

Byrd, James P. *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2021. 376pp.

Toward the end of the American Civil War, President Abraham Lincoln declared: “Both [the North and the South] read the same Bible and pray to the same God and each invokes His aid against the other.” James Byrd seeks to elaborate on the meaning of those words in his recent quantitative history, *A Holy Baptism of Fire and Blood: The Bible and the American Civil War*. To accomplish this task, Byrd examines over 2000 resources, including sermons, diaries, letters, newspapers, tracts, and slave narratives (15, 303). Throughout his book, Byrd chronicles the usage of Scripture by participants on both sides, starting with the secession crisis and ending with the war’s immediate aftermath. Then in the appendix the author provides three charts that identify what he believes to be the most cited texts for the Union, Confederate, and combined “Bibles” (303–7). Byrd notes: “Americans cited the Bible in various ways. Sometimes a text from Scripture was a rhetorical allusion, used to support a viewpoint but with little or no elaboration on the Scripture, its context, or its full meaning. At other times, biblical passages received extensive focus. Most often Americans looked for analogies between biblical wars and the Civil War” (3).

From reading *A Holy Baptism*, one can get the impression that people used Scripture during the Civil War predominantly “to lend divine sanction” to their political and patriotic persuasions (17). It is undeniable, as Byrd records, that Union and Confederate sympathizers (mis)appropriated the Bible to support their partisan causes and to interpret “God’s providential plan” in military and political events of that time (287). But many of these same people utilized the Scriptures for another objective, in a far greater proportion. They read it, preached it, sang it, and prayed it for the purpose of worshipping “the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world” (John 1:29 KJV). American evangelicals, especially in the South, saw the Scriptures preeminently as a spiritual book; hence Chaplain J. William Jones (a Baptist) could say in *Christ in the Camp*:

I do not believe that . . . any of the missionaries or chaplains were ever able, before or since, to preach sermons of such power as they were stirred up to preach in the army [during the war]. If any man had any capacity whatever to preach, it would be developed under circumstances which would have stirred an angel’s heart; and if he knew anything about the Gospel at all, he would tell it to these congregations. . . . And so, when the preacher stood before these congregations of veterans, his very soul was stirred within him, and he “determined to know nothing among them save Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”¹

In the same book, Methodist Chaplain J. C. Granberry “add[ed his own] testimony to that of Dr. Jones on the evangelical tone of the preaching and worship in [the Army of Northern Virginia].” Granberry said:

¹ *Christ in the Camp, or Religion in the Confederate Army*, 2nd ed. (1904; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle, 1986), 245.

Chaplains and visiting ministers determined not to know anything among [the soldiers] save Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. It was always assumed that the cause for which they contended was righteous; on it was invoked the divine blessing, and the troops were exhorted to faithful service. But the grounds of the war were not discussed; constitutional and historical questions were passed by, except a certain local coloring, such as illustrations drawn from active military life and appeals based on the perils of war. The sermons in the camp would have suited any congregation in city or country, and with even less change might have been preached to the Union armies. Eternal things, the claims of God, the worth of the soul, the wages of sin which is death, and the gift of God which is eternal life through Jesus Christ—these were the matter of preaching. . . . The man of God lifted up, not the Stars and Bars, but the cross, and pressed the inquiry, “Who among you are on the Lord’s side?”²

Robert L. Dabney, a Presbyterian seminary professor turned parson-adjutant, compiled the only known collection of army sermons from the war, which confirms Jones and Granberry’s thesis in the main. Although Dabney could drift into political statements (particularly in his commemorative discourses), the vast majority of his ministerial labors in Confederate camps were spiritually oriented.³ Unfortunately, Byrd does not reference Dabney’s compilation, *Christ in the Camp*, William Bennett’s *The Great Revival in the Southern Armies*, *The Central Presbyterian*, *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, *The New York Observer*, or any of the works of John Broadus, James Pettigrew Boyce, John L. Girardeau, Moses Drury Hoge, William Hoge, Thomas E. Peck, Benjamin Mosby Smith, C. R. Vaughan, Joseph C. Stiles, William S. White, Stuart Robinson, Samuel McPheeters, Archibald A. Hodge, George Junkin, Gardiner Spring, or William S. Plumer (regrettably, there is no bibliography in *A Holy Baptism* to assist readers; only endnotes and an index).⁴ Byrd recognizes that his book “is not flawless” and “may be subject to revision with additional information” (360); so in light of the information above, perhaps an updated edition will be forthcoming that will include these resources.

