

*Baptists and the
American Civil War*

CRUCIBLE
OF FAITH
AND FREEDOM

Bruce T. Gourley

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FOREWORD

My childhood assumption was that everyone grew up climbing on cannons and stone monuments — and that picnics and hikes were best suited for the wide expanses of a military park dotted with historical markers.

Saturdays might call for climbing up the west side of Lookout Mountain. After a lunch break at the historic Cravens House, where the famed “Battle Above the Clouds” had played out, we would push onward to the top for an impressive view from Point Park.

Lazy Sunday afternoons were often spent tossing Frisbees or footballs with friends in an open field near the 85-foot, stone Wilder Tower with its circular staircase. Our pursuit was more of fun than history — although we were surrounded by it constantly.

That narrow childhood perspective and those youthful experiences came from being born within a cannon shot of the Chickamauga Battlefield Visitor Center — and growing up all around the varied parcels that make Chickamauga & Chattanooga National Military Park the largest of its kind.

Just east of the park, my home community — including the church and elementary school I attended — bears the name of Henry Van Ness Boynton, who drove the effort to establish the first national military park there.

A Union officer, Boynton had received the Medal of Honor for his actions in the nearby Battle of Missionary Ridge. However, I don’t recall ever being told that our nice little Southern community was named for a Yankee.

Proximity to the battlefield was extremely close, yet the harsh realities of the Civil War seemed far removed. The pristine park grounds belied the carnage that had occurred there less than a century before my birth.

While the monuments, markers and museum exhibits told in great detail the horrors of the costliest two-day battle of the entire war, such statistics felt distant from my daily, personal experiences.

At times, however, I did wonder what life was like for my ancestors and others there who lived through such a trying time. But my thoughts were more on the physical struggles they faced than anything philosophical, political or theological in nature.

Questions about what Baptist Christians were thinking, saying and doing at such a time were never raised. There were no serious inquiries into why American Christians plundered each other, with each side claiming a divine mandate.

The 150th anniversary of the war provided a grand opportunity to consider precisely what Baptists — North and South — were saying from their pulpits, in the press and through official resolutions from that time. And Dr. Bruce T. Gourley was the perfect person to bring such perspectives to life.

Making good use of careful and significant research, he has creatively taken a chronological approach using primary sources. There is much in this volume to be learned — and to long remember.

What do these persons have in common? Robert Smalls, Thomas Hill Watts, Basil Manly Sr., Gov. Joseph Brown, Gov. Sam Houston, Isaac Taylor Tichenor, Crawford H. Toy, and Frank and Jesse James.

The answer: They are just a few of the many Baptists who had a role in the American Civil War. Most went on to great prominence in politics, religion or education. The latter two became known for behavior not learned in Sunday school.

So read — or read again — these firsthand accounts of how Baptists on both sides sought and claimed divine favor and righteousness. The lessons are as plentiful as the statues and markers that dot the many battlefields where the devastation has given way to peaceful fields and quiet woodlands.

—John D. Pierce
Executive Editor, *Baptists Today* news journal
Publisher, Nurturing Faith Books

A WAR LONG COMING

The road to the American Civil War began with the introduction of slavery into the American colonies in the early 17th century. Slavery was confined to Africans, as English common law prohibited the enslavement of white persons.

Human bondage entered the colonial experience in Virginia, a colony whose economy depended upon agriculture. For the cultivation of tobacco and other crops, slave labor was much cheaper than indentured servitude — which included both blacks and whites — or wage labor. The practice grew quickly, encompassing Southern and Northern colonies and putting an end to indentured servitude.

By 1720, slaves represented 30 percent of Virginia's population and 70 percent of South Carolina's population. New York led the way in slavery in the North, with 15 percent of the state's population enslaved. Whereas slaves worked the fields of the South, in the North they worked on farms, as tradesmen and in homes, while on a larger scale the North benefited from the buying and selling of slaves.

On the eve of the American Revolution up to 5,000 slaves were imported into the colonies on an annual basis. Out of a total of roughly half-a-million slaves in the colonies, some 90 percent lived in the Southern states. Free blacks existed, but largely in the North and in few numbers.

Following victory over the British, the original 13 colonies set about the task of establishing a national union on a permanent basis. Slavery, however, proved to be a stumbling block. The Northern colonies were already turning against slavery, with Vermont leading the way by abolishing the practice in 1777, and others soon following. Influential, large-scale slaveowners, on the other hand, controlled the politics of the Deep South and were not about to give up the source of their great wealth: slave labor.

