have put two millions of men in the field to save the Republic The Christian men and women of this land largely failed, though they were reproached for it, to do their duty, and God smote the people with that war.”⁷⁰ The duty the author referred to was the Christian obligation to avoid intemperance and evil, which, American Christians having ignored, impelled God to punish them for their sins. This sentiment resounded in another 1873 article, in which the author declared that the Methodist Church risked additional divine punishment for allowing the South to return to the spirit of rebellion in its treatment of freed people in the South. As northerners did nothing, “the fruits of their [former Confederates’] evil deeds are maturing in such a plentiful harvest of crushed ambitions and humbled pride, of poverty and helplessness,

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁷⁰ “A Plea for Temperance,” *The Christian Advocate*, April 3, 1873.

[that] we would be admonished not to wish to further afflict those whom God is so evidently and so severely chastising.”⁷¹

The culpability of Christian America for the calamity of the Civil War was a reoccurring theme. Americans had been sinful, God punishes all sin, and thus Americans were responsible for their own suffering. Rather than an upward step in building a righteous nation, as described in the preceding section, this view laments human weakness: “The occurrence of such wars [like the Civil War] among the most civilized and cultured Christian nations presents a discouraging prospect to the hopes often expressed, that, with the advance of our Christian civilization, wars would cease among nations.”⁷² In another article, the punishment of the war was inflicted on the whole nation, North and South, for collective guilt. Despite northern victory, “we knew the complicity of the nation, as a whole, in the great crime which God had evidently undertaken to avenge,” and the “sufferings endured by the people of the free states had not been in proportion to their guilt.”⁷³ Implicit in this article was a belief that a nation has a moral status, regardless of the morality of individual members therein.

Still, even this vision appears less hopeful than the glorious destiny of a Christian nation, the war as punishment still engendered hopes of a better future. In hindsight, the war might even have been seen as a positive, as in the 1871 article, “The Good Things of War.” In that piece, the author posed a rhetorical question: “But four years of terrible war has wrought a great change in the national heart: and, terrible as was the expense of that war in blood and treasure, who shall say that the purchase was not worth the price?”⁷⁴ The action required in the face of chastisement, rather than glorious destiny as the meaning of the war, was more often prayer. In a time of

⁷¹ “The Not-Reconstructed South,” *The Christian Advocate*, September 4, 1873.

⁷² “The War and the Revolution,” *The Christian Advocate*, September 15, 1870.

⁷³ “President Johnson – The New Orleans Riot,” *The Christian Advocate*, August 30, 1866.

⁷⁴ “The Good Things of War,” *The Christian Advocate*, January 19, 1871.

frequent violence in postwar New Orleans, the *Advocate* urged prayer, asserting “Never was there a time, not even in the darkest days of the rebellion, when Christian people were more solemnly admonished to pray for the gracious interposition of the Divine power to save the nation.”⁷⁵

Methodist Reconciliation and Evangelism

The preceding two meanings largely cast the Civil War in spiritual terms, while this section discusses more practical meanings given to the war in the *Advocate*. Both of these functioned to try to bring more souls, mostly southerners, into the Church fold. The *Advocate* became a platform to debate the reception northern Methodists should give to the defeated, and presumably disillusioned, southern Methodists, with whom they had parted ways in 1844. Some contributors favored reunion while others wished to keep the corrupt southerners at arms’ length. More universally agreeable were calls in the *Advocate* to evangelize to disaffected southerners and newly-freed slaves, often following the army. In Norwood’s analysis (1974), the northern M.E. Church “took unfair advantage of the military victory of Union forces to push into the south at the expense of the M. E. Church, South.”⁷⁶ Norwood also interpreted these efforts, at both reconciliation and a bullying kind of evangelism, as the ultimate failure of the imagined Christian Republic. He noted that although “Christian America was still overwhelmingly Protestant, it was no longer unified in a common dream of an evangelical kingdom of God. The great turning point was past. It was a different country, a new world.”⁷⁷

⁷⁵ “President Johnson – The New Orleans Riot,” *The Christian Advocate*, August 30, 1866.

⁷⁶ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 247-8.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 258.

In the 1860s and 1870s, however, Methodists did not have the benefit of Norwood's hindsight. Rather, they were enthusiastic about efforts to enlarge the Church. One missionary-minded writer observed:

The events of the War opened to us the whole South, which till then had been closed against us by the lawless tyranny of slavery, and the finger of God pointed to the door thus opened – too plainly to be misunderstood – commanding us to enter it. . . . The [southern] public conscience had become debauched by the presence and dominance of slavery, and the whole social body needed the regenerating power of uncorrupted Christian doctrines and institutions.⁷⁸

Whereas previously slavery had clouded the moral judgment of southern Christians, abolition of slavery, even if inflicted on the southerners by force, might now allow them to take part in American destiny. For similar reasons, reconciliation between ecclesiastical sections was newly possible as well, now that the barrier of slavery was removed. The “upheavals and convulsions” of the “lamentable civil war” ordained by God might let “Methodists begin to look each other in the eye and see the light of a common faith reflected in their clear, liquid depths [and] in time they must come together.”⁷⁹ The optimism in these articles would turn out to be overstated, however, as most southerners were content to remain in their own denominations and freed people were much more receptive to the efforts of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

Additionally, many northern Methodists did not wish to be reunited at all with the M.E. Church, South. These voices often respected southern sincerity, but strongly opposed their beliefs. One lamented, “In that war the most thoroughly committed and most actively engaged bodies upon the opposing sides were the two Methodisms The return of peace, dictated at the mouth of the cannon, did not bring these antagonists into harmony. The close of the war

⁷⁸ “Our Southern Work,” *The Christian Advocate*, December 7, 1871.

⁷⁹ “Harmonious Methodism,” *The Christian Advocate*, September 14, 1876.

found the two Methodisms more widely separated than ever before.”⁸⁰ Another praised the cessation of hostilities but found reconciliation likely “to be postponed indefinitely.”⁸¹ A third wanted a polite distance from former adversaries: “because Methodists, North and South, were deeply convinced of the right of their cause, they could not, as soon as the clang of arms had ceased, embrace each other, who were so lately intent upon each other’s destruction. . . . We favor fraternity, but prefer that it shall be spontaneous and informal.”⁸² The war highlighted sectional differences, rather than minimizing them, for these Methodists. With sentiments like these, it’s not surprising that reunion required nearly seventy more years.

Conclusion

These varying interpretations of the Civil War represented many strains of thought among the M.E. congregations. Whether the war meant God’s displeasure, the catalyst for a new Christian age, or the possibility of church growth, in all cases Methodists, at least to the extent reflected in the *Advocate*, attached high importance to the war in the subsequent years.

Interestingly, in no instances did the *Advocate* opine about the meaninglessness of the war’s bloodshed or the waste of life – even if obscure to human vantage, Methodists always found some sort of meaning in the war. Jones noted this as well: “Methodists had a transcendent frame of reference that would not allow them to admit that there was no meaning to the dramatic historical tragedy through which they had just lived.”⁸³

Inevitably, too, the conflict’s outcome proved the legitimacy of the North and its churches. A failure of one side’s military strength indicated to all watching that God, who directed everything, had ordained that outcome. In this “vindication of the Northern cause and

⁸⁰ “Southern ‘Fraternization,’ cont.,” *The Christian Advocate*, July 18, 1872.

⁸¹ “The Southern General Conference and Fraternity,” *The Christian Advocate*, June 4, 1874.

⁸² “‘Fraternity’ and ‘Union,’” *The Christian Advocate*, April 8, 1875.

⁸³ Jones, *The Sectional Crisis and Northern Methodism*, 70.

the rightness of the Methodist Episcopal Church as over against the Southern connection” the “God of battles had arbitrated the question at issue in the war and decided that the North was right.”⁸⁴ It follows logically then, that the winner of the battles would be God’s chosen nation, especially because, as has been shown, this coincided with other deeply-held Methodist beliefs.

Several years after the end of the war, the *Advocate* featured an article that asked, “Peace or War”? This article concluded that “it was only to save the life of the nation that the loyal masses assented in their feelings that there should be war.”⁸⁵ The identification of the mass of Methodists with the nation’s very existence surely demonstrated a new direction in mainstream American Christianity. In contrast to Francis Asbury’s, the virtual founder of American Methodism, “insistent prescription” that “our kingdom is not of this world,” the meaning that Methodists attached to the Civil War showed how thoroughly connected they believed the nation and their faith to be.⁸⁶

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁸⁵ “Peace or War,” *The Christian Advocate*, August 6, 1868.

⁸⁶ Carwardine, “Methodists, Politics, and the Coming of the American Civil War,” 342.

CHAPTER 2: THE AFRICAN METHODIST EPISCOPAL CHURCH

No one had more at stake in the Civil War than African Americans, and the largest African American church in the United States, the A.M.E. Church, understood that the war represented a divine occurrence for its people and a momentous event in their history. The Civil War had been the ultimate execution of political force and A.M.E. members frequently interpreted the war as a call to further political action by African Americans. Unlike the other denominations in this study, the racial element of the Civil War was not only unavoidable, for the A.M.E. Church race formed the fundamental character of the war itself. The newly-freed slaves were not an abstract entity, waiting for white Christians from other denominations to evangelize them and grateful for northern salvation, but seekers after true religion and freedom of worship in a church untainted by white condescension. Thus, the overarching political changes brought by the Civil War had a profound religious meaning to African Methodists as evidenced in the rhetoric of the war in the Church's periodical, *The Christian Recorder*.

History of the A.M.E. Church

The African Methodist Episcopal Church began as a splinter from the larger Methodist Church when its founder, Richard Allen, led a group of dissatisfied African American congregants out of the M.E. and to organize their own church. In what would become a motivating principle for A.M.E. members (sometimes called African Methodists), the founding members of the Church created an institution separate and independent of white churches. Religious and church historian Clarence E. Walker comments: "with the organization of the A.M.E. Church in 1816 black people had a church which would utilize their talents. Its existence was proof, members of the church believed, that black men did not have to depend on their white

brothers for moral instruction [and] tutelage in any facet of life.”⁸⁷ Though discontented with the prejudice shown by the M.E. Church, the A.M.E. Church retained its organizational structure and relied on “the simplicity of the Methodist gospel message to convert Africans [African Americans] to Christianity.”⁸⁸ Allen and the majority of the eventual membership of the A.M.E. were northerners and before the Civil War the denomination had difficulty reaching new converts among the enslaved people in the South. Despite the uncondusive climate toward the Church, however, “the clergy and laity of the A.M.E. Church believed it was their duty to bring the message of God’s love and the promise of salvation to America’s poor, disadvantaged, and sinful blacks,” referring both to free northern African Americans and slaves.⁸⁹

Prior to the Civil War, the Church combined its theological teachings with a strong sense of social duty. Historian Gilbert Anthony Williams described how,

From Methodist religious philosophy, the AME Church took the concept of social concern and transformed it into a unique social consciousness that promoted racial equality and a focus on educational achievement. Moreover, the AME Church appropriated the general Christian direction to be an open and fearless advocate of liberty, justice, and all righteousness and used it as a kind of guiding AME conviction.⁹⁰

Walker repeated this assessment of the Church’s vision before the war, in that the “the major concern of the A.M.E. Church before the Civil War was setting a moral example, not political and social agitation.”⁹¹ The racial strictures of the era and slavery hampered the Church’s efforts

⁸⁷ Clarence E. Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land: The African Methodist Episcopal Church During the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 83.

⁸⁸ A. Nevell Owens, *Formation of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in the Nineteenth Century: Rhetoric of Identification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 96.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

⁹⁰ Gilbert Anthony Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: History of a Forum for Ideas, 1854-1902* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1996), 21.

⁹¹ Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land*, 27.

to “elevate the race,” which was its vision of “carrying out God’s will on earth.”⁹² The significance of this aim would be magnified by the possibilities opened by the end of the Civil War, and contributed greatly to the Church’s conception of the war in the *Recorder*.