But *A Holy Baptism* suffers from a much greater malady: an embrace of postmodernism. Byrd says:

Although many Americans claimed to follow “the Bible alone,” everyone read scripture in a place and time, and those conditions influenced how people interpreted the Bible. Although Americans often thought of the Bible as their highest authority in life, they also dealt with other authorities in their lives—governments, laws, churches, parents, spouses, ministers, presidents, and (for many) slaveholders, just to name a few. To say some person, or text, has authority only makes sense when we think of the relationships between that authority and other authorities. The key, as Seth Perry

² *Christ in the Camp*, 14–15.

³ See Jonathan W. Peters, ed., *Our Comfort in Dying: Civil War Sermons by R. L. Dabney, Stonewall Jackson’s Chief-of-Staff* (Destin, FL: Sola Fide, 2021). An enlarged and updated edition is being prepared for future publication.

⁴ During the Civil War, Rev. Plumer fought hard to keep politics out of his pulpit at Central Presbyterian Church in Allegheny City, PA, and was severely criticized for it. Sean A. Scott, “‘Patriotism Will Save Neither You Nor Me’: William S. Plumer’s Defense of an Apolitical Pulpit,” in *Contested Loyalty: Debates over Patriotism in the Civil War North*, ed. Robert M. Sandow (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018): 168–197.

writes, is to examine “the Bible’s *authoritative use* by individuals in their relations with others, not from the assumption that the inert book itself possessed authority.” (17, emphasis original)

Confessional Protestants, regardless of social location, would contend that this last statement is biblically and experientially untrue. The Bible is “the word of God [which] is quick [i.e., living], and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Heb 4:12 KJV). While some passages are harder to understand than others (2 Pet 3:16), biblical texts do have meanings (Matt 9:12–13; Luke 24:27), and “those things which are necessary to be known, believed, and observed, for salvation, are so clearly propounded and opened in some place of Scripture or other, that not only the learned, but the unlearned, in a due sense of the ordinary means, may attain unto a sufficient understanding of them.”⁵

Additionally, confessionalists would argue that God has also ordained certain authorities to expound his Word (Neh 8:5–8; 2 Tim 4:1–2; Titus 1:5–9), and while these finite creatures sometimes make mistakes due to indwelling sin (Rom 7:18, 23; Phil 3:12–14; 1 John 1:10), they can proclaim the Scriptures truly and authoritatively, even if not exhaustively (1 Cor 13:12).⁶

Despite the aforementioned criticisms, *A Holy Baptism* remains a good source for discovering how the Bible was used during the Civil War to justify political allegiances and to interpret God’s providence in contemporary events. After completing this work, readers may agree with Benjamin M. Palmer that “providence is always hard to be interpreted, when we are in the very current of events, drifting and whirling us along too rapidly for the comparison and thought which are necessary to scan the mysterious cypher in which God writes his will upon the page of human history” (221).

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⁵ Westminster Confession of Faith, “Of the Holy Scriptures,” Chapter I, Section 7. Cf. London Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, “Of the Holy Scriptures,” Chapter I, Section 7. See also Ps 119:105, 130; John 5:39; Acts 17:11; 2 Tim 3:15.

⁶ Kevin DeYoung, “Postmodernism’s revenge,” *WORLD*, December 1, 2021; accessed April 12, 2024, <https://wng.org/opinions/deyoung-on-postmodernism-1638355746>.