Northern delegates to the Constitutional Convention soon realized that the creation of a strong central government would necessitate compromise with Southern slaveowners. Northern slave-owning delegates along with some from Virginia and Maryland insisted that slavery was inconsistent with liberty, freedom and morals, and thus should be abolished in the Constitution. In response, John Rutledge of South Carolina spoke for most Southern slaveowners when he declared, "Religion and humanity have nothing to do with this question [of slavery]."

Viewing themselves as an aristocratic class, wealthy slaveowners insisted that freedom and liberty belonged to whites only. Delegates from the Deep South states of South Carolina and Georgia stood ready to walk away from the proposed union if their demands for the permanent establishment of black slavery were not met, thus holding the Constitutional Convention hostage and forcing the North to acquiesce to their demands.

As a result and despite the promise of equality embedded within the nation's Declaration of Independence, human bondage was written into the Constitution in the form of each black slave being counted as three-fifths of a person for legislative representation and taxing purposes. This arrangement provided the South with greater proportional representation in the nation's capitol, resulting in the Southern dominance of the U.S. government until the Civil War. In addition, the South secured the extension of the Atlantic slave trade for 20 additional years, thus ensuring enough time for the slave population to continue growing of its own accord. Apart from the Constitution, Southern delegates forced the enactment of a runaway slave clause mandating the return of escaped slaves to their owners.

Southern slaveholders scored an additional major victory in 1791 in the enactment of the Second Amendment to the United States Constitution, which reads: "A well regulated Militia, being necessary to the security of a free State, the right of the people to keep and bear Arms, shall not be infringed." The amendment was added at the insistence of slaveholders who wanted assurances that they could raise militias to put down slave rebellions.

A number of slave revolts occurred in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, including an especially ambitious, attempted insurrection in Charleston, S.C., the epicenter of pro-slavery ideology. In May 1822 Charlestonians caught wind of what became known as the Vesey revolt, named after Denmark Vesey, a free black and a prominent Christian leader among Charleston's black population.

Vesey recruited more than 100 co-conspirators who planned to lead a violent uprising against slaveowners in the Charleston area, free as many slaves as possible, and then commandeer local ships and sail for the free state of Haiti. Word of the insurrection leaked, however. Vesey and his co-conspirators were arrested, and many put to death. Afterward, Charleston officials voted to raise a local militia to protect the city and surrounding area from future slave rebellions. The result of that decision led to the creation of the South Carolina State Arsenal, otherwise known as the Citadel, which in 1842 became the South Carolina Military Academy.

Beyond the creation of the pro-slavery U.S. Constitution and the Second Amendment, one final development sealed the opposing views of freedom and

liberty between the North and South: the 1794 patenting of Eli Whitney's cotton gin. The device allowed for a much faster processing of cotton, a profitable Southern agricultural commodity extensively dependent upon slave labor. In 1800 the South produced some 200,000 bales of cotton annually, a number that rose to more than 4,000,000 by 1860. Some 4,000,000 slaves worked mostly in the cotton fields of the South by 1860, planting, tending and harvesting America's largest export product.

Although slavery was legally outlawed in the North by 1804, full emancipation came decades later. Meanwhile, the North bought much of the South's slave-produced cotton, processing the raw product in textile mills and generating considerable wealth. The public's conscience increasingly struggled to reconcile the dichotomy. Christian leaders black and white during the height of a period of religious revival known as the Second Great Awakening spearheaded a growing abolitionist movement that reached a critical mass about 1830. The ascent of abolitionism in the North paralleled the firm establishment of cotton as the dominant cash crop of the South, which in turn further galvanized Southern politicians in the nation's capital to resist, with all means possible, any attempt to curtail, much less abolish, the institution of black slavery upon which the Southern economy heavily depended. South Carolina in 1832 voted to withdraw from the Union in protest over a national tariff act that wealthy slaveowners believed would reduce their cotton profits, backing down only when the tariff was watered down.