Though the Church maintained an otherness from white churches in order to preserve its independence, A.M.E. members largely saw themselves as equally part of the same American nation, and to a degree partook in the same spiritual influences as the other northern churches. The popularity of black military service in the war, strongly supported in the *Recorder*, indicates the willingness of African Methodists to join the fight for national survival and destruction of slavery. Furthermore, “Throughout the war the A.M.E. Church would continue to oppose plans to colonize blacks outside the United States, because they believed that Negroes were Americans and should not be removed from their homeland. In time, this sense of Americanism would also alter the church’s attitude toward the war.”⁹³ Like almost all Christians in the North, the A.M.E. Church also believed that the fate of the nation contained a divine mandate, in addition to their intimate experience with abolitionism.

During the war, denomination leaders turned the *Recorder* “into a paper with a nationwide reach, solicited and published extensive coverage of the Civil War (including letters from and about black troops), facilitated diverse political and theological commentary, [and] highlighted the struggles of newly freed African Americans in the South,” leading to a generally accepted understanding of the war’s meaning by the A.M.E. Church’s members.⁹⁴ By serving in the military and wholeheartedly embracing the Union cause, African Americans sought to secure rights for themselves once the war had concluded. Unfortunately, as most historians of African

⁹² *Ibid.*, 2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁹⁴ Eric Gardner, *Unexpected Places: Relocating Nineteenth-century African American Literature* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 56.

American history have agreed, the identification of northern whites with African Americans as “true” Americans, compared to the rebellious white southerners, soon fell away in light of white America’s desire for sectional reconciliation. The A.M.E. Church continued to use the war as an inspiration for increased black political involvement, however, and “defining clearly a political culture that would serve as the platform to make claims on the behalf of the black community.”⁹⁵

The A.M.E. Church was in a unique position regarding the Civil War in comparison to the other churches examined in this thesis. The A.M.E. Church, and African Americans more generally, faced a more complex outlook at different times during Reconstruction than the predominantly white Adventists or Methodists because of the successes and failures of respective civil rights movements from 1865-1877. The idea of the war as an impetus to political action, for example, would have been more applicable in the wake of the passage of the 15th Amendment in 1870 as compared to the government’s failure of Reconstruction in 1877. The future probably would have seemed very different to an African American who had recently achieved freedom, basic civil rights, and the right to vote (though only for men) through the War Amendments, than to one in the later 1870s, when the government’s protection of African Americans in the South and its interest in their rights had rapidly begun to erode. The themes in the *Recorder* in the later sections of this chapter demonstrate, in part, some of the differing responses of African Americans to the uncertainty of their collective future.

Historiography of the A.M.E. Church and the Civil War

The fact that the Civil War was rich with meaning for the Church has been universally agreed upon among historians, though they have differed in their appraisals of that meaning. As will be demonstrated, the dominant themes that appear in the *Recorder* regarding the war - a call

⁹⁵ Eddie S. Glaude, *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 48.

to increased political action, a status as a race favored by God, and assurance in the protection of Providence - are all partially reflected in the historiography of the Church in the Reconstruction Era. Naturally, these themes often overlap and even the more secular meanings attributed to the war, such as calls for increased political activity, carried strong religious overtones. In the same way that the antebellum A.M.E. Church had combined its religion with social involvement, so the war reflected an intersection of supernatural and mundane destiny. The following historiographical interpretations have been grouped by the themes in the *Recorder* that these historians have identified, beginning with the most prevalent significance attributed to the war, as a catalyst for political self-determination.

Clarence Walker's seminal history of the A.M.E. recognizes all three themes from the *Recorder* and he offered considerable detail in his analysis of the importance that African Methodists attached to the war. Regarding the impulse to political action, Walker suggested that the Church visualized connections to the inception of the nation itself: "To the members and hierarchy of the A.M.E. Church, the Civil War was a moral conflict between slavery and liberty, a struggle for the rights of man which would culminate in the realization of the ideas embodied in the Declaration of Independence."⁹⁶ Walker drew a dividing line between the Church before the war and the Church afterward, implying a new sense of purpose, mirroring the postmillennial optimism that the M.E. Church embodied. Walker described how African Methodists believed "God was the prime mover of history and that history itself was progressive, [thus] the A.M.E. Church believed once that war was over it could push on successfully, in quest of a millennium of peace and hope."⁹⁷ The connection with the war is salient as an archetype of future black

⁹⁶ Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land*, 110.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 45.

accomplishments: just as African Americans had been active in fighting the war and securing freedom, so they would continue to do so to perfect their nation.

Optimism about political possibilities for the Church and the race was tempered, according to Gilbert Anthony Williams, by the awareness of a “new economic order as well as a new political order that encompassed both whites and blacks. No wonder optimism was tinged with caution.”⁹⁸ This wariness that “the government would [not] honor its side of the bargain, despite all evidence to the contrary,” is an important caveat to understanding the A.M.E. Church’s hopefulness for immediate political action.⁹⁹ “African Methodist Episcopal bishops, ministers, and lay people viewed the changing situation immediately after the Civil War with cautious optimism,” because the War Amendments to the Constitution gave African Americans, theoretically if not in practice, the tools to “make their way in a new and unshaped postwar environment.”¹⁰⁰

Turning to the burgeoning understanding of the war as a sign of black chosenness, God’s special favor for the African American race, professor of English Benjamin Fagan identified this theme with the broader American belief in the chosenness of the nation. As with the call to political action, Fagan emphasized that the A.M.E. members approached aligning themselves with the American nation with some caution, writing, “The Civil War represented another step toward the liberation that black Americans, as God’s chosen nation, would surely achieve. But again, the United States’ commitment to black oppression made that country’s fate less

⁹⁸ Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 21.

⁹⁹ Benjamin Fagan, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2016), 145.

¹⁰⁰ Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 21.

certain.”¹⁰¹ To co-opt white Protestantism’s common metaphor of the Children of Israel passing through the wilderness as a representation of the journey of the American nation in the Civil War, Fagan argued that the A.M.E. Church instead saw the period following the war as the wilderness, the war itself being the dramatic crossing of the Red Sea. He again attributed caution to the Church, but “as God’s chosen nation, they could rest assured that they would eventually reach the end of the wilderness, and cross into the Promised Land.”¹⁰² David W. Blight’s *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* employed the same biblical trope, declaring that African Americans considered their narrative of victory in the Civil War “comparable to the older conquest [over] ‘Pharaoh and his host.’”¹⁰³

Walker likewise pointed to this feeling of chosenness being inculcated primarily by the success of the war. A wartime article in the *Recorder* certainly seems to confirm this, proclaiming, “I do most certainly believe that the colored people of this country are destined to be the people that will save this nation from God’s fiery indignation because of [its] political sins.”¹⁰⁴ Walker’s own analysis led him to state that “in calling for black troops the nation had at least realized that its salvation was not in its own hands. That was the way the A.M.E. tended to view it. The people of the North had learned that liberty was the birthright of all the sons of Adam.”¹⁰⁵ The war had been the trial that forced the rest of country to call upon God for rescue, represented by his chosen race, innocent of the nation’s crime of slavery.

Ironically, the identification of the chosen African American people with the chosen nation began to erode as the 1870s progressed. The A.M.E. bishop Henry McNeal Turner saw

¹⁰¹ Fagan, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*, 143.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 148.

¹⁰³ David W. Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001), 24.

¹⁰⁴ *The Christian Recorder*, February 14, 1863.

¹⁰⁵ Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land*, 42.

the fact that Reconstruction was “visibly dying” as reason for the Church to emigrate to Africa, as he argued frequently in “exhortations” in the *Recorder*.¹⁰⁶ Williams saw this expression in the *Recorder* as yet another manifestation of black chosenness, where the “nationalist theme and the emigration fever it engendered reflect[ed] the self-determination philosophy in the black community.”¹⁰⁷ In Fagan’s words, “black chosenness had always been, at least in part, a means to the end of freedom from bondage,” thus, when it became apparent to members of the Church that the American nation no longer would advocate on behalf of their interests, they considered exercising their chosenness elsewhere – though significantly, few members actually ever chose to emigrate.¹⁰⁸

Finally, Walker and Williams acknowledged the theme of passivity toward the will of Providence in the *Recorder*, as well. To African Methodists, “the Civil War represented a watershed in the history of the Republic. The destruction of slavery was God’s punishment on America for the sin of slavery.”¹⁰⁹ Though the Church felt no guilt about complicity in the national sin, as other northern churches did, some A.M.E. members felt that trust in God, rather than their own activism, was the way to secure further progress. When whites had tried to fight the war themselves, without black soldiers, they had failed because “God had ordained a mission for America, which in no way envisioned the segregation of the races.”¹¹⁰ Submission to the will of God is an age-old Christian belief, but A.M.E. ministers applied it specifically to the context of the uncertainty of blacks following the war. If their God, explained Williams, was “an all-powerful God, more powerful than the white man,” then the proper response was for African

¹⁰⁶ Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 136.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Fagan, *The Black Newspaper and the Chosen Nation*, 146.

¹⁰⁹ Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land*, 2.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 42.

Methodists to wait upon the Lord, for only his strength could continue to protect them. The *Recorder* confirmed this attitude requiring submission because “above all the changefulness of men, above all the fluctuations of politics, God rules.”¹¹¹

Walker’s position on the meaning of the Civil War for the A.M.E. deserves further clarification here, regarding the three major themes that other historians and this essay have identified. He suggested a disparity between the words of the *Recorder* and the actions of the Church:

The rhetoric that A.M.E. Church members used to describe the Civil War and their people’s participation in the conflict is misleading: for they did not really believe that the war would completely transform their position in American society. Although they used a language which was rich in biblical imagery, these black folk knew that once the hostilities ceased they would have to struggle on another front The clergy and members of the A.M.E. Church believed that the best way to accomplish this was for blacks to become respectable property owners.¹¹²

In short, to truly “elevate the race,” they needed to become “respectable members of the communities in which they lived.”¹¹³ The A.M.E. Church’s encouragement and support of education and evangelism seems to reinforce Walker’s stance, yet, his argument still ran against the grain of the *Recorder*, in that it implied that the authors did not intend that their words be taken literally. The rhetoric used in describing the war appears to have attached real meaning to the war, if it is read at face value. Of course, multiple themes beyond those listed here are also present and the meaning of the war should not exclusively be associated with the Church’s vision for bettering all African Americans. Walker’s point is well-taken, however, at least in the sense as with all the periodicals examined here, that the *Recorder* reveals a disconnect between

¹¹¹ “Wayside Thoughts,” *The Christian Recorder*, April 21, 1866.

¹¹² Walker, *A Rock in a Weary Land*, 43.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

language and action. Furthermore, as the following section discusses, there are additional evidences in the historical legacy of the *Recorder* to argue for a face-value reading.

The Christian Recorder

The Christian Recorder was the primary African American publication in the nineteenth century, both in longevity and readership. It accepted content contributions from many sources, such as ministers, church members, and influential African American leaders, like Frederick Douglass. It published content from the more common discourses on spiritual and political affairs, to poetry and eulogies, serialized novels, letters from black soldiers during the war, speeches, and so on. African American print historian Eric Gardner described the *Recorder* as a periodical

conceived by African Americans, edited by African Americans, written primarily by African Americans, and largely distributed by African Americans to an almost completely African American audience - a periodical that, in the midst of a sea of failed print ventures by members of all races in the nineteenth century, survived and influenced a readership across the nation.¹¹⁴

Given this historical context, the *Recorder* is one of the best sources to examine the A.M.E. Church's understanding of the Civil War. Though not every member of the A.M.E. subscribed to the *Recorder*, and certainly not every subscriber agreed with the claims therein, for clarity and brevity this essay will treat the *Recorder* as representative of A.M.E. discourse during the Reconstruction Era, though of course those Church members' perceptions of the war do not speak for the African American community as a whole. Additionally, the *Recorder*'s usages of the term "nation" often referred to members of the black race, not always the United States. A *Recorder* essay by Julia C. Collins expounded this duality, declaring that the events of the war had changed "the seemingly invincible destiny of our people, and build[t] us up a nation that

¹¹⁴ Eric Gardner, *Black Print Unbound: The Christian Recorder, African American Literature, and Periodical Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 4.

shall shine forth as a star on the breast of time, and be gathered into the brilliant galaxy of great nations,” and it was “the will of God that we become a nation and a people.”¹¹⁵ Though striving for rights in the American nation, the *Recorder* reflected African Americans’ identity as a “nation within a nation.”

