

God's Will and Warfare: A Civil War Sermon

Dr. Mike Williams

One of the most difficult questions for humans to answer throughout our troubled past, is what relationship the divine has to that most evil of all outcomes of human life, warfare. Throughout the centuries, men and women have answered this question in various ways. Some have chosen to regard warfare as God's will and way of punishing sinners, either those who are unbelievers or those who have strayed from the fold of God's covenant. The Old Testament is replete with examples of occasions where the Old Testament prophets and writers record this message. Others regard warfare as punishment in a more general way—as a consequence of living in a fallen and imperfect world. Still others regard warfare and its results as proof that God does not exist or if God does exist, it is simply as a disinterested party—the Creator-God who set the universe in motion and then steps back and observes it all “from a distance.” Such debates have led to considerable conflict and a desire oft times by both warring parties to claim God's favor in the conflict and to enlist the aid of others in what they perceive as a divine cause.

In few places in U. S. history is this any more evident than in America's greatest conflict, the Civil War. It is well documented that more American lives were lost in the Civil War than in all other American wars combined. In such a bloody and apparently senseless conflict, it was popular—in fact, even perceived as necessary—to develop a theological understanding of such a great catastrophe as Americans warring upon one another. Pastors, politicians, and most other citizens sought some divine explanation. As President Abraham Lincoln described so well in his second inaugural address, “Both

[North and South] read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. . . . The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.”¹

White southern clergymen especially struggled with these issues. Due to the devout nature of many southern Christians, even the Confederate government recognized the critical role that clergymen and sermons played in maintaining southern morale. As the tide of war began to turn against the South, they sought to continue their defense of slavery and southern nationalism, explain defeat on the battlefield, and reconcile these issues with the will of God. One such clergyman was Isaac Taylor Tichenor, pastor of Montgomery, Alabama's First Baptist Church.

Isaac Taylor Tichenor was born in Kentucky in 1825. As a young man he served briefly as a missionary of the Indian Mission Association and as pastor in Columbus, Mississippi and Henderson, Kentucky. He quickly became involved in the newly created Southern Baptist Convention. In 1852 at the young age of 26, he began service as pastor of the First Baptist Church of Montgomery, serving in that pastorate until the eve of the Civil War and returning to the pastorate there from 1863 through 1868. During the first two years of the war, he served as a chaplain and a missionary to the Confederate army. He distinguished himself as a “fighting chaplain” at the battle of Shiloh. After the war he became one of the South's most prominent leaders, especially in the religious realm. From 1868 through 1871, he served as the

¹ John Gabriel Hunt, ed., *The Essential Abraham Lincoln* (Avenel, NJ: Portland House Publishing, 1993), 331.

president of the Montevallo Mining Company and laid out many of the initial mineral surveys that eventually led to the region becoming one of the leading coal and iron ore producing regions in the nation. After that he accepted the presidency of the new Agricultural and Mechanical College of Alabama, now known as Auburn University. He led the A & M College for ten years, pioneering in attempts to blend traditional liberal arts courses with a new scientific and engineering curriculum. After his tenure as president at Auburn, Tichenor returned to denominational life, serving as the chief executive of the SBC Home Mission Board from 1882-1899. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, Southern Baptists recognized Tichenor as one of their most significant leaders.²

Tichenor's successor at Montgomery's First Baptist, respected Southern Baptist pastor Basil Manly, Sr., left the church in late 1862. Finding their former pastor now willing and able to return after completion of his chaplaincy, the congregation again called I. T. Tichenor to begin his second pastorate there in January 1863. The church struggled throughout the war years and the thirty-seven year old pastor worked hard as the ravages of war destroyed the southern economy. Yet, he, like others, remained loyal to "the cause."³

Immediately after the removal of the Confederate capital to Richmond in 1861, Montgomery had essentially returned to antebellum normalcy. The impressive sanctuary built in Tichenor's first term as pastor

² For greater detail about Tichenor, see the author's forthcoming work, *Isaac Taylor Tichenor and the Creation of a Baptist South* (Tuscaloosa, AL and London: The University of Alabama Press, 2005).