As the Southern position on slavery hardened and Northerners increasingly gravitated toward abolitionism, many Baptists of the South initially expressed affinity with Northern views. A minority and persecuted sect in the mid-18th century, Baptists of the South in particular were largely a rural, lesser-educated and lower socioeconomic group. Few white Baptists had the means to own slaves. Baptist preachers in the decades prior to the Revolution often admonished slaveowners to free their slaves. Many slaves voluntarily joined white Baptist churches, in part appreciative of the Baptist view of the spiritual equality of blacks and whites. Neither heavily vested in nor benefiting significantly from the institution of slavery, into the Constitutional years most white Baptists of the South seemingly remained largely ambivalent or opposed to slavery. In some instances blacks, slave and free alike, formed their own congregations under the watchful eye of the law. In 1789 the Virginia Baptist General Committee declared that "slavery is the violent deprivation of the rights of nature, and inconsistent with republican government," a "horrible evil" that should be abolished by "the use of every legal measure."

The First Amendment's establishment of religious liberty for all and church-state separation, however, provided opportunity for the minority Baptists of the South to move toward both the religious and socioeconomic mainstreams characterized by strong pro-slavery currents. In 1793 Virginia Baptist leaders reversed their earlier anti-slavery course and declared that slavery was neither a moral nor religious issue, but rather a political matter. An 1805 Virginia state law requiring that slaves obtain written permission of their masters in order to join a congregation put an end to slaves in that state freely joining Baptist congregations, creating ever greater distance between whites and blacks.

As Southern laws in many states further cemented the bondage of blacks during the first and second decades of the century, white Baptists throughout the South grew rapidly, adding to their ranks a growing number of wealthy slave-owners. Many churches benefited from the surging profits of plantation owners whose fields of rice and cotton were worked by slaves, resulting in the enlargement of many church buildings, edifices often both financed and constructed by slave labor. Into these churches slaveowners sent their slaves to worship, balconies having been constructed for their segregated seating. In areas with large slave populations, Baptist congregations and their pastors rose to places of community and civic prominence, with South Carolina leading the way.

By the 1820s many white Baptists of the South had tacitly accepted the racial caste system of the Southern states. The next step was for white Baptists to move from quiet approval of black slavery to formal, theological ownership of the practice. That moment arrived on Dec. 24, 1822, in Charleston, S.C.

On that day and in the wake of the failed Vesey rebellion, Richard Furman, arguably the most prominent Baptist minister in the entirety of the South, wrote a pointed letter to the governor of South Carolina. In his capacity as president of the Baptist State Convention of South Carolina, Furman assured the governor that white Baptists of the South embraced the "right view" of black slavery. White Baptists believed that God had blessed South Carolina in the thwarting of the Vesey insurrection, Furman declared. The minister offered his assurances, on behalf of his fellow Baptists, that the enslavement of the black race was a biblical, moral and Christian practice ordained of God for the well-being of an inferior race. The state of South Carolina, in short, could depend upon white Baptists to wholeheartedly support the benevolent institution of black slavery.

Furman's letter signaled a unity of elite white Baptists and government leaders in the South, moving Baptists from a position of passive acceptance of black slavery to a position of theological, and hence religious, affirmation. In the decades following, Baptists and Presbyterians and Methodists of the South

bathed slavery in a literal reading of the Bible, preaching slavery from the pulpit and in denominational literature. In so doing, they intentionally positioned themselves against Northern counterparts who advocated for abolitionism on the basis of a contextual reading of the New Testament that dismissed biblical acceptance of slavery as an ancient, discredited practice and instead focused on Jesus' command to love one's neighbor as oneself (Matt. 22:36-40) and on Paul's declaration that all persons are equal in the eyes of God (Gal. 3:28).

Religion represented a significant dimension of Northern opposition to slavery, but so did class economics. Apart from religious sentiments, Northern Baptists and other citizens were alarmed that Southern slave labor distorted and harmed the wage labor market both South and North, magnifying white poverty in both urban and rural areas.

This biblical-infused and economic-laden battle over freedom for all versus freedom for whites only grew increasingly hostile until in the 1840s the Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians of the South began breaking apart from their Northern counterparts in defense of black slavery. Baptists split in May 1845 when prominent Baptist slaveholders gathered in Augusta, Ga., and voted to form the Southern Baptist Convention in order to ensure the continued enslavement of blacks, thus preserving the economic benefits accrued to their churches and mission efforts from slave labor.