As a historical resource, however, the *Recorder* is unique in this time period. As Gardner explained, “As a national ‘recorder,’ the paper included notices of marriages and obituaries - often the only print records of critical events in the lives of Black individuals and communities. . . Perhaps most fascinating, it published letters from Black readers across the nation in a time of massive cultural change.”¹¹⁶ Other historians, such as Williams, have also observed the exceptionality of the *Recorder*, in that it “received financial and other support from the A.M.E. Church, a church that was never controlled by whites. Ministers helped sell subscriptions and raised money for the *Recorder*, and church officials worked as writers and assisted in the paper’s publication. The *Recorder* also had a sizable and fairly stable circulation.”¹¹⁷ Thus, as an organ for African Methodist voices, the *Recorder* probably best captures the religious attitudes of Church members across the nation following the Civil War. Additionally, the official sponsor of the *Recorder*, the A.M.E. Church, experienced unprecedented growth following the war, as its missionaries and publications began to circulate among newly freed slaves in the states of the former Confederacy. The membership of the A.M.E. Church grew from 75,000 in 1865 to 400,000 in 1880 due to this desire of freedpeople to participate in African American institutions.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Julia C. Collins, “Life is Earnest,” *The Christian Recorder*, January 7, 1865.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹¹⁷ Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 15.

¹¹⁸ Glaude, *African American Religion*, 49.

African Methodists felt the impact of the war in very significant ways, in addition to the massive growth of the A.M.E. Church, and they used the *Recorder* to express their memories of the war and the meanings they understood it to possess. With the ending of slavery, the character of the *Recorder* changed as well; instead of “a heavy emphasis on religious news and features” that defined the *Recorder* before the war, it “underwent a transformation,” exemplified by a “front page [that] featured secular issues more prominently.”¹¹⁹ Members of the A.M.E. Church knew they had greater control over their destiny than ever before and had a greater stake in the secular events of the day. The war meant something to African Americans more intimately than the other churches examined here, as a political freedom allowing them greater freedom of religious expression. African Americans were constantly aware that, in the words of historian David W. Blight, “black freedom was the child of civil war, [and] black rights were the products of blood, destruction, and fierce political conflict.”¹²⁰

The War as Impetus for Political Action

The A.M.E. Church framed not only emancipation but African American suffrage and incorporation into the government of the United States as one of the principle gains achieved by the war. The Church’s narrative predicted that the new, postwar nation needed African Americans to participate or risk falling back into a “new slavocracy.”¹²¹ The Founding Fathers of the nation had “ingrafted slavery into the tree of liberty” and so “supplied the germ of the present civil war.”¹²² If the country had not learned from its mistakes and continued to “deny the negro the right of right . . . [the] United States government [would] again become speedily another

¹¹⁹ Williams, *The Christian Recorder, Newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*, 16.

¹²⁰ Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory*, 132.

¹²¹ “The Elective Franchise,” *The Christian Recorder*, April 29, 1865.

¹²² *Ibid.*

rotten carcass in the moral world.” If the nation failed to achieve equality for freedpeople, then it failed its redemptive arc. As the article “Letter from Washington” stated, “Deny us this, the right of suffrage, and the strife of civil war will be void of gain to the American patriot.”¹²³ The meaning of the war had been political freedom for African Americans, and the nation required them to take political actions for the good of the Republic, or risk falling back into the former sinfulness.

However, the actions that the war inspired were not only those of the white government, but also those of blacks themselves, preached the *Recorder*. After all, African Americans had taken an active role in fighting the war as soldiers to win freedom. In the same way, asked the *Recorder*,

Shall these soldiers of liberty, returning from fields of death to Northern fields of labor and of peaceful contest - of contest in which the ballot is the only weapon, and the bulletin of defeat or of victory is contained in the election returns, who never flinched before mighty force, be overborne, with their laurels so green, by political stratagem? . . . Are the victors in fields of death to become the vanquished in halls of legislation?¹²⁴

This rhetorical question uses the fearlessness of black soldiers on the battlefields as an ideal to match their bravery in courthouses and legislative assemblies. Such a conception of the African Americans’ sacrifice in the war contained religious symbolism as well as secular political imagery, too. The African American’s “loyalty, the consecration of his life, his property and sacred honor to the welfare of the Republic, is abundantly attested by our national history Henceforth we are all freedmen and citizens, with the same law, as the same heavenly light, covering the whole face of our country.”¹²⁵ In the same breath as these statements about black people’s role in the nation, the *Recorder* awarded “the praise for this work, this moral triumph”

¹²³ “Letter from Washington,” *The Christian Recorder*, February 3, 1866.

¹²⁴ “Universal Suffrage,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 22, 1865.

¹²⁵ “Emancipation and Enfranchisement,” *The Christian Recorder*, October 14, 1875.

to the Republican Party.¹²⁶ The A.M.E. Church was drawing a clear connection between its spiritual ties to the war and its duty to act politically in the nation.

The Church proclaimed that the sufferings of its people had earned them a rightful place in U.S. politics. One of the ways for them to secure their rights was “to prove ourselves capable of making as good use of all the political privileges which white citizens enjoy, as they do themselves.”¹²⁷ Not only would they use their new power intelligently, as proved “in our loyalty and sacrifices during the terrible civil war,” but their very presence in the government would “be a living protest against the injustice that would proscribe us.”¹²⁸ Again, the claim arose that it was morally necessary for the former victims, who presumably knew the sacrifices and costs of national sin better than anyone, to take an active role in the nation to prevent further wars and national strife. Through the “fire and storm of battle” did God reveal that he “made of one blood all the nations of the earth.”¹²⁹ For the *Recorder* this revelation solved the “question of the colored race in this country, which has rent us from the beginning, and will heave and harry us until it is put honorably to rest.”¹³⁰ Through civil and political rights, African Americans could finally “have the power of settling” the racial prejudice that had brought on the Civil War.¹³¹

To achieve political strength, the mission of the A.M.E. Church and the meaning of the war went hand-in-hand. As mentioned above, the Church evangelized effectively to the freedpeople of the South after the war and found many new converts for the Church. This “labor” served a twofold purpose: religiously it served “the salvation of all men,” and politically it served “the enlightenment and Christianization of the needy freedmen, in order that they may

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ “Trying Moment for the Colored People,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 10, 1866.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ “Blacks and the Ballot,” May 27, 1865.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

become good citizens of this Republic, and be prepared for the citizenship of Heaven.”¹³² This twofold call to the Church, declared, “Let it be said of us, that we have done what we could by words, acts and deeds, to extend our Redeemer’s Kingdom on earth.”¹³³ In the late war, “thousands devoted their hearts, hands and means to their country’s service,” and thus in the legacy of the war, the people of the A.M.E. Church were continuing that work.

God’s Favoritism of the Race and the Triumphant Future

The theme of political involvement rested in part on the idea that African Americans were needed in government to preserve the morality and integrity of the nation. That idea was strongly intertwined with the present theme of God’s special favoritism of the black race, that, like the Children of Israel, African Americans were chosen by God. In the aptly titled article, “Our Future,” the *Recorder* spelled out the narrative of chosenness:

Now and then we are favored with glimpses of the future, that seem to us as beacons to light us onward. But the light is yet uncertain. ‘To walk by faith and not by sight,’ is yet our special prerogative. . . . True, we, too, shared the trial and pain; we, too, walked through the blazing furnace of civil war. The baptism of blood, the ordeal of battle fires, were for us; and freely we gave our loved ones as food for the sword. The tidings of defeat bowed our heads; and when victory waited to follow the lead of the Stars and Stripes, whose heart throbbed higher than ours? Whose jubilant songs were fuller of gratitude to propitious Heaven?¹³⁴

The Church had been faithful and followed God even when the future looked bleak, and God had carried his people through sufferings to emerge into a future bedecked by “gleams of glorious sunlight.”¹³⁵ The events of emancipation, victory in the Civil War, and the surge of converts after the war to the A.M.E. Church must have appeared as God’s special providence for the Church and its people. The significance of the war had been a test of faith for God’s chosen.

¹³² “The African M.E. Church, *The Christian Recorder*, May 26, 1866.

¹³³ “Seed Thoughts,” *The Christian Recorder*, August 17, 1876.

¹³⁴ “Our Future,” *The Christian Recorder*, December 16, 1865.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

One of the common manifestations of the theme of divine favoritism in the *Recorder* was in its lofty praise of African American soldiers. The *Recorder* reported with pride that the “fame and glorious deeds” of “our colored soldiers” “belong to no one state, but are the property of the Union they contributed so much to save.”¹³⁶ The record of their bravery “shall glow in brighter and yet brighter colors while we have a national existence,” and “what an incentive to elevated action and the cultivation of a pure, unselfish patriotism has every colored youth in our land!”¹³⁷ The soldiers’ “disregard of risk and danger,” however, was so great that observers forgot the soldiers’ underlying “moral heroism.”¹³⁸ Another article described the soldiers as men who “by their determined energy, have won for themselves undying fame, and woven wreaths of victory that are imperishable. That they fairly won these honors, no one will question, who follows closely their history.”¹³⁹ With heroes like the African American Civil War soldiers, the A.M.E. Church saw a generation exemplify the attributes of God’s chosen race.

In this vein, a writer in the *Recorder* scoffed at the claims to glory “that invests the white American today” and that accompanied white condescension concerning race.¹⁴⁰ If whites believed an African American to be “Ashamed of the Color of My Skin!,” as the title implied, the author admonished the reader, “Ashamed of the color of your skin! He that is, must be ashamed of his God, and doubt his wisdom.”¹⁴¹ Turning the white paradigm on its head, the Church should be proud of its color, as a characteristic of God’s chosen people. As with skin color, the old ways of thinking were passing away, particularly in the dominance of the “Saxon”

¹³⁶ “Passing Events,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 31, 1866.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ “Letter from the Fifth Regiment, U.S.C.T.,” *The Christian Recorder*, November 4, 1865.

¹⁴⁰ “Ashamed of the Color of My Skin!” *The Christian Recorder*, June 30, 1866.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

race, which was to be replaced by God's chosen.¹⁴² From the "Saxon," African Americans "learned that form of government that is as surely destined to prevail the world over, as there is absolute worth in man."¹⁴³ The "American Negro has been close by the side of his white brethren, and has long seen how he applies these great principles," but now this torch of liberty was passed on to the black man, who "bids fair to rival his great teacher."¹⁴⁴ The white race had been marred by its complicity in the atrocity of slavery, and so God had allowed his favoritism to pass on to African Americans.

Blacks' longstanding assertion of the race's chosenness was affirmed by the Civil War, when the "nation was obliged to call upon the negro before they got through with their Civil war," and so in future would the nation call on them again.¹⁴⁵ As the heirs to liberty and God's favor, the Church understood its new role to come with profound duties to the Republic. The *Recorder* asserted that "the principle of universal liberty, checked for over eighty years in its progress, . . . announced its triumph in the noise of a war that made every hilltop of our land reverberate with its sound."¹⁴⁶ Speaking to African Methodists and to African Americans more broadly, the *Recorder* urged, "Let our people have faith in the triumph of principle, and because we have faith, let us hope, and because we hope, let us be strong. Let us ask for nothing but what is right, and be satisfied with nothing less."¹⁴⁷ Through high ideals in freedom and Christianity and sacrifices in wartime, the Church and African Americans had proven their chosenness over their white counterparts. In tandem with the previous theme, this status impelled blacks to take increased action in the nation to continue to embody God's will. The *Recorder* did not always

¹⁴² "The American Negro," *The Christian Recorder*, November 21, 1868.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁵ "National Reform Association," *The Christian Recorder*, June 22, 1876.

¹⁴⁶ "It Is Not Safe," *The Christian Recorder*, August 4, 1866.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

adhere to this position, however, and many voices in the *Recorder* advised readers to have faith in God's guiding hand, instead of attempting to take his matters into their own hands.

