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Pro-Union Sentiment among Restorationists within the Confederacy

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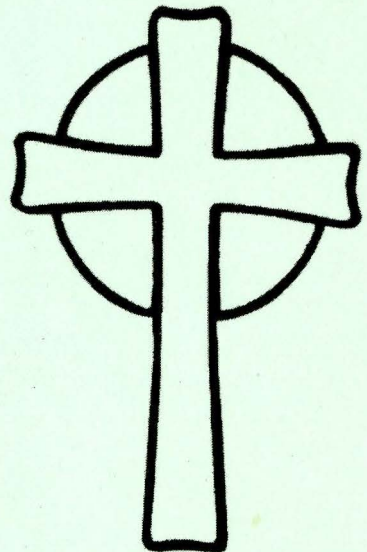
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PRO-UNION SENTIMENT AMONG RESTORATIONISTS WITHIN THE CONFEDERACY

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Restorationists in the South during the Civil War are often assumed to have been either pacifists with Southern leanings or actively Confederate. Pro-Union sentiment among members of the Church of Christ/Christian Church, however, was fairly widespread, especially in the border areas of the Confederacy. There were ministers, individuals, and even whole congregations who actively supported the North. Conflict often resulted when these partisans came into contact with those of the movement who were in sympathy with or actively supported the more usual Confederate position.

When it became obvious that a Civil War was imminent between North and South, Restoration Movement leaders on both sides worried about the effect upon Christian unity. It had been only about twenty-five years since the more northerly Campbell movement had united with the more southerly Stone movement. The strength of the combined group was primarily in the middle states rather than in the upper North or lower South. Opinion about the war would be expected to be divided in these states. Western Virginia, the home of the Campbell faction, declared for the Union when Virginia seceded, but there was considerable Southern sentiment as well. Kentucky, the home of the Stone faction, tried very hard to remain neutral, but eventually declared for the Union when the South refused to respect its desire for neutrality. These events left the birthplaces of both movements and the majority of their adherents within the states loyal to the Union. A considerable membership, however, also resided in the Confederacy.

Within the seceded states the well-known, Southern minister-editors David Lipscomb and Tolbert Fanning were convinced that Christians should not participate in the conflict even if they sympathized with the Southern cause, as did Lipscomb and Fanning. Their view was not generally accepted before or during the war, however, and most Southern restorationists of military age volunteered or were drafted. This was true even of the students at Franklin College, a religious school founded by Fanning. Other Southern ministers, for example T. W. Caskey and Benjamin F. Hall, were well known

for their enthusiastic support for secession and the war. Fanning's *Gospel Advocate* even complained that preachers in general had "run perfectly mad about politics." Although in the minority, some Southern ministers, individuals, and whole congregations refused to support the Confederacy either emotionally or actively, but rather cast their lot with the Union.

Restoration Unionists in the South are overlooked because Southern Unionists in general are overlooked. Although as many as one-fourth to one-third of the people of the South opposed secession and about ten percent of the available manpower of the South fought on the Union side,¹ they are scarcely remembered. The myth that there had been a solidly pro-rebel consensus developed after Reconstruction when the pre-war leaders regained control in the South. It became unwise for former Unionists to speak of their wartime allegiance. Southern then became synonymous with Confederate in the minds of later generations. Restoration Movement historians have generally assumed that any Union sympathy that existed among Southern restoration churches was only in isolated individual responses. No comprehensive list of Southern restorationists exists, of course, but church records, local histories, military records, loyalist claims, and biographies do remain. Sampling these sources in areas known to have had pro-Union populations yields sufficient evidence to establish that loyalist sentiments were at least as prevalent among restorationists as in the general Southern population. Indeed, they were probably greater than in those religious groups whose membership included more of the deep South.

Some of the most concentrated Unionist sentiment inside the eleven states of the Confederacy existed in Tennessee, northern Alabama, and northern and central Texas. These regions were not the Cotton Kingdom where large slave plantations were the rule but were rather areas populated by yeomen farmers and small landowners with few slaves. It was among this class and in these areas that the Restoration Movement had made some of its largest gains in the South. It is to be expected, therefore, that restorationists who sympathized with the Union position could be found in these places. It is also to be expected that support for the Union would be very unpopular with restorationists who supported the Confederacy.