While the regional division over slavery had by now existed for decades, the splintering of denominations signaled that differences over slavery had risen to crisis proportions. Political events in the 1850s subsequently escalated tensions as Southern states demanded the right to expand slavery westward and Northern states resisted such efforts. In addition, Northern states claimed states rights in refusing to enforce fugitive slave laws. Southern states dismissed Northern rights and instead claimed their own states rights in demanding that Northerners return their escaped property. Against the backdrop of political polarization came increasing violence between pro- and anti-slavery advocates in Washington, D.C., in the Border States, and on the Western frontier. The increasingly complicated political nuances of the heated slavery debate roiled the two-party national political system. Politicians on the fence regarding slavery were forced to choose sides. The Democratic Party largely opted for a pro-slavery position while the Whig Party waffled, creating an opportunity for an anti-slavery party to emerge: the Republican Party. By 1860 the Whig Party was effectively reduced to political rubble and an anti-slavery, Baptist-raised, backwoods lawyer from Illinois by the name of Abraham Lincoln emerged as the presidential candidate of the Republican Party.

As the worlds of religion and politics collided spectacularly over the issue of slavery, the ever-skyrocketing economy of the South pulled an astonishing amount of wealth southward, wealth that accumulated in the hands of a relatively few large slaveowners. Massive wealth inequality among white Southerners led to the decline of the white male population in the 1850s South as poor whites moved North and West in search of jobs. By 1860 the South was home to the 10 richest counties in America and most of the nation's millionaires, the wealth clustered along the South Carolina coast and Louisiana's Mississippi River delta — regions of fertile soil and massive plantations collectively worked by hundreds of thousands of slaves.

Abraham Lincoln's presidential victory in the fall of 1860 convinced South Carolina's elites that further negotiations with Washington, D.C., were fruitless. Republicans led by their illegitimate "black president" would insist upon the containment of slavery to the South and, eventually, to the abolishment of the practice altogether. In order to protect their riches now and in the future, wealthy slaveowners had to propel the South to leave the Union.

On Dec. 17, 1860, in the sanctuary of the First Baptist Church of Columbia, S.C., the state's wealthy slaveowners assembled for the purpose of leading South Carolina to secede from the United States. Three days later, the secession convention having been moved to the slavery capital of Charleston due to an alleged smallpox outbreak in Columbia, delegates issued a Declaration of the Immediate Causes Which Induce and Justify the Secession of South Carolina from the Federal Union. The document pointed to disagreements over slavery as the foundational reason for secession, villifying the North for its abolitionist sentiments and refusal to help slaveowners recover runaway slaves, and for daring to brand slavery as sinful. White freedom, the delegates insisted, depended upon the enslavement of blacks. Not all Southern whites agreed that secession was necessary, but the white elites of South Carolina were not about to give up their freedom to own slaves. And they were determined to bend the will of the larger white South to their view.

Secession had begun. Other Southern states would follow in the months ahead. Prominent Baptist pulpits and newspapers of the South, in addition to those of other denominations, blessed the disunion, speaking forcefully for white liberty and black enslavement. A new nation was to be birthed, a godly nation in which black slavery, willed of God, would last in perpetuity. And if need be, the South would take up arms to preserve their slavocracy.

A line was thus drawn over the future of a long-discordant nation. With the Union and human freedom at stake, an untried president of a fledgling political party for whom only 40 percent of voting Americans had cast a

ballot prepared to take a suddenly weakened office. But alongside the country lawyer-turned-president stood the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, the North's industrial might, a superior number of white males, and a mature abolitionist movement with deep and broad support in the religious community.

No less important, from across the great regional divide the daily prayers of millions of enslaved black individuals — the Baptist faith predominant among those holding church membership — fervently petitioned God for freedom, prayers that helped empower resistance to the oppressors in ways subtle but real. Upon the faith and bravery of the oppressed hinged the outcome of the coming war.

NOTES

This volume, originally published as a series of articles in *Baptists Today* from 2011-2015, is a condensed version of the five-year, daily digital journal project, *Baptists and the American Civil War: In Their Own Words*, written by Bruce T. Gourley and located online at civilwarbaptists.com. The website features approximately 1,800 articles arranged by date and exploring the lives, thoughts and actions of Baptists during the Civil War — white, black, Native American; North and South; Southern, Northern (American), Primitive and more.

Also included on the website are primary source and secondary source material information from which the articles in this print book rely. To locate specific sources for a given month in this book, refer to the online daily articles for that month at civilwarbaptists.com.