Providential Assurance

The theme of providence in the meaning of the Civil War had more explicitly spiritual underpinnings than the previous sections. It has been a Christian mainstay in many different contexts to "wait upon the Lord" for deliverance from trials. For the A.M.E. Church, though, this casting of the events of the war and Reconstruction shifted the emphasis from the Church or the race as the actors to God as the actor with A.M.E. members as passive. Divine providence might take the form of miraculous intervention or a subtle change of heart in a conflicted person. For example, the *Recorder* attributed the changing attitudes of white America toward racially unjust laws as God's working within their character. Such laws were "becoming more objectionable to the American white people every day. This is not caused by a suddenly conceived love for the black man, but it is the result of that truth which God taught the nation during our four years of civil war."¹⁴⁸ Compared to the other themes, good things had been achieved not by direct action or earning a chosen status, but by faith. Things otherwise incomprehensible were made sense of through God's power, like the war for emancipation by a slavery-tolerating nation. "In the progress of this war, how many thousands have we seen fight for the liberty of the slave," pondered the *Recorder* somewhat paradoxically; "Yes, fight to elevate the negro, though they hated him. God does indeed 'move in a mysterious way his wonders to perform.'"¹⁴⁹ In the face of such mystery, the Church could only trust that God was working for the benefit of his people.

¹⁴⁸ "Distinction on Account of Color," *The Christian Recorder*, February 16, 1867.

¹⁴⁹ "A Gala Day in Leavenworth, Kansas, Reception of the First Regiment Kansas Colored Troops," *The Christian Recorder*, December 23, 1865.

This belief took an intriguing shape in an article admonishing President Andrew Johnson about his political policies. The president should be aware, said the *Recorder*, that African Methodists “are among those who believe in a true and living God, and that He will govern all nations, and that they shall yield to Him their Lord and King.”¹⁵⁰ Johnson might “try to crush the colored people of this country, but God intends that they shall live wherever they will . . . and eventually become citizens of this great Republic.”¹⁵¹ Even a change in the president’s mind was God’s domain, as the *Recorder* indicated, wishing that “God grant that he [Johnson] may see the error of his ways before it is too late.”¹⁵² To the extent that this article tried to persuade Johnson rhetorically, it merely informed him that he was acting contrary to God’s intentions, and left all else up to God.

Human action again withdrew in a sermon on the meaning of the Fourth of July in 1865, where the preacher painted a narrative in which all human events were subject to God’s providence and everything good to come out of the Civil War had been ordained by God. The *Recorder* wrote that “God has granted to us to have safe passage through all those fiery ordeals,” that “He has given us victory,” “He has overthrown the rebel armies,” and has “given the miserable [rebel] leaders into our hands.”¹⁵³ It was even God who accepted “the precious human sacrifices, offered at our country’s altar.”¹⁵⁴ Nowhere did the author attribute the outcome of the war to the actions of soldiers or leaders, or argue that African Americans had been chosen as a special subject of God’s favor. God had allowed the United States to survive the Civil War and become a “great nation,” only to achieve his own ends of creating a “better example of true

¹⁵⁰ “Progress at the South,” *The Christian Recorder*, November 24, 1866.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ “The Fourth of July,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 8, 1865.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

liberty.”¹⁵⁵ In all of this, God had been the active agent and his designs were mysterious, leaving the Church with nothing to do but wait and have faith.

Following along the same lines, the *Recorder* reflected on the past war in another article, “The War and Its Effects.” In it both the good and the evil that resulted from the war were attributed to God: “In viewing the evils which follow in the rear of war, we are too apt to forget, that while Providence permits this most dreadful scourge to pass over lands whose inhabitants have well nigh forgotten His laws, He still, in wrath, remembers mercy.”¹⁵⁶ Waiting on providence had been a “terrible suspense.”¹⁵⁷ However, at precisely the right moment, God chose to intervene to save the nation and his people, requiring the North only to acknowledge the cause of freedom. “As soon as justice was recognized, and its dictates obeyed in the conduct of the war,” God reversed his former wrath, “and victory perched upon the banner of the North, which before often trailed in the dust, while its best blood flowed like water before the fierce onslaughts of the rebel hordes.”¹⁵⁸ The war had shown that God blessed those who obeyed his laws. Unlike the other themes in the *Recorder*, this providential understanding placed traditional Christian morality and longsuffering above the self-determination evident in those themes’ political overtones.

Conclusion

Broadly stated, in the postwar A.M.E. Church the war took on political, racial, and spiritual meanings, reflecting the diversity of the church members’ experiences of it. In regard to the history of the Church and of black experiences in America, each of the themes portrayed in the *Recorder* echoed a facet of the complex world of the time. The Church’s history of social

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ “The War and Its Effects,” *The Christian Recorder*, July 22, 1865.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

activism to “elevate the race” certainly contributed to an active sense of involvement in national political events to help guide the postwar United States. The concrete political gains of freedpeople, many of whom would join the A.M.E. in the Reconstruction Era, also demonstrated what could be achieved through the Church’s advocacy. Furthermore, as the nation was punished for the sin of slavery, African Americans were innocent of that national evil, and the perception of becoming the moral inheritors of the country’s founding ideals seemed natural. The sense of emerging from a great ordeal and time of testing in the war, and the following emancipation, were evidenced in the Church of God’s special destiny for the race. At the same time, the African Methodists were still Christians, deeply imbued with an age-old Christian attitude of “this too shall pass.” The war had been an expression of God’s providence, which proved that he would save his people if only they would have faith. In this intellectual multiplicity, there can be no single interpretation of the war in *The Christian Recorder*. The *Recorder* does reveal, however, that the A.M.E. Church understood the war to signify a real source of many spiritual, political, and racial meanings for navigating the postwar era and beyond.

CHAPTER 3: THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

The Seventh-day Adventist Church's (S.D.A.) *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* most frequently interpreted the U.S. Civil War with profound prophetic implications. This chapter examines how the articles in the *Review* expressed S.D.A. beliefs associated with and meanings attached to the war. To contextualize the analysis of the *Review*, this chapter will first lay out briefly the institutional history of the church, only formally incorporated in 1863, and of its chief periodical, the *Review*. Many historians have commented on the importance of the Civil War in postwar Adventist thought, and a representative selection of that historiography will be surveyed here, as well. As in the preceding chapters, the central themes of the denomination's conception of the war will then be categorized and examined. The most significant method of handling the war in the *Review* was as an element of the unfolding of events described in the Bible's Book of Revelation, a sign of the coming apocalypse. Other meanings attributed to the war had more in common with the Methodist and A.M.E. churches, such as depicting the war as a purification for the sins of the nation or as evidence of the thoroughness of humanity's sinfulness. Numerous articles in the *Review* also treated the war metaphorically, comparing the South's rebellion to the rebellion against the law of God in each person's heart. The sum of this rhetoric, in short, shows how denomination members saw great significance in the Civil War but also felt that it "was not their struggle."¹⁵⁹

History and Demographics

The Seventh-day Adventist Church was in its infancy in the 1860s and 1870s and had a relatively tiny membership. From the earliest roots of the Advent Movement to its formal incorporation, the S.D.A. Church had "skyrocketed from about 200 members in 1848 to 3,500 in

¹⁵⁹ Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 186.

1863,” to eventually grow to 78,000 by the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁶⁰ The movement began with the gradual coalescing of former followers of William Miller, the Millerites, after the failure of Miller’s prediction that Christ’s Second Coming would take place in 1844. Only a small fraction of Millerites went on to become Adventists, but they continued to reflect Miller’s emphasis of the immediacy of the end of the world as prophesied in the Bible. During the Civil War and Reconstruction eras, the Adventists understood their Church to be the only true “remnant” of righteousness among the rest of the churches in the United States. Even though the S.D.A. Church was closely linked with other Protestant churches theologically, the Church nonetheless considered those churches to have fallen from biblical truth and into step with Catholicism, especially in regard to the correct day of worship. Unlike the majority of antebellum Americans, who “posited a God who worked within and through people and their institutions,” the early Adventists adhered to a “literal cataclysmic Advent [Second Coming] of Christ into their world;” that is, the S.D.A. Church was premillennialist, rather than postmillennialist, regarding how the period of godly peace on earth would unfold.¹⁶¹ Instead of this Millennium occurring on earth as other Protestants believed, premillennialists held that the Millennium occurred in heaven, taking place only after the dynamic events of the Second Coming. As the following analysis of the *Review* will reveal, the portrayals of this event in Revelation would highly influence the S.D.A. Church’s perception of the Civil War.

The organizational structure of the S.D.A. Church is similar to the other churches in this study. The local churches are combined into conferences and several conferences form unions.

¹⁶⁰ Brian E. Strayer, *John Byington: First General Conference President, Circuit-Riding Preacher, and Radical Reformer* (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2017), 162; Richard Bowen Ferret, *Charisma and Routinisation in a Millennialist Community: Seventh-day Adventist Identity* (Lewiston, New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008), 219.

¹⁶¹ Ferret, *Charisma and Routinisation*, 52.

The most extensive unit, the General Conference, is the collective voting body of representatives from each union and the General Conference elects a president at its quinquennial gathering. In the Reconstruction period examined here, 1865 to 1877, all but one of the G.C. presidents were also editors of the *Review*. In such a relatively small denomination it would be natural to expect this overlap in leadership roles, and for this reason the *Review* can be substantively considered the “voice” of the Church during this time.

The *Review* made a direct statement about Adventist participation in the war that illustrates a central interpretative theme: when asked by a correspondent whether “Adventists believe it is right to go to war,” the editors replied simply, “No. Our position is that of non-combatants, and was so acknowledged by the Government in the late civil war.”¹⁶² As will be expounded in subsequent sections, such a stance against an active role in conducting the war illuminates the S.D.A. perception that the Civil War, though imbued with meaning, was not an enterprise in which the Church had a “personal” stake. In response to S.D.A. “hawks” in the North, the first General Conference President, John Byington, petitioned the Michigan government for conscientious-objector status, further separating Adventists from the literal execution of the war.¹⁶³ Some historians have even suggested that one of the driving reasons for the Church’s incorporation in 1863 was to “speak as a body to the government [in order to] take advantage of the noncombat provisions.”¹⁶⁴

Compared to the Methodist and African Methodist Episcopal churches, the S.D.A. Church was unusual in this period because of the influence of the charismatic figure of Ellen White, who was widely held by the church to be a prophetess, though the degree of her divine

¹⁶² “To Correspondents,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 9, 1878.

¹⁶³ Strayer, *John Byington*, 170.

¹⁶⁴ Gary Land, *Adventism in America: A History* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 65.

inspiration was and continues to be debated. She was a prolific writer for the church for seventy years after joining the movement in 1846 and “by the time of her death in 1915, Ellen White functioned as the acknowledged interpreter of Scripture for the Adventist church.”¹⁶⁵ However, though her importance in shaping the church’s theology and vision were vital, including in regard to the Civil War, she “never accepted formal office, thereby establishing a distinction between her charismatic role and the bureaucracy of the church.”¹⁶⁶ This distinction might be blurred by the fact that she married the eventual president of the Church’s General Conference and future editor of the *Review*, James White, but, for the purposes of this study, her role is secondary as she never wrote in the *Review* concerning the war. Briefly, Ellen White “functioned as a spiritual wild card, a source of authority in the community outside the usual channels, while also providing assurance of the divine presence in the community.”¹⁶⁷ She will be discussed in the following section only to the extent that her prophetic visions about the war were supposed to have influenced S.D.A. thought in the postwar period.