³ *Christian Index*, 11 November 1862, 2; *South Western Baptist*, 15 January 1863, 2; and Allen, 84-86.

maintained its prominent location on North Court Street. Nearby, the Episcopal Methodist and Protestant Methodist congregations met on Court Street and Bibb Street. Presbyterians, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics all held services regularly in their respective locations. A newly constructed Jewish synagogue held a significant spot in the community. Corn and cotton grew close to the city limits and roaming cattle and hogs posed a problem, even within the city limits. Homes in Montgomery represented the disparate income levels of Montgomerians that indicated the wide range of southern social and economic classes.⁴

By the time Tichenor returned to First Baptist Church, evidence of the war had become more apparent. Located in the interior of the deep South, Montgomery became a location for several hospitals for wounded and convalescing Confederate soldiers. While not achieving the strategic prominence of other southern cities like Chattanooga, Atlanta, or even southern neighbor Mobile, Montgomery became an important location for storage of army supplies. Both the Alabama River and the rail lines that connected Atlanta with the South and West added to Montgomery's significance, especially as the war crept ever southward. The Confederate Commissary Department utilized the city as a depot for food and uniform storage, the Montgomery arsenal served as storage for firearms, and small factories sprang up to supply war needs. The existing Montgomery Iron Works was already well established. Despite these efforts, the difficulties imposed by the Union blockade, hardships

⁴ W. W. Rogers, Jr., *Confederate Home Front: Montgomery during the Civil War* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1999), 7-8, 10, 61.

brought on by zealous impressment agents, and the crippling effects of inflation devastated Montgomery's fragile economy. As the cotton kingdom dissolved, so too, the economy of Montgomery crumbled.⁵ As a citizen of Montgomery and as pastor of one of its most prominent churches, Tichenor was forced to deal with the reality of day-to-day existence. With many local leaders at the front lines or in Richmond, Tichenor would have assumed a more visible role in local leadership.

On August 21, 1863, the Alabama Legislature asked Tichenor to bring its "Fast Day" sermon. Both Union and Confederate governments called for periodic days of prayer and fasting throughout the war. The Confederacy was reeling from the twin disasters of the Battle of Gettysburg and the capture of the stronghold of Vicksburg a little more than a month earlier. With these defeats virtually any Confederate hope of European mediation of the conflict or of alliances with Great Britain or France died. Tichenor's sermon designed his sermon on this occasion to bring a divine message in the midst of political and theological crises. His sermon demonstrated that earlier victories in the war at places like Manassas and Chancellorsville had convinced southerners that God sided with them despite the tremendous odds facing the Confederacy. The recent defeats, like the ultimate defeat of the Confederacy in 1865, caused white southerners loyal to the Confederacy to question God's hand in these events. He attempted to bring some sense out of the recent major defeats that the South had suffered. This "Fast Day" message was delivered to the General

⁵ Ibid., 57, 70, 71, 72, 73 and Harold S. Wilson, *Confederate Industry: Manufacturers and Quartermasters in the Civil War* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2002), xviii, 103.

Assembly of the state and was so popular that he was requested to publish it in the secular press. The text for the sermon was Psalm 46:9, "He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; He breaketh the bow and cutteth the spear in sunder; He burneth the chariot in fire."⁶

Tichenor began the message with an eloquent introduction with which many would have identified. He asked, "When shall we have peace?" He added:

Two weary years of war have wrung this question from the agonized heart of our bleeding country. "Oh! That we could have peace!" exclaims the statesman, as he ponders the problems that demand solution at his hands. "Peace," sighs the soldier, as he wraps his blanket around him and lies down to sleep upon the open field. "Peace!" moans the widow, as she reads the fatal news of her heroic husband fallen on some bloody field, and bitterly thinks of the darkened future in store for herself and her orphaned children. The prayer of the land is for peace. You may hear it in the sanctuary, at the fireside, around the family altar, in the silent chamber, on the tented field. *When will it come?*⁷

The three points of his response to the question regarding peace were "God Governs the Nations," "The Purposes for Which God Afflicts a Nation," and "The Call for Humiliation and Prayer before the God of Nations." He

⁶ I. T. Tichenor, "Fast Day Sermon" as cited in Jacob S. Dill, *I. T. Tichenor: Home Mission Board Statesman*. Nashville: The Sunday School Board, 1908), 88, 93, 106. See also *South Western Baptist*, 5 November 1863.