Tennessee had the largest loyalist population. The first vote on secession failed, and the second, positive vote was obtained by the use of force. Much of east Tennessee and four counties in midwest Tennessee continued to vote to remain in the Union even on the second vote. Tennessee also had the most

¹ Richard Nelson Current, *Lincoln's Loyalists* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992) 218.

restoration churches of any state within the Confederacy. These churches were in all sections of the state but were especially numerous in middle Tennessee.²

In the extreme northern part of middle Tennessee, just across the line from pro-Union Kentucky, the churches were often sympathetic with the Northern cause. Some Civil War era church records remain for the area. Young men from these churches joined the Eighth Tennessee Mounted Infantry, USA, or crossed into Kentucky and joined Kentucky regiments. A shared ministry with the Mulky and Stone churches of Kentucky, family relationships, and a rim of hills separated these churches from the more pro-Southern middle Tennessee churches around Nashville.³

Even in middle Tennessee some individuals and groups maintained their Unionist position. David Lipscomb was called to a congregation in Franklin to mediate between the Union and Confederate partisans within the church. He managed to convince them at least to keep politics out of the formal assembly. Lipscomb wrote in the *Gospel Advocate* about another church, however, whose worship was disrupted. The deacons were Unionists, and certain secessionist women did not wish to take communion when it was passed by these men. This church solved its problem by dismissing the Union deacons and appointing secessionists.⁴ In the same vicinity Absalom Nicks Jr., a preacher in Dickson County, was well known for his opposition to the war. His support for the Union caused the military governor of Tennessee, "Parson" Brownlow, to appoint him to represent Dickson County during military occupation even though Nicks did not apply for the position.⁵

Seven counties in east Tennessee had churches that were visible enough to be included in the 1860 religious census. The *Millennial Harbinger* mentioned four churches in Carter County; hence that county was chosen for study. Carter elected to remain with the United States by a vote of 1343 to 90; thus it is no surprise that the families on the church rolls are prominent on the rolls of the Thirteenth Tennessee Cavalry, USA, and other federal units raised in the area. The *Goodspeed Biographies of East Tennesseans* also mentions the influential Elder John F. Grisham of neighboring Washington County as a strong Union man. Grisham held several high

² 1860 U. S. Religious Census.

³ Peggy S. Holley, "A Portrait of Union, Long Fork, Salt Lick and Bagdad Christian Churches," *Discipliana*, Winter 1992, 51-56.

⁴ David Lipscomb, "Appointment of Officers," *Gospel Advocate*, 18 Jan. 1877, 41.

⁵ W. Jerome, D. Spence, and David L. Spence, *A History of Hickman County, Tenn.* (Nashville: Gospel Advocate, 1900) 418.

political offices and was the son of the minister who was the first to preach the Christian doctrine in East Tennessee. Allegiances within churches in other counties can be presumed to be similar since the overall vote in East Tennessee against leaving the Union was more than two to one.⁶

Four counties in Midwest Tennessee remained loyal, and several other counties nearby had considerable minorities of loyalists. The largest congregation in the area was the Roan's Creek Church in Carroll County. Almost every family in this church had relatives in the Seventh Tennessee Cavalry or Second Tennessee Mounted Infantry, USA. Thirty soldiers from this church, including two medical doctors, can be easily identified. The highest ranking officer was Major Milton Hardy, descendant of the Gist and Hardy families who had donated the land for the church building. Hardy led some of his fellow Christians in the Seventh Cavalry and later recruited more for the Second Tennessee Mounted Infantry, which was nicknamed Hardy's Battalion. Hardy was killed while attempting to kidnap Tennessee Governor Isham Harris near Paris, Tennessee, and is buried near the old campground on the Gist property that was mentioned frequently in Stone's *Christian Messenger*.

The second largest church in Carroll County was the Reedy Creek Church near Leach. It was also decidedly pro-Union. The minister, sixty-two-year-old John Neely, raised a company for the First West Tennessee Infantry, USA, and was elected its captain. Neely and three of his sons died during the war and are buried in Antioch Cemetery, Carroll County, under a large Union marker which details their war records. Other members of this congregation, including one sixty-four-year-old private, were mustered into the Sixth, Seventh and Twelfth Tennessee Cavalries, USA.

Just below Carroll County in the pro-Union eastern section of Henderson County, the Christian Chapel Church also had little sympathy for the Southern cause. The church records characterized the war as a "rebellion" and expressed fear for the safety of the loyalist members if they attempted to hold services. This county was noted for extreme acts of violence among the partisan civilians. At the end of the war the clerk entered the following into the church book:

During the great political rebellion of 1860 we continued to meet until sometime in the year 1862. Owing to the troubled condition of the country, the members thought best for their personal safety and well being to absent themselves until more favorable opportunity should offer and [there] was no

⁶ Richard Nelson Current, *Lincoln's Loyalists*, 29.

regular meeting until sometime in the year 1865 when the members that survived the gun again to come together . . .⁷

Some civilians from the west Tennessee churches left the Confederacy and spent the war in southern Illinois around Metropolis and Moscow and in western Kentucky around Paducah. A memoir written by Molly Neely, the niece of Captain John Neely, mentions numerous families from both Roan's Creek and Reedy Creek who fled the Confederacy and settled in that area. Some, like Molly Neely's family, returned to west Tennessee after the war, but many remained to swell the churches there.⁸