Historiography

Historians of Adventism and the S.D.A. Church have addressed the Church’s evaluation of the meaning of the Civil War. Typically these interpretations have formed the context of the relationship between the Church and the nation. The lack of much direct participation in the war has resulted in relatively curtailed examinations of its importance in Adventist thinking. Adventist history has been additionally limited, according to historian Jonathan M. Butler, by the “differences between a historian of Adventism and an Adventist historian, secular versus

¹⁶⁵ Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 29.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶⁷ Douglas Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001), 24.

supernatural history, and [by] apologists who rate scholarly notice and those who do not.”¹⁶⁸ Such an assessment might be leveled at denominational historians of any sect, but is particularly prevalent with Adventism partly because of the powerful presence of Ellen White, who has been traditionally assumed to have had divine revelation. Butler explained, “Before 1970, Seventh-day Adventist ‘history’ belonged in quotation marks. For about a century, Adventists told their story to themselves without the constraints of mundane cause and effect; history to them meant magical thinking.”¹⁶⁹ Fortunately, the newer generation of historians of Adventism have done the “heavy lifting historiographically,” and maintained greater academic rigor, even if this newer class is relatively small and their studies of the S.D.A. and the Civil War have been minimal.¹⁷⁰

Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf’s survey of Adventist history provides a useful starting point to begin unraveling how Seventh-day Adventists understood the war. To set the stage of the Civil War, Schwarz and Greenleaf wrote,

By the early 1850s J.N. Andrews’s identification of the two-horned beast mentioned here [Revelation 13:11-17] as the United States had been accepted. With a mixture of wonder, apprehension, and anticipation Adventists watched for events in the United States which would herald its support of the image of the beast (Protestantism) and its enforcement of the beast’s mark (Sunday observance).¹⁷¹

As the nation descended into war, Adventists were fixated on the prophetic implications of such a cataclysm, particularly as articulated by J.N. Andrews, an Adventist leader who would become G.C. President and an editor of the *Review* after the war. During the war, Adventists were comparatively passive, despite being antislavery, because “no one could delay God’s prophetic

¹⁶⁸ Jonathan M. Butler, “Seventh-day Adventist Historiography: A Work in Progress” *Church History* 87, no. 1 (2018): 149-66.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ Richard W. Schwarz and Floyd Greenleaf, *Light Bearers: A History of the Seventh-day-Adventist Church*, revised ed. (Nampa, Idaho: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2000), 168-169.

timetable” and the end of the U.S. “would also mean the end of the world.”¹⁷² Even after the war, most Adventists refused to accept that much positive progress had truly been achieved, and instead “staunchly declared the popular Protestant view of the world’s conversion and a temporal millennium preceding the Advent to be a ‘fable of these last days.’”¹⁷³ This statement generally disapproving of the prevailing Protestant culture marks the extent to which Schwarz and Greenleaf commented on Adventist reflections on the war after the fact.

Another work, by far the most well-received study of Adventism, had even less to say about the Church’s thinking on this subject. Malcolm Bull and Keith Lockhart’s study of the culture of Seventh-day Adventism thoroughly analyzed the “alternative route to the American dream” that the Church and its members have produced, leading Butler to praise their book, *Seeking a Sanctuary: Seventh-day Adventism and the American Dream*, as the “the high watermark for Adventist historiography.”¹⁷⁴ *Seeking a Sanctuary* reinforced the concept that the S.D.A. Church did not see the Civil War as its fight, because of the Church’s fundamental otherness from the mainstream Christianity of the nation: “in early Adventist apocalyptic, the church was placed in opposition to the American nation.”¹⁷⁵ As far as the actual meaning attached to the war in hindsight, however, Bull and Lockhart say only that it created the tradition of Adventists participating in medical capacities during wartime, rather than performing combatant roles.¹⁷⁶

Bull and Lockhart asserted that Adventism provided an alternative to the American nation, but this point should not be overstated, nor pacifism in the Civil War used to justify an

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 95.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 169.

¹⁷⁴ Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 364; Butler, “Seventh-day Adventist Historiography: A Work in Progress.”

¹⁷⁵ Bull and Lockhart, *Seeking a Sanctuary*, 244.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 187.

argument that the Church entirely eschewed the outside world. Edwin Iván Hernández made this point succinctly in his dissertation, “Religious commitment and its political consequences among Seventh-day Adventists in the United States.” Hernández focused on religious commitments within the Church from a sociological perspective, but he made a key distinction that bears on the discussion of the *Review* in the following sections. The S.D.A. narrative of history, prophetic or otherwise, would have incorporated the Civil War as an important link in a chain of events. Hernández explained that “while Seventh-day Adventism during the mid-nineteenth century was characteristically an otherworldly and premillennial movement, it did not withdraw from concerns of society. It was classified as a world-denying sect only in that it saw history moving toward a transcendent end.”¹⁷⁷

Douglas Morgan went much further in describing the relationship between S.D.A. and the U.S., but rarely emphasized the Civil War as an exemplification of that relationship. In *Adventism and the American Republic: The Public Involvement of a Major Apocalyptic Movement* (1989), he stated,

Until the Civil War, the Adventist view of America remained largely deterministic. Adventists felt they could do little to affect the nation’s biblically predicted course. During the Civil War and the two decades following it, however, Adventists moved beyond their apocalyptic warning of the inevitable ruin of the Republic and protest of its evils. . . . They took the position that they could, if only temporarily, influence the nation by working for human rights and human wholeness, and that it was the divine imperative for them to do so.¹⁷⁸

From this statement, it may be assumed that the Civil War influenced Adventists to integrate more fully into the surrounding culture in order to correct social injustices. The implication then follows that presumably because the war had the effect of abolishing the worst “national sin,”

¹⁷⁷ Edwin Iván Hernández, “Religious commitment and its political consequences among Seventh-day Adventists in the United States” (PhD diss., University of Notre Dame, 1989), 16.

¹⁷⁸ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 30.

Adventists were heartened that more good might be accomplished by working within the nation rather than withdrawing from it. Morgan did explicitly make these connections, however, and it is important to remember that, in his words, “Adventists have consistently articulated an apocalyptic lament regarding the Republic and its future and have generally not treated efforts to transform society as the primary vehicle of redemption.”¹⁷⁹

Unlike Hernández and Morgan, historian Jud Lake addresses the Civil War at length in his work, *A Nation in God’s Hands: Ellen White and the Civil War* (2017). Lake’s avowed purpose is to “tell the story of the war again but from the unique perspective of White’s visions,” and throughout he proceeded with the assumption that both White’s visions were supernatural in nature and were proven correct by the events of the war – endeavoring even to justify White’s prediction that England would enter the war.¹⁸⁰ White can probably be considered the preeminent persona in the Church during this period, and Lake’s conclusions about her interpretation of the war are valuable for complementing the perspectives found in the *Review*. Notably, Lake characterized White as believing that “God was angry with the nation, that the war was God’s punishment on both the North and the South for the sin of slavery, . . . and that the Union forces would not have ultimate success in the war until emancipation of the slaves became the dominant purpose.”¹⁸¹ As will be seen, the *Review* echoed these beliefs, as well, in a reoccurring portrayal of the war as a purification of a deeply sinful country. Furthermore, Lake made an apt statement about the S.D.A. Church’s “mixed feelings” about the U.S.A., writing that “they believed it was the greatest nation on earth and a model republic because of its principles of political and

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁸⁰ Jud Lake, *A Nation in God’s Hands: Ellen White and the Civil War* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2017), 17, see also 18, 326.

¹⁸¹ Lake, *A Nation in God’s Hands*, 17-18.

religious liberty,” but also “dragonlike in its potential threat to religious freedom.”¹⁸² This dichotomy is important to note, too, because Adventists seemed to disengage with the popular notions of the national destiny and yet the *Review* occasionally commented hopefully about the nation’s future and called upon readers to work for a better nation.

Several other works of Adventist history have ignored the Civil War almost entirely. For instance, in his 1986 essay “Sectarianism and Organization, 1846-1864,” Richard Schwarz mentioned the Civil War only in passing, suggesting that a more highly-organized missionary effort, rather than the petition for non-combatant status, motivated formal church incorporation in 1863. In the same collection of essays from *Adventism in America: A History*, Emmett K. Vandevere’s contribution, “Years of Expansion, 1865-1885,” did not discuss the war at all.

The sum of these works have informed the conclusions made in this chapter about the meaning of the Civil War as evidenced in the *Review*. In this context, the nation figured prominently in the prophetic destiny laid out in the Bible, and the preceding historians rarely classified the nineteenth-century Adventists as active members of their country, though they were not wholly removed from it either. The historiography of the Seventh-day Adventist Church and the Civil War, then, appears to be an overlooked area of religious history, and this chapter has an opportunity to fit into that niche.

The Advent Review and Sabbath Herald

The Church’s official periodical, the *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, featured many articles that illuminate the Adventist perspective of the Civil War in the years following the war. Not every individual piece can or should be said to speak for the entire denomination, but, en masse can be considered to represent the standard understanding of the war within the Church,

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 18.

for two reasons. First, the editors of the *Review* during the 1860s and 1870s were well-known figures within the Church: editors James White (husband of the denomination's prophetess) and J.N. Andrews would eventually both be elected as G.C. presidents. Second, the categories of meaning developed and explained in this study each rely on many articles as evidence, and thus represent a much larger proportion of the *Review's* content than a single article. As in any church or organization, of course, there are bound to be substantial divergences of opinion and the *Review* and the S.D.A. Church are no different, though the categories in the following sections do reflect a range of depictions of the war.

The *Review* itself had a much smaller readership than the *Christian Advocate* and the *Christian Recorder*, as some of the *Review's* editorial practices indicate. The *Review* often quoted or reprinted material from other periodicals or non-Adventists, presumably as long as the editors felt the material was relevant to readers. For example, before quoting at length comments by a Catholic priest on the nearness of the apocalypse, the editors qualified the inclusion of a Catholic source with the usual Protestant suspicion: "Testimony to the truth respecting the nearness of the end of all things is sometimes borne where it might be least expected. Some even among Roman Catholics fail not to discern the signs of these times, and proclaim them to their people. Let the truth be spoken, no matter where, no matter by whom."¹⁸³ Unless disclaimers like these state or imply the opposite, this study will treat reprinted or quoted material as generally coinciding with Adventist thought.

Like the *Advocate* and the *Recorder*, the *Review* was issued weekly and contained a variety of items beyond the purely religious, such as news, poetry, and politics. Writing for a mostly northern audience, the *Review's* anti-slavery position "led to the exclusion of Adventist

¹⁸³ "A Catholic on the Signs," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 27, 1870.

publications from the slave states,” wrote Schwarz and Greenleaf, but still Adventists “had no hope of eradicating sin prior to the Advent, and so expected slavery to exist right down to the end. They deplored the increasing political controversy, which distracted men from what was more important: preparation for the Second Coming.”¹⁸⁴ This focus on prophetic and spiritual affairs above the political and social is also exhibited in the small heading, a quote from Revelation, that ran across the first page of each issue of the *Review* examined here: “Here is the patience of the Saints: Here are they that keep the Commandments of God, and the Faith of Jesus. Rev. 14:12.” By placing a statement about the righteous “remnant” during Revelation’s descriptions of the end times in the front of each issue, the *Review* made clear the context framing its subsequent material. This immediacy of the prophetic end times is a reoccurring theme in discussions of the Civil War that follow.

Prophetic Implications

The *Review*’s prophetic treatment of the then-recent Civil War can be further divided into three subcategories: the war as a signal of the end of times, a call to evangelism given the “shortness” of the remaining time, and as warning against Sabbath (Sunday) legislation (which Adventists interpreted as persecution against their Saturday-keeping). The first of these meanings attached to the war presents a paradox, because the war had ended in 1865 without the culmination of their prophetic timetable and Adventists were “faced with the reality that God’s act of judgment on the nation had ended slavery without ending the world.”¹⁸⁵ Thus in postwar thinking, the war had to be recast as a harbinger or a “sign of the times.” These sentiments were articulated in the *Review* scarcely three months after Robert E. Lee’s surrender. The article “Permanent Peace” explained that “while the hearts of the American people are filled with

¹⁸⁴ Schwarz, *Light Bearers*, 95.

¹⁸⁵ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 31.

rejoicing at the prospect of the speedy closing up of our national difficulties” the nation remained “absolutely reeking with crime and iniquity.”¹⁸⁶ The S.D.A. “student of prophecy is not surprised” by such moral conditions, however, because “the sure word of prophecy tells us that we are in a time when the spirit of war is to predominate, and the nations are to become angry, which of course is utterly at variance with the idea of permanent peace.”¹⁸⁷ After quoting biblical descriptions of the end times, the *Review* counseled, “when they shall say peace and safety, then sudden destruction cometh upon them.”¹⁸⁸ The cessation of the war did not provide a respite from vigilance of these events and this jeremiad would be repeated frequently in the *Review*.

The fact that the United States had survived its civil war did not diminish the war’s prophetic importance in the *Review*, which often associated the U.S. with evil powers described in Revelation. “With regard to the permanency of our government,” wrote the *Review* in 1866, “we may infer that it is to stand till the close of time, from the fact that it is the same identical power spoken of in [Rev. 14:20, a manifestation of evil], which is to be engulfed in the final ruin.”¹⁸⁹ From this vantage point, the North’s victory seemed to fulfill prophecy, rather than circumvent it. The speed with which final events would occur should not be underestimated, advised James White in 1869, comparing his predictions for the future with the situation in 1861, asking “who then thought that we would so soon be involved in a terrible civil war[?]”¹⁹⁰ Like the swift coming of the Civil War, White believed that “when Providence gets hold of the crank, things move very rapidly,” even going as far to challenge his readers about the upcoming events

¹⁸⁶ William C. Gage, “Permanent Peace,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 6, 1865.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, quoting 1 Thessalonians 5:3.

