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The War Justified

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VIRGINIA UNITED METHODIST
HERITAGE

A decorative flourish consisting of a continuous, flowing line that loops and curves, positioned below the word 'HERITAGE' and between two horizontal lines.

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The War Justified

By Margaret T. Kidd



"We must hope and pray for the best result, and prepare for the worst."

- REVEREND JAMES A. RIDDICK¹

*"Politically and ecclesiastically the line has been drawn between
North and South."*

- JAMES A. DUNCAN, *Address to Christians Throughout the World*²

Ministers often found it difficult to promote their own views on politics because the public believed ministers should keep their thoughts on the realm of heaven and not necessarily earthy pursuits. Just before the 1860 presidential election, the *Richmond Christian Advocate (RCA)* printed a letter which rebuked their involvement in worldly politics:

*"We occasionally see a minister of the Gospel of Peace condescending so low as to immerse himself, his sacred office, together with all its hallowed and holy associations, into the muddy, turbid and turbulent pool of party politics, where alas naught can be expected, and naught is realized, save disgrace, contempt and degradation to this most sacred, holy and responsible office with which poor frail and mortal man can be honored...this unwise and unholy mixture (if persisted in) will be most effective and telling element in our destruction."*³

Men of the cloth had to approach carefully their arguments for and against war lest they be chastised for degrading their "sacred office." Many had perfected their ability to argue delicate matters during the debates over slavery. Ministers claimed they were not lowering themselves by speaking of the debase matter of the politics of slavery. Rather, they allowed the Bible to guide them on these issues. Many maintained the Bible was silent about slavery, neither for nor against. As one writer to the *RCA* stated, the doctrine of the church was to

¹ James A. Riddick to William Gray, 8 January 1861 regarding the increasing difficulties between North and South, William Gray Papers, Virginia Historical Society (Ms1 G7952 FA2).

² James A. Duncan, *Address to Christians Throughout the World*, April 1863.

³ "Letter to the editor," *Richmond Christian Advocate*, 1 November 1860.

“preach Christ and Him crucified to master and servant, and teach obedience to Christ.”⁴

Any position that ministers took regarding the war needed to be couched in religious terms and preferably with biblical precedent. The ministers had no shortage of examples from the Old Testament to cite. They took their cues from the Bible and melded them together with their personal beliefs. When done in this manner they did not fear expressing their opinions.

Many times when a minister from this period made a disclaimer as to his province in a matter, he was usually about to comment on the subject. Such was the case with the *Address to Christians Throughout the World*. This address, written by Reverend James A. Duncan in April 1863 and signed by ministers of various denominations, acted as the “Christian response” to Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation.⁵ Duncan, the pastor of Broad Street Methodist Episcopal Church, South and editor of the *Richmond Christian Advocate*, had few qualms about giving his thoughts on the war. He even stated that ministers had an obligation to address the war and explain what the people of the South were fighting for. A war platform was “not merely a secular, but a moral question, and therefore [I] do not think we exceed the limits of what is appropriate to the religious press in calling attention to it.”⁶

Duncan wanted to gain as much support as possible, especially from those in Europe who remained hesitant to fully throw their support behind the Confederacy. The Confederacy had long hoped to garner recognition and assistance from England and France. Duncan, who routinely printed rumors of foreign recognition, did however caution at one point not to put faith in the foreign princes.⁷ This was not only a reference to the belief of some that foreign recognition would save the Confederacy, but also a warning by Reverend Duncan not to place confidence in anyone but God.⁸ However, this did not stop him and others from courting Christians in other nations to drum up support and justify their cause.

4 Letter by John B. McFerrin of Nashville, *Richmond Christian Advocate*, 7 June 1860.

5 *Address to Christians Throughout the World*, p. 2.

6 “Have We a War Platform?” *Richmond Christian Advocate*, 7 January 1864.

7 *Richmond Christian Advocate*, 13 November 1862.