The opposition to rebellion that characterized midwest Tennessee also extended over the line into northern Alabama. The area with the highest percentages of loyalists had at least eleven restoration churches, two of which were in Winston County. This county "seceded" from Alabama when Alabama seceded from the Union. The Brushy Creek Church in Winston (now Cullman) County seems to have followed the prevailing anti-Confederate sentiment in the county. The two leading families, the Speegles and the Guthrys, had eight of their sons in the Union Army.⁹ William Guthry even served for a time as General Sherman's bodyguard. Most northern Alabama Unionists were in the First Alabama Cavalry, USA, the only Union regiment raised in the state, or they crossed the line and served in the west Tennessee federal units.

The churches around Florence, Alabama, seem to have been especially disrupted by the participation of many of their members in a running battle between the Second Tennessee Mounted Infantry, USA, and the local Lauderdale County Confederate Volunteers. Several members of the Thrasher family were in the USA troops, including the infamous Lt. Elias Thrasher, as well as the son of John Wade, a prominent pro-Union cotton planter who had been baptized by Alexander Campbell. The Chisolm family, connected by marriage to Confederate Benjamin F. Hall, were leaders in the Confederate Volunteers. These interrelated families, as well as several others from the local churches, carried on a conflict in the declining years of the war that often had more in common with bushwhacking than with the usual rules of war.¹⁰

A peculiar footnote to north Alabama history was the invitation extended to Union commander James Garfield to speak at the Mooresville

⁷ Christian Chapel Church records, unpublished.

⁸ Molly Neely Owen, personal memoir, unpublished.

⁹ Margaret Jean Jones, *Combing Cullman County* (privately published) 75.

¹⁰ Wade Pruitt, *Bugger Saga* (Columbia, TN: P-Vine Press, 1977).

Church in Limestone County.¹¹ The commander, a well-known minister and educator at Hiram College in Ohio before the war, was part of an invasion force which entered Alabama in July 1863. The invitation to speak is almost incomprehensible in the heat of battle unless the church itself contained some pro-Union sentiment, as was the case in much of the Huntsville area, or it was attempting to curry favor with the occupying forces. The members of the Mooresville Church that are known to have been in the army, however, were Confederate. If the congregation was sincere in its desire to listen to a sermon by an officer who was leading troops against its members, it is very unusual indeed. The episode is usually cited as an example of the triumph of Christianity over politics.

Alabamians, Tennesseans, and Kentuckians had been moving into Texas since the 1820s. Many were restorationists who founded churches in their new situations. The northern Alabama Waterloo Church even seems to have moved as a group. In the ten counties of central Texas and in eight counties along the Red River which voted against secession, there were at least sixteen churches in 1860.¹² Examples of Union sentiment within these churches is readily available.

In Williamson County in central Texas, the church at Georgetown had about seventy members just before the war. Though the county had voted against secession, the church was about equally divided. The weekly meetings became bitter political debates with less and less attention to religion. Stephen Strickland, the minister, finally suggested that the church disband. The members were scattered during the war, and the building deteriorated. There is little record of another church in Georgetown before the late 1800s.¹³

In the counties along the Red River in north Texas, restorationists were caught up in a hysteria that surrounded a secret organization popularly referred to as the Peace Party. The purpose of the organization seems to have been to resist the Confederate draft and spy for the Union. An excited public believed that the organization planned murder, arson, and general terror against Confederates. Newton J. Chance, who later became a minister in Wise County, infiltrated the group and informed on their activities. A civilian court was set up in Gainesville, Texas, with the help of the Confederate military. One of the members of the jury was Thomas Barrett, a well-known minister in Cooke County, whose baptism tallies frequently

¹¹ W. W. Wasson, *James A. Garfield: His Religion and Education* (Nashville: Tennessee Book Company, 1952) 86.

¹² 1860 U. S. Religious Census.

¹³ David Lipscomb, *Gospel Advocate*, Jan.-Dec. 1872, 635.

appeared in the *Gospel Advocate*. About one hundred fifty suspected Unionists were arrested and tried by the court, and forty were hanged.¹⁴

The best-known restorationist to be arrested was Dr. Mansel W. Matthews, a minister-physician and one of the members of the Waterloo Church that had migrated from north Alabama. Dr. Matthews was later released. Not so blessed, however, were John M. Crisp and Rama Dye. They were two of the forty tried by the court and hanged by the mob. Crisp was a deacon, blacksmith, and father of three small children. Dye, who had donated the land for a Christian Church in the southeast corner of Cooke County, was a farmer and minister. Thomas Barrett later wrote a memoir attempting to justify his participation in the affair.¹⁵

Other Texas counties also had courts and vigilante groups dedicated to suppressing dissent. Just south of the Red River counties at Weatherford in Parker County, D. O. Norton and several others from the Weatherford Church were charged with serious political offenses against the Confederacy. Norton was arrested with James M. Luckey, a former constable of Weatherford, and sent to Houston for trial. The remaining members of that church were so frightened that they left their public meeting place at the schoolhouse and met for the duration in the seclusion of a private home.¹⁶ At least ten families from the congregation are represented in an 1867 listing of Parker Countians who had not supported the Confederacy.