¹⁸⁹ J. Clarke, “The Present,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, May 1, 1866.

¹⁹⁰ James White, “The Watching Time,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 2, 1869.

of Revelation: “it is impossible for you to show that these things cannot take place in eighteen months.”¹⁹¹

The *Review* did not shrink from bold predictions about the timeframe of final events which the Civil War signified, in that the “terrible civil war in the United States” and “the war-portending attitude of the Old World, seem to crush our hopes of peace.”¹⁹² This strife was “but the final struggle of his Satanic majesty,” who would “see the end of the world's deception by the binding of Satan in the proclamation of universal peace within the next five years, or at the farthest, in the decade following 1880.”¹⁹³ In proclamations like these, the S.D.A.’s Millerite heritage reappeared, though the *Review* noted, too, that Adventists were not the only ones to see the Civil War as a symbol of the immediacy of the end of the world. The newspaper quoted a Catholic priest’s lament in 1870 that “but a few short years ago we had a civil war in our midst, in which torrents of fratricidal blood were shed,” which was a sure confirmation of “the inspired writer [John the Revelator], [who] in his prophetic eye, over eighteen centuries ago, foretold the signs which would mark the approaching dissolution of the world.”¹⁹⁴

The formulation of the Civil War as a symptom of the end took on a slightly different cast when applied to the individual soul. The war had also brought on desensitization to violence and death, so that such evil happenings “lose their force upon the mind by their frequent occurrence.”¹⁹⁵ Contributor D.T. Boureau’s aptly named submission, “Can Ye Not Discern the Signs of the Times?” examined at length this deadening of the heart caused by the war:

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² “The Millennium at Hand,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 22, 1878.

¹⁹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁴ “A Catholic on the Signs,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 27, 1870.

¹⁹⁵ D.T. Bourdeau, “Can Ye Not Discern the Signs of the Times?” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 22, 1873.

At the commencement of our late war, the American people were more shocked at the news of ten falling in battle, than they were afterward to learn that one thousand soldiers had been killed in an engagement. . . . Each event of this nature should tend to deepen the first impression, and arouse the soul. So it should be in regard to the increasing signs of Christ's second coming. . . . As it was in the days immediately preceding the deluge, it is now. The nearer the world are to God's awful judgments, the less are they moved by them.¹⁹⁶

Americans were less moved by violence and so religion mattered less to them as well, as the *Review* posited later in 1877. The war had briefly overthrown "corruption and infidelity," yet the postwar era was still "a day of latitudinarianism," or lackadaisical adherence to God's laws.¹⁹⁷ As a result of the war, "religion has been made popular, at the cost of much of its power." Like the prophetic fate the Civil War signaled for the nation, the war signaled the decay of morality among the formerly faithful. It would be in this setting that the nearness of the end and the degeneration of the soul that the prophetic implications of the war in the *Review* took on another form: a call to action for the Church to evangelize these souls in the short time remaining.

In the "comparative peace" following the war, James White asserted that God had brought "the nation, stained with the crime of slavery, low in the dust . . . [to] receive the message, and in unity and love obey it."¹⁹⁸ The peace in 1865 could only be a slight reprieve, when "angels hold the four winds that the servants of God may be sealed," wrote White, referring to the four winds of strife of Revelation and the seal that God's chosen would receive before the Second Coming.¹⁹⁹ Now that the war had ended, "the message will forget its feebleness and will swell into the loud cry."²⁰⁰ White's call to proselytize in the remaining

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ "The Positive Commands of Christ," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 11, 1877. Reprinting an article by Prof. H.S. Carpenter, LL. D., from the *Standard*.

¹⁹⁸ James White, "War and the Sealing: The One Hundred and Forty-Four Thousand," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 25, 1865.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰⁰ Ibid.

window of time was echoed by others, such as in the article “A Message from the True Witness to the Remnant.” In that piece, the *Review* acknowledged the “deadening influence of civil war,” but urged readers that “still the four winds of the earth are threatening. The last message of mercy delivered to God’s people must yet perform a great work.”²⁰¹ The fact that the war had not led directly to the end of the world was interpreted in the *Review* as a mercy, and as an opportunity for the S.D.A. Church to perform its duty to spread the gospel.

The *Review* used this framing of the Civil War to call subscribers to contribute “more men and more money” to the evangelism efforts. In the “late rebellion,” the call for more assistance would always be answered by those loyal to the Union, and in the same way, “a greater rebellion than this” was “becoming so deep and dangerous upon the little remnant of light, [that] more men and more money are again called for.”²⁰² Likewise, editor James White returned to this theme often, pressing in 1874 that “the present is a time of comparative peace among the Christian nations of the globe, and a most favorable period for extending our missions and pushing forward the work.”²⁰³ A year later, White admonished his readers again, that “most of our people seem asleep, both to the value and importance of the present truth, and to the sacrifices and duties of this time.”²⁰⁴ Invoking the war once again, White implored,

A few years since, our country was involved in a terrible civil war which diverted the attention of the people from our message, and absorbed our resources so that for four anxious years the cause stood still. Now peace is restored, American slavery abolished, and candid people of our great nation, from the Atlantic to the Pacific, from the extreme North to the extreme South, are waiting to read and to hear the message which God has for them at this time.²⁰⁵

²⁰¹ John Matteson, “A Message from the True Witness to the Remnant,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 3, 1867.

²⁰² Etta Booth, “More Men and More Money,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 29, 1869.

²⁰³ James White, “The Present and Future,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 9, 1874.

²⁰⁴ James White, “The Cause of God,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, November 4, 1875.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

This sense of urgency, based on the typical S.D.A. apocalypticism, compelled White and the *Review* to make use of the limited time of peace that the war had granted. That the nation and the world would succumb to evil was prophetically inevitable, thus Adventists were to preach and utilize this time as diligently as possible.

To protect the remaining time, the S.D.A. Church resisted Sunday legislation proposed by other reform-minded Protestants as a direct encroachment on Adventist worship practices and the Church's ability to evangelize. The Civil War had set into motion a governmental mechanism for righting social wrongs, and S.D.A. members worried that reformers, who had succeeded in abolishing slavery, might turn next to regulating the day of worship. As Saturday-keepers, a small minority among Christian groups in the U.S. in that period, they were wary of any attempt to legally create a national day of worship. Morgan summarized the S.D.A. mindset as believing that "Protestants had betrayed true Protestantism by honoring Sunday instead of Saturday, and by joining forces with Catholics to attempt to coerce non-Sunday keepers with law. Adventists see their duty as to delay passage of such laws."²⁰⁶ In keeping with their emphasis on the role of U.S. in prophecy, the Church saw attempts to "create a kingdom of God in American through politics" as "actually lead[ing] to the downfall of the Republic."²⁰⁷ Although this fear had a far-reaching influence in the *Review*, the threat of Sunday laws was frequently discussed in the context of the Civil War.

Just as the national sin of slavery had been "upheld by the church the religious influence of the American public," requiring expiation by "our late civil war," so also would another war

²⁰⁶ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 38-39.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

be required to silence dissenters to the proposed Sunday laws.²⁰⁸ In “view of what the present public feeling is concerning the Sabbath,” as “soon as the agitation reaches a point where the popular idea is disturbed or endangered by the dissenters, dissenters . . . must necessarily be forced into silence, or the authority and power of the church be lost.”²⁰⁹ In their quest to perfect society, reform-minded northerners were feared as threatening to use the force of law and their churches’ influence to compel compliance, just as they had in the Civil War. Interpreting the war and Sunday laws this way allowed the Church to graph the political contest of legislation into the S.D.A. narrative of coming persecution by the state.

The comparison of the war to end slavery and a future war to silence religious non-conformists arose again in later issues of the *Review*. In the same way that “the long and bitter conflict of chattel-slavery with free industry began in the world of ideas, passed to the area of politics, burst into the hell of war,” so “the old story will be repeated, for it is the same old conflict in a new guise,—though we hope and would fain believe that the dreaded possibility of another civil war is in fact an impossibility.”²¹⁰ As seen in the previous examples, the possibility of additional wars to come was a central facet of the *Review*’s interpretation of prophecy. Even after the nation achieved peace, the Civil War remained proof in the S.D.A. Church that things were quickly unraveling, and the “end was nigh.” This meaning of the war was the most common in the *Review*, but as the following sections demonstrate, other prominent themes that somewhat contradicted this one were present as well.

²⁰⁸ A.H. Lewis, “Reply by Eld. Lewis,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 1, 1867.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

²¹⁰ Uriah Smith, “The Religious Amendment,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, March 10, 1874. Quoting, in part, the *Index* of February 12, 1874.

The War as Purification by Providence

The purifying or punishing effect of the war in the Adventist worldview included an assumption that after the cleansing a period of justice and peace might uplift the nation, even if only temporarily. This secondary interpretation of the meaning of the war had more in common with the mainstream optimistic visions of a glorious American destiny, rather than the prophetic moroseness from the previous section. Despite their efforts, it seems that the S.D.A. Church could not entirely avoid agreeing with the sentiments of other Christians in the North. As Hernández commented, “Adventism during this time of national turmoil drew upon America’s millennial self-understanding and assumed much of it rather than rejecting it out of hand.”²¹¹ Morgan concluded similarly, “the success of the North’s just cause in the war . . . and the privileges of religious liberty and non-combatant status that this government had granted Adventists, all gave them at least some measure of hope that temporary improvement could be brought about in American society.”²¹² The *Review* would never be as hopeful as the rest of northern society about the destiny of the nation (remember that Adventism often associated the government with satanic powers), but some articles predicted, at least, a brighter future to emerge after the war.

In 1865, the *Review* stated that many Americans had been “speculating upon the continuance of the war, and predicting that the present summer, which is yet mostly in the future, would witness the most severe and bloody part of this great struggle.”²¹³ However, the people of God “saw light in the prophecies that the time had come for this strife to be brought to a close,

²¹¹ Hernández, “Religious commitment and its political consequences among Seventh-day Adventists in the United States,” 15.

²¹² Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 34.

²¹³ “The End Reached,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 6, 1865.

directed their prayer accordingly to Him who holdeth the nations in his hands.”²¹⁴ Such an admission seemed to belie the prophetic themes that the end of times was coming soon – yet by leaving the final outcome to the mysteries of Providence, the *Review* avoided the contradiction. The same “hand of God” was seen “in raising up and previously training, a fit person [Abraham Lincoln] to take the helm, while our nation should pass the fiery ordeal of rebellion and civil war,” again implying that Providence wished the nation to survive.²¹⁵ The war, then, was an expression of “judgments and mercies intermingled,” and “never have these two attributes been made more manifest, than since the breaking out of the Southern rebellion.”²¹⁶ Statements like these show a belief that God’s Providence still offered hope for the nation, which even the prophetic minded James White called “the best government in this revolted and sin-cursed world.”²¹⁷

The war could be characterized as containing the lesson for Christians or being the lesson itself that humanity needed to turn back to God. In an 1866 article, the *Review* described that “during the struggle for our nation’s life, the great mass of our people felt that we were dependent on God for success in preserving our institutions.”²¹⁸ Once victory had been won, however, Americans quickly forgot their need of God, and new trials arose as “God in his providence is again reminding us that we are not independent of his help. We find that there are still shoals and rocks ahead of our good ship, and the pilots need wisdom from God to direct them.”²¹⁹ If the nation contained anything worth preserving, indeed if it really was Adventists’

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Jos. Clarke, “Judgment and Mercy,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 22, 1865.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 34.

²¹⁸ “The Situation,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, August 21, 1866. Reprinted from the *Christian Press*.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

“good ship,” then it follows that the Civil War was a righteous struggle, and not only an apocalyptic portent.