⁷ Tichenor, "Fast Day Sermon" in Dill, 88-89. Emphasis Tichenor's.

argued from biblical passages with a rhetorical line of questions and then stated:

If God governs the world, then his hand is in this war in which we are engaged. It matters not that the wickedness of man brought it upon us, that it was caused by the mad attempts of fanaticism to deprive us of our rights, overthrow our institutions, and impose upon us a yoke which, as freemen, we had resolved never to bear.⁸

Tichenor, along with many other southerners, believed that the North forced the war upon them. Obviously, “overthrow our institutions” was a reference to slavery. Like others, Tichenor apparently believed the southern states had the constitutional right to secede in order to preserve slavery. He did not admit that the South precipitated the war by secession or by firing the first shots at Fort Sumter, nor did he theorize that secession was illegal and slavery immoral. He simply held the beliefs common among many other white Alabamians and southerners. He concluded one section of the sermon with a telling statement: “While the storm-cloud sweeps over our land, let us remember that God rides upon the wings of the tempest, and subjects it to his will. God in his own way will save our Southland.”⁹

Tichenor went on to discuss two reasons for the current suffering of the South. He believed that it was “punishment for sin” and “development of national character and resources, so as to qualify a people for some high and holy mission which he designs to commit to

⁸ Ibid., 93-94.

⁹ Ibid., 94.

their trust.” Increasingly in 1863 and 1864, southern ministers called their congregations to repentance, claiming that such repentance would restore God’s favor. Unlike Abraham Lincoln, who in his second inaugural address less than two years later also suggested that the war punished the nation for the evil of slavery, the pastor did not criticize his fellow southerners for the peculiar institution. He did criticize southerners, however, saying that the “most crying of our national sins” was “the covetousness of our people.” In this indictment he especially spoke against the use of money for “selfish gratification.” He also attacked those who engaged in black market type activities and hoarding. He especially chided those who “have sought to monopolize articles of prime necessity, and by withholding them from market to enhance their price, and fatten themselves upon the sufferings of their country.” Confederate government inspector Colonel Eugene E. McLeon cited speculation in Montgomery as a major problem in the report of his visit in March 1864. This would have been a popular sentiment with many suffering the inflationary travail inherent in the Confederate economy. Hoarding and similar activities seriously contributed to starvation and other shortages by mid war and Tichenor’s censure of those elements unquestionably resonated with many of his hearers and subsequent readers.¹⁰

The Montgomery pastor also condemned pride as another aspect of national sin. He believed that southerners at the beginning of the war held “a vain

¹⁰ Ibid., 97, 98 and William C. Davis, *Look Away! A History of the Confederate States of America* (New York and London: The Free Press, 2002), 211. See also James W. Silver, *Confederate Morale and Church Propaganda*. Tuscaloosa: Confederate Publishing Company, 1957. 53-55.

confidence in our national strength; we placed a high estimate on the valor of our people, and held in contempt the martial qualities of our foes.” This pride had manifested itself in a “boastful self-reliance,” said Tichenor. He spoke accurately of the Confederate mindset in 1861:

We expected no defeat, and thought that nothing but victory could await us on any battlefield. We confidently believed that our agricultural products in which the world is so much interested would bring us recognition by the nations of the earth, defeat the purpose of our enemies to blockade our coasts, and insure our independence. COTTON was our hope. Cotton was not only our *king*, but it was enthroned the god of our confidence, and worshiped as our national deliverer.¹¹

Early battlefield victories further contributed to this confidence in Confederate prospects. Early successes convinced Confederates of their martial abilities, of the justness of their cause, and its ultimate success. Tichenor ended the appraisal of Confederate arrogance with language that suggested that he considered this confidence the equivalent of idolatry which could only be solved by repentance, a dependence upon God for the future, and “a fresh appeal to arms.”¹²

Next, Tichenor criticized some aspects of slavery. As typical of his generation’s white southern evangelicals, Tichenor never criticized slavery as an institution but chose rather to condemn its abuses. He raised no questions about the contradiction of denying freedoms to

¹¹ Tichenor, “Fast Day Sermon,” in Dill, 99. Emphasis Tichenor’s.