Arkansas had fewer loyalists than Texas, Tennessee, or Alabama, but the well-known incident at Fayetteville illustrates that Unionists could also be found in predominately Confederate areas. Washington County, where Fayetteville was located, was unusual in that it was "the last stronghold of Unionism in the state." Arkansas College, the local educational institution, was founded by Robert Graham, a minister and graduate of Bethany College. Graham, William Baxter, the president of the college, and Judge J. M. Tebbetts all attended Union Church, the largest church in the region. Many of the two hundred students were also restorationists. When recruiting for both armies began in earnest, the students, after much debate among themselves, entered the competing armies. The college, which was at least nominally Christian, then ceased to exist.¹⁷

¹⁴ Richard B. McCaslin, *Tainted Breeze: The Great Hanging at Gainesville, Texas, 1862* (Baton Rouge, LA: State University Press, 1988) 87, 117.

¹⁵ Thomas Barrett, *The Great Hanging at Gainesville, 1862* (repr. Texas State Historical Association, 1961).

¹⁶ H. Smythe, *Historical Sketches of Parker County* (St. Louis, 1877) 65–69.

¹⁷ William Baxter, *Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove* (Cincinnati: Poe and Hitchcock, 1864).

Later, when the Confederate Army went through Fayetteville on the way to the Battle of Pea Ridge, Baxter and Graham met with Benjamin F. Hall, a chaplain in Barton W. Stone Jr.'s Confederate regiment and a well-known Southern preacher for more than forty years. Baxter and Graham kept their pro-Union political views to themselves out of fear. Tebbetts had already been arrested and jailed. Baxter's published account of the meeting accused Dr. Hall of having said that all his former brethren who were not pro-Southern were infidels.¹⁸ Whether the account was accurate of Hall or merely partisan vindictive on Baxter's part, it shows the bitterness that politics could engender among brethren even within the South.

Another group of Unionists almost totally forgotten are the Southern Blacks. They furnished about 100,000 soldiers to the Union Army, or about the same number as Southern Whites.¹⁹ Virtually all black members of restoration churches can be assumed to have been pro-Union, especially after the Emancipation Proclamation. Freedom would result only from a Northern victory. This in itself must have placed considerable strain on Southern churches since owners and slaves worshipped in the same congregations before and during the war. The post-war withdrawal of blacks from most Southern churches in order to form segregated churches was undoubtedly due in part to this strain. At least one of the pro-Union west Tennessee churches, however, had black members into the early 1900s.²⁰

Although at least 75 percent of Southern restorationists were probably pro-Confederate in sympathy if not in action, evidence for considerable pro-Union sentiment can easily be found, especially in areas that voted against secession before the war. Given that these border areas were often places where restoration churches were strongest, it is safe to assume that restoration churches had a higher percentage of Unionists than churches such as the Episcopal Church South that were stronger in the deep South. The prevailing sentiment in an area of residence and a person's condition of servitude were more likely to determine opinion about the war than religious affiliation. In areas where political opinion was mixed, bitterness and sometimes bloodshed resulted even among civilians of the same fellowship.

Since a considerable group of Southern restorationists actively opposed the Civil War, the question arises of how this might have affected the later Church of Christ/Christian Church division in the South. The expectation would be that pro-Union sympathizers would tend toward the Christian

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Richard Nelson Current, *Lincoln's Loyalists*, 198.

²⁰ William M. Pinkley, *The One Hundred Fiftieth Anniversary Story of Roan's Creek Church of Christ* (Jackson, TN: Laycook Printing, 1975) 9.

Church since more of the Northern restorationists went that direction. Most of the east Tennessee churches did become Christian Churches.²¹ The aforementioned west Tennessee pro-Union churches, however, became Churches of Christ while the very pro-Confederate Paris Church in the same area became a Christian Church. Churches and individuals in Alabama and Texas were also not predictable. No correlation seems to exist. Pro-Northern and pro-Southern leanings in the South during the Civil War are not indicators of later progressive or conservative views. The sources of division within the Confederacy require other explanations.

²¹ John Waddy, *Churches of Christ in East Tennessee* (Singapore: J. C. Choate, 1988) 9.