In fact, in 1868 the *Review* would refer to the Civil War as undertaken with “holy purpose.”²²⁰ And, in light of the vast number of interpretations of the war signaling the beginning of the end, the *Review* would still, occasionally, describe the situation optimistically: “We have just emerged from a terrible war, brought upon us by slaveholders, rebels, and rebel sympathizers; and while this war was pressed upon us by wicked men, God, the great ruler, of the universe opened the heart of our nation to break the yoke of the oppressed, and set the slave, the oppressed of our land, free.”²²¹ This apparent dichotomy between prophetic and purification interpretations may not be as stark as it appears, however. Like all institutions, the *Review* contained a spectrum of perspectives, but despite the presence of these more mainstream Protestant, postmillennial voices, prophetic interpretations were more prominent and numerous. Additionally, as firmly abolitionist, the *Review* saw at least one consequence of the war, freedom for enslaved peoples, as an entirely positive good. As seen above, the peace after the war allowed Adventists to evangelize more freely, which also contributed to a more favorable opinion of the conflict. Finally, as will be seen in the next section, the *Review*’s depiction of the utter depravity of slavery and rebellion naturally resulted in the war, which defeated such profound evil, being viewed as more justifiable. The sum of these factors should be taken as an important, though secondary, meaning of the Civil War for the S.D.A. Church.

Evidence of Sinfulness

As a northern, abolitionist Church, the Seventh-day Adventists shared the general northern disdain for slaveholders and their rebellious spirit. In this mindset, the war represented

²²⁰ “European Armies,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, February 18, 1868.

²²¹ Ethan Lanphear, “An Appeal,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, October 9, 1866.

the moral decay and wickedness that was overcoming humanity as the final events of history were unfolding. Though related to the larger theme of prophetic importance, the individual sinfulness and culpability of rebellious southerners told Adventists that just as nations were descending into strife, so were people's hearts growing fuller with anger and greed. The *Review* spoke to this belief in strong terms: "As for the people of the Southern States, the hellish, spirit of slavery is part and parcel of their being; and the leopard will sooner change his spots, than they cease to cherish it in their hearts."²²² The prophetic S.D.A. narrative stated that God's people, who were known by their Saturday-keeping, were sealed as chosen by God; therefore, all the "unsealed" were rejected by God and apparently allowed to wallow in evil. This evil could only be corrected by the Second Coming, according to the *Review*, and "To get the spirit of slavery out of this nation, it will be necessary to wipe out of existence those former Southern slaveholders, men, women, and children. It is born and bred in them, and will die only when they die."²²³ In the same manner that the war signified the coming apocalypse, so too did the immorality which had caused the war in the first place.

Comparing it to Satan's rebellion in heaven, the *Review* asked, "Can the Southern rebellion be cured?"²²⁴ And, in answer to its own question, the *Review* summarized the North's attempts at curing southern morality: "Hundreds of thousands of lives, and millions of property, have been offered up as a sacrifice, and the condition of things is no better to-day than when Abraham Lincoln first called for seventy-five thousand soldiers."²²⁵ The *Review* looked with

²²² "This Week's Review," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 9, 1866.

²²³ *Ibid.*

²²⁴ James White, "Report from Bro. White No. 3," *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, January 29, 1867.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*

disdain on the argument that, “many wise and good men, it was said, were slaveholders.”²²⁶ Quoting the famous abolitionist minister Charles Finney, the *Review* continued, “when this horrid civil war came on, these great and good men, who had sustained the institution of slavery, sustained and stimulated the war. . . . Who does not now admit that they were deluded . . . that they were in the hands of the Devil all along?”²²⁷ By emphasizing the wickedness of the rebels as tools of the devil, the *Review* again made prophetic interpretations. The former Confederates appeared to Adventists as unrepentant sinners, whose brashness in breaking divine law could only indicate the approaching end of the world.

Due to the sinfulness of its citizens, the United States’ claims to be a place of freedom were seen by the Church as hypocrisy. In contrast to American ideals, the *Review* pointed to the Indian wars and the Civil War, “all of which caused great misery and loss of life.”²²⁸ The *Review* continued to warn that “we may boast of our civilization and brag loudly of the moral progress of the nineteenth century; but the facts stated show all such boasts and brags to be—brags and boasts only.”²²⁹ The other churches in the U.S. shared the blame, for “American churches sustained American slavery.”²³⁰ “Shrewd politicians foresaw the late war in the division of the M. E. church into ‘North’ and ‘South,’” even implied that the churches carried some of the responsibility for the war itself.²³¹ Even the peace after the war was tainted, by the rights so quickly returned to the debased southern politicians, and the *Review* asked sarcastically, “Was it

²²⁶ C.G. Finney, “Freemasonry – IX: The Argument that great and good Men have been and are Freemasons, examined,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 15, 1868. Reprinted from *N.Y. Independent*.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 12, 1871. Untitled article.

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

²³⁰ James White, “Answer to Correspondents,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 30, 1873.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

philanthropic or statesmanlike to accord at once to these rebels rights so precious, and clothe them so soon in robes of honor and authority?”²³²

An intriguing corollary to the interpretation of the Civil War as an demonstration of end times’ human depravity can be found in the anti-Catholic statements in the *Review*, which consistently described the papacy, if not necessarily individual Catholics, as agents of the devil. Go back to the beginning of the war, said one article, and “let the facts we shall name speak for themselves.”²³³ These facts “show that Rome, during our terrible struggle for national existence, was true to her ancient history and traditions, as the enemy of civil liberty, and the friend of the oppressor the world over.”²³⁴ Historian Richard Bowen Ferret described how, two decades after this article, “eschatological excitement reached fever pitch for Adventists . . . when the Roman Catholic Cardinal James Gibbons clasped hands with the Protestants, petitioning Congress on behalf of Sunday legislation.”²³⁵ The S.D.A. assumption appears to have been that the national strife would continue to worsen until the Catholic Church was accepted as the only means of peace, and then the true persecution of Adventists would begin. In this context, they understood the war as a product of human evil (specifically, that of the southern rebels) but extending in a lesser degree to the northern churches, too. This theme differs from the larger prophetic narrative mentioned above because it narrows the scope from the tumult at the national level to the little rebellions formed in each individual soul.

²³² J. Clarke, “The Slave,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, December 2, 1875.

²³³ “Rome in the Field,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, April 7, 1868. Reprinted from the *Christian Intelligencer*.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ Ferret, *Charisma and Routinisation*, 210.

The War as Metaphor

A less substantive but certainly prevalent method of making meaning out of the war came in the form of metaphorical comparisons. This rhetoric used a purposefully simplified idea of the war to make a point or demonstrate a lesson about another idea, usually a moral or biblical concept. Probably the most common of these metaphors was Ellen White's comparison of the Civil War with Satan's rebellion against God, and such comparisons would seep into the opinions in the *Review*. Lake explained,

Another subtle aspect of Ellen White's interpretation of the war was the idea that the great controversy between Christ and Satan, as depicted in the Bible, formed the background for this epic war on earth. The rebellion in the South was a mirror of Satan's rebellion in heaven; just as Satan and his hosts were cast out of heaven (Revelation 12), so slavery must be cast out of the nation for there to be any peace and hope for the future.²³⁶

As with White, the *Review* often used the war metaphorically, as the following examples will show. The significant factor here is that once again, but in a new way, the *Review* spiritualized the concrete events of the war.

“A Lesson from the Rebellion” revealed the author's intent in speaking about the war from the article's title. The author, a J. Clarke, compared Union loyalists in the South to God's people among sinners, writing “The situation of a loyal man' among rebels, is not an inapt illustration of the situation of good men in this world. Victims of Satan's art, seduced by his flatteries . . . boldly enlist in the army of that rebel leader.”²³⁷ In another article, the *Review* again compared the “false” Sabbath with the Civil War, suggesting that “had the rebellion succeeded as well as did the apostasy foretold by the prophets and apostles, [Jefferson] Davis might have assumed the title of President of the United States, as Sunday in the midnight of the

²³⁶ Lake, *A Nation in God's Hands*, 456.

²³⁷ J. Clarke, “A Lesson from the Rebellion,” *Advent Review and Herald*, February 13, 1866.

dark ages assumed the title of Sabbath.”²³⁸ In both of these articles, the actuality of the Civil War seemed to matter very little and they characterized it only as a rebellion from the good and established order of the world.

Similarly, the *Review* warned against “traitors in the citadel of our hearts,” who “sympathize with Satan” and “who fully manifest themselves at his approach, as did traitors in the North at the approach and success of the Southern army during her late rebellion.”²³⁹ In “The People of God are One,” the *Review* related an anecdote about quarrelling Union regiments, divided down East and West lines. However, when “the battle hung trembling in the scales, and the jaws of death were closing around them, and these despised eastern men came to the rescue and saved them from destruction, they were brothers ever after.”²⁴⁰ The same applied to readers struggling in the “fight of faith,” who found friends in the conflict and “rejoice to be companions of all that fear God.”²⁴¹ Here, again, the meaning of the war was reduced to a foil, a background upon which a more vital point could be made. The tendency to treat the Civil War in this manner characterized much of the S.D.A. Church’s understanding of the war.

Conclusion

The goal of this chapter and of this study is to integrate the multiple diverging themes in each denomination’s conception of the Civil War into an image of manageable scope. In regard to the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the *Review* has shown that the majority of its interpretations of the war were primarily spiritual in nature, rather than political, economic, and so on. Naturally, all churches examined here made spiritual conclusions about the war, but the

²³⁸ R. F. Cottrell, “By What Authority Do You Call Sunday the Sabbath?” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, July 23, 1867.

²³⁹ D. T. Bourdeau, “Temptations,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 27, 1871.

²⁴⁰ H. L. Hastings, “The People of God are One,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, September 21, 1876.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*

S.D.A. Church largely ignored the practical and literal details and outcomes of the war to emphasize spiritualized elements. These conceptions were usually prophetic, dealing with the place of the war in the Adventist narrative of the coming of the end of the world, or dealt with the individual soul, as in the unrepentant rebellion of the southerners, or the lessons that such a rebellion (treated very generally) could teach Christians. Even the theme with the most practical implications, the war as a catalyst for the movement to institute Sunday legislation, handled the Civil War as a prophetic “sign of the times.” The articles in the *Review* that depicted the war as purifying the nation in order that the nation might proceed with its divine destiny are a minority and are an exception rather than the norm.

This is not to say that there is or was a single interpretation of the war that Adventists either possessed or overlooked. Various meanings have all been attached to the massive and complex series of events that was the Civil War, depending on the perspective of the observer. While some saw the mindless violence as an indication of the absurdity of the universe, others saw the war as fulfilling God’s destiny for the nation, and still others knew the war personally as an experience of fear and death. For Adventists in the postwar period, however, the Civil War was another piece of the prophetic puzzle, another step in the world’s acceleration toward the end. James White spoke to this, again, asserting, “We have only to refer to the difficulties under which we labored during the American civil war to form an opinion of the obstacles that will retard the progress of the cause in the stormy future, when, in fulfillment of the word, the spirit of unrest and anger shall seize the nations.”²⁴² This perspective explained their spiritual preoccupation with the war, because unlike other northern Christians, “Adventists sought the perfection of their individual souls in order to magnify the contrast between themselves

²⁴² James White, “The Present and Future,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald*, June 9, 1874.

(remnant) and their world” – withdrawing from the mundane world rather than participating in it.²⁴³

At the same time, the Civil War represented something more subtle in the *Review*, as well. The war had passed without the Second Coming, and the apocalyptic movement had to decide what to do. The prophetic strain remained strong in the *Review* of course, but the Church now had to face the future without the pressing immediacy of the war to buoy conceptions of biblical prophecy. As Morgan suggested, “the possibility emerged that God’s judgment on the nation would lead to something of a redemptive outcome *within* history,” shown by Adventists’ increased involvement in social reform, the temperance crusade, and missionary work.²⁴⁴ The implications of the war were largely spiritual, but even in those systems of meaning the S.D.A. Church had to continually reassess the new relationship of the nation and themselves that the war had initiated.

²⁴³ Ferret, *Charisma and Routinisation*, 103.

²⁴⁴ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 32, 35.