¹² Ibid., 99-100.

slaves that the South was determined to defend. Rather, he declared, “We have failed to discharge our duties to our slaves.” Certainly, the Baptist pastor held a paternalistic view of African Americans. Unlike some who believed slaves to be only property, Tichenor believed them to be inferior beings to be cared for by their masters. While he would not have gone as far as J. D. B. DeBow, a New Orleans editor, in stressing the superiority of southern society and slavery,¹³ Tichenor was quick to defend slavery. He stated, “I entertain no doubt that slavery is right,” but added, “there are abuses of it which ought to be corrected.” He even enumerated these abuses.

Marriage is a divine institution, and yet marriage exists among our slaves dependent upon the will of the master. “What God has joined together let no man put asunder,” yet this tie is subject to the passion, caprice, or avarice of their owners. The law gives the husband and the father no protection in this relation. The remorseless creditor may avail himself of the power of the law to separate husband and wife, parent and child. This is an evil of no minor magnitude, and one which demands an immediate remedy.¹⁴

Tichenor also mentioned another abuse—the lack of missionary effort among the slaves. He reprimanded, “Too little attention has been paid to their moral and

¹³ Davis, 43.

¹⁴ Tichenor, “Fast Day Sermon,” in Dill, 102. See also John B. Boles, “Evangelical Protestantism in the South,” 28-34 in Charles Reagan Wilson, ed., *Religion in the South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985) and Mathews, 158ff.

religious culture.” He acknowledged that slave labor had resulted in agricultural prosperity. “By their labor our fields have been made white with abundant harvests,” Tichenor admonished, “and the wealth they have produced has been spent with lavish hands,” and yet, “scarcely a pittance has been given to furnish them with the bread of life.”¹⁵ Many had made this identical criticism prior to the Civil War. Throughout his ministry, Tichenor demonstrated a concern regarding African-American religion. Tichenor’s sermon, however, links the failure to provide adequately for the spiritual condition of slaves with God’s punishment of the South.

It is significant to note that Tichenor made no mention of masters and overseers who abused their slaves physically or the fact that most states forbade slaves to read and write when those skills would have aided them in understanding the message of the gospel. Earlier in his career, Tichenor had been extremely critical of slave preaching that he witnessed. As a young pastor, he recorded in his diary that a slave minister’s preaching was harmful, and the lack of substance to the message appalled him. Nowhere, either in his early diary or in this Fast-Day Sermon, does Tichenor acknowledge or even allude to the fact that the cause of the perceived poor quality of slave preaching, the slave’s lack of understanding of orthodox Christian doctrine, and his weak biblical comprehension might have resulted by limitations placed upon slave preachers by southern law and society.

Nor did Tichenor criticize antebellum viewpoints that considered slaves genetically and intellectually inferior. This viewpoint had been advocated by many of those who defended slavery. Utilizing language and methodologies

¹⁵ Ibid.

promoted as science, poor biblical interpretation and theology, and an incomplete understanding of history, individuals like Dr. Samuel Cartwright and the aforementioned DeBow promoted rationales for white racial superiority that were not challenged by Tichenor.¹⁶

Finally, the Montgomery pastor failed to mention a moral problem that diarist Mary Chesnut noted privately prior to the onset of the war. Chesnut wrote,

God forgive *us*, but ours is a *monstrous* system & wrong & iniquity. . . . This *only* I see: like the patriarchs of old our men live all in one house with their wives & their concubines, & the Mulattoes one sees in every family exactly resemble the white children. . . .& all the time they seem to think themselves patterns—models of husbands & fathers.¹⁷

Tichenor could not have been unaware of these other abuses, but the fact that he neglected to address them demonstrates again that he was a product of his culture. Even in his attempt to speak in a prophetic voice, he ignored the opportunity to criticize slavery and its worst abuses.