EPILOGUE: WAR, IDENTITY, AND MEANING

Religious belief is a component of the methods that people or institutions use to evaluate the events that they perceive in the world. Churchgoing northerners used their Christian beliefs as a lens to understand the late war; to make sense of the chaos, loss, and victory. Determining what, precisely or generally, the war meant helped these religiously-minded Americans comprehend how the momentous events of the war affected them personally, institutionally, or nationally. As print historian Candy Guther Brown commented, the worldview, the “cultural universe,” of nineteenth-century evangelicals “contained and reconciled a multiplicity of strains in dialectical tension: individual and community, local and universal, temporal and timeless, presence and purity, Word and world.”²⁴⁵ If the war was to be seen as a great tragedy of human suffering, then, as a frequent interpretation went, God had used the war to punish the nation for its sin. Alternatively, if the war was viewed as a victory over the forces of slavery and rebellion, then divine Providence had ordained the war to cleanse the nation of these influences in order to create the kingdom of God on earth. The war held still other meanings for the respective churches’ conceptions of race, biblical prophecy, and each person’s battle with sin. The periodicals examined here have shown that each church attributed many meanings to the war, yet the predominant lens which each used discloses a great deal about how that church understood its own identity and its place in the nation.

Methodist Episcopal Church

The Methodists saw the war as a stage in the moral maturity of their nation. The foremost meaning that their *Christian Advocate* found in the Civil War was a purgative one: that the backward and tyrannical power of slaveholders had to be defeated to usher in the new age of the

²⁴⁵ Brown, *The Word in the World*, 14.

United States as a more fully Christian Republic. Therefore, in the postwar era, the “events of the war, and the peace of 1865, must inaugurate a new era of prosperity, happiness, and glory for the American people.”²⁴⁶ The fate of the nation seemed to be intimately important in the *Advocate* and to the northern Methodists, who had identified so closely with the Union during the war. The theme of the war as God’s punishment on the nation also reflects the idea of a kind of collective national soul or morality, though this second theme differs because it placed the emphasis on the trial, not the “reward.” Church and nation were linked, too, as micro- and macrocosms of one another in the third theme: as the nation would reunite the wayward southerners into the Union, so the war might bring reconciliation between the divided North and South branches of the M.E. Church. These themes all interpreted the war with meaning for the nation, or the relationship between the church and nation. Thus, for Methodists, the nation was the primary interpretive lens for understanding the Civil War.

Methodists perceived the Civil War to hold significance for America likely because they had taken such a personal and substantial stake in the war. The northern Church’s commitment to the war had been pervasive, as evidenced by Lincoln’s observation during the war that the M.E. Church “sends more soldiers to the field, more nurses to the hospital, and more prayers to Heaven than any.”²⁴⁷ As the largest and most mainstream of the Protestant denominations, Methodists had a stake in the government that the tiny S.D.A. Church and the racially distinguished African Methodists did not. In the Reconstruction Era, victory in the war was seen as the Church’s and the nation’s triumph, because Methodists had contributed and sacrificed for the nation and consequently identified strongly with it. The joint success in the war of the

²⁴⁶ “Letter from Charleston,” *The Christian Advocate*, March 22, 1866.

²⁴⁷ Abraham Lincoln, *The Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), vol. 7, 350-351.

Church and nation meant that, thoroughly unified, the newly-cleansed country could continue to fulfill the purpose that God had created it for. In its understanding of the Civil War, the M.E. Church demonstrated its intellectual heritage to the old Puritan ideal of the nation being “as a city upon a hill.”

African Methodist Episcopal Church

Where white Methodists recognized the war as a stage in the grand destiny of the nation, African Methodists knew the war as the herald of a better future for their long-oppressed race. As a church consisting of members of the racial minority in a deeply racially-segregated nation, the A.M.E. Church saw the war as its entry from subjugation and obscurity onto the political and moral stage of the United States. Accordingly, the war was often used rhetorically in that Church’s *Christian Recorder* as an impetus to further political action. If our people achieved this much in the war, went the *Recorder*’s ideological position, so we will and should continue to flourish afterward. During the war, a reporter in the *Recorder* stated these hopes: “Our future as a people is to be preeminently glorious. I do not forget that we are still sinful: but we have drawn the sword for a good and holy purpose.”²⁴⁸ The remembrance of the deeds of African American soldiers in the war served as a motivation to more accomplishments in the political sphere, but also as evidence of the character of the race. The moral sincerity and earnestness for justice with which the *Recorder* spoke of black contributions to the war were linked to a conception of the war as a sign of God’s favor on the race, sometimes called black chosenness. Where white Americans had failed to uphold God’s will for the country, African Americans had remained innocent and were untainted by having enslaved fellow human beings. God’s favor to the race even appeared in the third theme in the *Recorder*, which interpreted the war as a justification of

²⁴⁸ George H. Stuart, “Impression of a Visit to the Army of the Potomac,” *The Christian Recorder*, March 19, 1864.

the Church's patience in Providence. Though this final theme reversed operative agents compared to the first two themes, African Methodists continued to see the war through a narrative of racial identity and progress.

The themes of racial meaning that the Church ascribed to the war are clear in light of the chief accomplishment of the war: the abolition of the system of racially-based slavery. The other denominations had the privilege of observing and even participating in emancipation with some degree of detachment, but for African Americans, even free northern blacks, the racial implications of the war were unavoidable. The legacy of the war in the racial identity of African Methodists was not static, however, because the political opportunities granted by the war were not always seen with equal hopefulness. Reconstruction, the period of this study, was a tumultuous time for the rights of African Americans, and therefore for the level of self-determination available through political means. The war as a political endeavor meant progress only to the extent to which those new legal rights were able to be exercised, which African Americans increasingly found difficult to do due to the growing apathy of white northerners to Reconstruction into the 1870s. In these times, the Civil War as a source of faith in God's fulfilled promises or black capacity for success were more important themes than the call to political activism. The *Recorder* provided this variety in meaning attributed to the war, but remained relatively consistent in the terms of racial identity that this meaning affected.

The racial interpretations of the war should not be read to imply a narrow or exclusive perception of the war in the A.M.E. Church, but rather a key in the Church's self-narrative. David W. Blight depicted the situation following Reconstruction this way for African Americans: "North or South, in a city or in a sharecropper's shack, where did most African Americans look for a safe haven in the past? Where could they find themselves a part of some

uplifting history in the age of Progress?”²⁴⁹ The Civil War was one of these havens. For African Methodists, the war was an indication that God had persevered in their favor and that they had the capacity to act in their own self-determination. Not only did they interpret the war as carrying meaning for their race’s future, but they also saw their people’s actions and faith during the conflict as a source of racial identity itself.

Seventh-day Adventist Church

In contrast to the two preceding denominations, the S.D.A. Church had a small stake in and contribution to the Civil War, though the Church still found the war to have significant meaning. The apocalyptic ideology and “remnant of righteousness” identity of Adventists formed a conception of the war from the vantage point of the Church. In the manner in which they discussed the meaning of the war, to state it broadly, Methodists viewed the war through the perspective of the American nation, African Methodists through race, and Seventh-day Adventists through their Church. In practice this meant that Adventists saw no exceptionality in the Civil War; it was merely another element of their prophetic narrative. The S.D.A. Church in this period understood itself as the last manifestation of God’s chosen people in the final days of earth’s history. Small and politically aloof, the Church saw the transpiring war and sin as signs of the end as predicted in biblical prophecy, and therefore made little effort to take part in the passage of predetermined events, noting these happenings as a mere observer. From the perspective of an insular church, Adventists applied the war to their notions of prophecy. The other themes in the *Review* found different meanings in the war, but from an understanding that the nation would not last nor would human efforts to combat wickedness succeed for long. Thus, the Church articulated beliefs that the war demonstrated the innate sinfulness of humanity or

²⁴⁹ Blight, *Race and Reunion*, 313.

spoke of the war as a simple metaphor for rebellion against God's law. Even in the theme more in common with the other churches, that the Civil War had purified the nation of some of its sin, the *Review* remained pessimistic about the future of the United States.

Without the possibility of meaningful change in the condition of the nation and the human soul, Adventists responded by withdrawing from the political world and focusing on spiritual matters. As historian Douglas Morgan remarked about the S.D.A. church members, "They did not work to change the American system. The nation's doom was foreordained. Only Christ's Second Coming, as one of Ellen White's visions depicted it, would free the slaves."²⁵⁰ The fact that the Civil War did indeed abolish slavery did little to change S.D.A. minds regarding the demise of the nation and the world. From the U.S. Civil War, the *Review* proceeded to name the wars in Europe, the injustices in Reconstruction, and a variety of sinful human acts as additional evidences of the coming end. The Church did not identify with the nation, but rather understood itself in opposition to America's eventual "dragonlike" apostasy.²⁵¹ This issue of identity and the meaning of the war exemplifies the Church's narrative of its own purpose, in that the unfolding of apocalyptic events like the Civil War served to reinforce the Church's belief in the accuracy of its interpretation of prophecy, and hence its perception of uniqueness among the scores of other churches.

Evangelism and Providence

The identity and narrative that each church possessed bore with it a belief in its own individuality. In one form or another, each church understood itself as chosen in a special way, whether as integrated in a nation, a race, or as a church specifically. Although each of these churches is unique in the ways they interpreted the Civil War, it's also worth examining the

²⁵⁰ Morgan, *Adventism and the American Republic*, 26.

²⁵¹ Lake, *A Nation in God's Hands*, 17.

commonalities they shared. For, despite their differences, these churches all had deep ties to the Protestant, Methodist traditions and shared more practical necessities, like the need to recruit members to sustain their institutions. The call to evangelize after the Civil War was taken up by all three periodicals analyzed here, in different ways. After the war, the M.E. Church discerned an opportunity to reunite with its former southern comrades (though this belief was not universal in the Church), to preach to the freedpeople of the South, and to use the burgeoning Republic as a vehicle to spread Christianity and democracy to the world. Likewise, African Methodists called for missionary drives into the South to convert and educate former slaves who were largely not welcome in similar white southern institutions. The prophetic events predicted by Adventists also produced a charge in the *Review* to preach to all who were willing to hear about the soon coming of Christ, in what they thought would be only a short period of peace following the war. It has been a characteristic of the Christian churches for centuries to expand through evangelism and missionary work, and no less so for the churches examined here. The message of Providence they announced, however, had been tempered by the war, according to religious historian Sidney Ahlstrom: for though the war did not “dim their conviction that they were fighting God’s war, . . . defeats and exhaustion gave them less and less occasion to proclaim their faith in God’s justice-dealing power.”²⁵²

This common belief in God’s providential guidance for their actions, their nation, and each member personally, was another recurring theme of Christian theology. Each church differed in its understanding of how God would do his will in the world, but never doubted that he ultimately controlled everything. One of the prominent themes in the *Recorder* deemphasizes human works as a method to improve their situation, instead stressing God’s power and mystery.

²⁵² Sidney Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 671.

In serving such a God, this theme promoted a longsuffering faith, not bold action, as the correct response to Providence. The themes of punishment and purification in the Methodist and Adventist church newspapers, respectively, viewed the destruction of the war as an element of God's judgment. God's providence might turn out all right in the end, but his ways were unknowable. To address the inevitable paradox of a loving God who ordained a devastating war, these churches' belief in Providence had to include an admission of human incomprehension and yet a declaration that "the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether."²⁵³

War and Meaning

The A.M.E., the S.D.A., and the M.E. churches each found meaning in the Civil War in a distinctive way. These churches' perception of their own identity and purpose influenced greatly how they saw the war. Whatever their differences, none of the church periodicals reported their members' assessment of meaninglessness or absurdity in the death and violence of the war. Perhaps it says a great deal about these churches, nineteenth-century patriotism, American Christianity, or religion in general that the people of these churches saw profound spiritual meaning in a terrible war. Frederick Norwood, referring to Methodism, but which might easily apply to each church here, wrote that the church "at the end of the Civil War was still living in an age of innocence."²⁵⁴ Looking back, it might be easy to term "innocent" the fact that for these Americans these were the truths they lived by, that God was watching over them or that the nation they struggled to preserve had a noble destiny. Yet, these very beliefs are what the newspapers examined in this thesis have revealed. If historians are to analyze the meanings that churchgoing northerners attributed to the Civil War, historians will necessarily have to encounter this mindset: that these religious Americans understood their world to be ordained and minutely-

²⁵³ Abraham Lincoln, "Second Inaugural Address," March 4, 1865.

²⁵⁴ Norwood, *The Story of American Methodism*, 253.

controlled by God, and, through their respective lenses, these principles influenced everything they knew and did.

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