Tichenor ended his sermon with additional pleas for repentance and prayer. He held out General Robert Lee as model Christian warrior and man of prayer. In third person, he recalled his own battle experiences at Shiloh

¹⁶ Davis, 130-37.

¹⁷ C. Vann Woodward and Elisabeth Muhlenfeld, eds., *The Private Mary Chesnut, The Unpublished Civil War Diaries*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 42-43, entry dated March 18, 1861. See also W. W. Rogers, Sr., *et al*, *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State* (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1994), 109-10.

and insisted that “it was the thought that prayer was then ascending for [the Seventeenth Alabama] that nerved their arms, and made them heroes in that fearful hour.” He presented an idea to which he returned upon many occasions in the days to come: “It may be that God has for the South a world mission, and that by these sufferings he is preparing them for that trust.” He asserted,

I confidently believe that in leading us through this fiery trial God is preparing a chosen people for a great mission. He wants a people purified, a people with a proper understanding and regard for all human rights; he wants a people, above all things, who will set the glory of God and the good of the race above all self-centering ambitions.¹⁸

Certainly, the irony of his own words regarding human rights was lost upon both Tichenor and his listeners.

The Fast-Day Sermon gives tremendous insight into Tichenor’s speaking skills and beliefs. The basic content for Tichenor’s sermon showed a pastor-theologian of moderate Calvinist beliefs, an individual convinced of the sovereignty of God, and at the same time, who acknowledged the responsibility of human beings. The power of his oratory comes through clearly. It is no wonder that Tichenor was regarded as one of the most outstanding preachers of his day. He moved from the concept of divine chastisement to a call for repentance while at the same time holding out optimistic hopes regarding the future of the South. The sermon reveals him as a product of his culture with his defense of slavery and sectionalism; but despite his own prejudices, he

¹⁸ Tichenor, “Fast-Day Sermon,” as cited in Dill, 103-04, 106-07.

maintained a semblance of a prophetic role. His sermon did not merely defend the southern cause and assure that all would be well. While there were obvious and crucial areas that he neglected, he did speak with a critical voice at points. Tichenor’s sermon was consistent with other messages preached and proclamations issued during this time.¹⁹ It demonstrates that at this point in the conflict, southerners believed that they could, by repentance and commitment, restore God’s favor upon the South. At this point in the war, and for some years to come, Tichenor, like most of his southern contemporaries, could not perceive that it might be God’s will that the South be defeated. In fact, Tichenor remained one Montgomerian who would continue to encourage others to resist almost to the bitter end.²⁰ Most important, was the development of a theme to which he would frequently return in the years to come. As university president at Auburn and as chief executive of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, he would repeat many times figuratively and often literally the theme that God had “for the South a world mission.”

In Tichenor’s Fast Day Sermon, one also observes tendencies of what historian Paul Gaston has described as southern mythmaking. Such tendencies were already present in the South prior to the Civil War but the concepts were not fully developed in 1863. Reading Tichenor’s sermon carefully reveals that this mythmaking was developing beyond what Gaston calls an “embryonic” stage.²¹ Unknowingly, Tichenor was one of those who laid

¹⁹ Steven E. Woodworth, *While God Is Marching On: The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers*. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2001, 273ff.

²⁰ See Richard E. Beringer, *et al*, *Why the South Lost the Civil War* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1986), 366ff.

²¹ Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1970), 6-13.

the foundation for a theology that could both cling to the myth of the Old South while embracing the concepts of a New South.

Finally, for today's reader it might also illustrate cautionary notes about how modern day "prophets" can and should address current political issues, including that of war. Those who speak for God should be careful about the types of claims that are made in God's behalf. Despite his very tenuous relationship to evangelical Christianity, the words of Abraham Lincoln are significant on this point. To a northern minister who told Lincoln that "he hoped the Lord is on our side," Lincoln replied, "I am not at all concerned about that. . . . But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord's side."²²

²² As quoted in Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992), 323.