8 This is a direct reference to Psalm 118:9, “It is better to trust the Lord than to put confidence in princes.” Interestingly, the next verse of the Psalm reads: “All nations compassed me about: but in the name of the LORD will I destroy them.” Perhaps Duncan was thinking this as he quoted verse nine in response to foreign recognition

Duncan stated outright in the address that they did not intend to discuss the causes of the war because it would "involve much more than, as Christian ministers, we feel it our province to argue."⁹ Having stated his disclaimer of province, he would discuss his real point: the reasons why the North would not succeed in this war. These supporters of the South did not believe they could be impelled by violence to rejoin the Union. Subjugation of the Southern people would only be temporary and it would be necessary to revolt again. Duncan likened this to the American Revolution. The Confederates wanted only to leave the Union in peace. If the Union should then fall apart after their departure, that was none of their concern, "So Pharaoh fell but not by the hand of Israel."¹⁰ Reverend Duncan also took a moment to highlight his home state's actions in joining the Confederacy. He noted that Virginia's decision to secede was not a hasty one, but Lincoln's demand that Virginia furnish troops forced the state to choose sides. "At once she took position with the Confederacy, preferring to battle in defense of liberty than in opposition to all her principles to invade, or suffer the invasion of the South."¹¹

The real purpose of his address was to defend the Southern way of life and most specifically the institution of slavery. Reverend Duncan stated that "the recent proclamation of the President of the United States, seeking the emancipation of the slaves of the South, is in our judgment, a suitable occasion for solemn protest on the part of the people of God throughout the world." He believed that if the master were made to suffer then the slave would suffer even more. This action could culminate in the death of tens of thousands by insurrection and the subsequent call to quell the insurrectionists for public safety. Duncan attacked Lincoln, claiming he used emancipation as a pretext for war. He contended that abolitionists should be appalled by Lincoln's exploitation of the slavery issue to fight a war. Duncan was sure Lincoln would only free the slaves that fought for the North and no others.¹²

Reverend Duncan explained in the address that slavery was not incompatible with Christian beliefs and it was a blessing for the Africans who were brought to this country. He felt that Divine Providence was instrumental in bringing them to the new world where they could find

9 *Address to Christians Throughout the World*, 2.

10 *Address to Christians Throughout the World*, 2.

11 *Address to Christians Throughout the World*, 3.

12 *Address to Christians Throughout the World*, 4, 6.



salvation. Duncan asserted that the South had done more than any people on earth for the Christianization of the African race. He contended, unlike the depictions in Northern fiction, slaves were prosperous and happy. There were a few masters who would abuse slaves, but the majority deems such acts as deplorable. Duncan and the signers of this address truly believed that God sanctioned slavery and they were fulfilling God's will.¹³

This address highlighted a significant change in how members of the Methodist Episcopal Church viewed slavery and how they wished to be perceived by outsiders. In 1844, the period of the Great Schism which divided the Methodist Episcopal Church, both sides believed slavery to be a moral evil that should eventually be ended. The major difference to the Southerners in this debate was that slavery was a moral evil, but not a sin, as the Northerners also believed. This posed a major and important distinction. If slavery was only a moral evil and not a sin, the Southern church could denounce it, but still function within the areas where slavery was legal. If it were a sin in the eyes of God, God's law would negate that of man and so the church could not condone it. The feelings of the Southern clergy on slavery had morphed during the intervening years. They no longer viewed it as a moral evil nor were they conflicted about it as before. They now proclaimed slavery was sanctioned by God and felt there was nothing shameful or morally evil about it.

The address also portrayed Southerners as victims of harsh Northern aggression. By painting themselves as victims they hoped to gain the sympathy and support of their Christian counterparts in other nations. It added fuel to the fire by claiming that emancipation could cause slaves to revolt in the South, which would result in needless bloodshed. However, this stood in stark contrast to Reverend Duncan's earlier assertion that slaves were happy in their position.

It is important to note that Baptist, Episcopalian, Presbyterian, Lutheran, and German Reformed ministers also signed this address. Although spearheaded by a Methodist minister, this address was a cross-denominational attempt to garner support from Christians in other countries. It also suggested that the belief slavery was an institution ordained by God was held by all the major denominations in the Confederacy. So the ministers were preaching to their members that slavery was not only the natural order, but also the Divine order. This served to further establish the belief of white supremacy that would

¹³ *Address to Christians Throughout the World*, 7-8.



have far reaching implications after the war.

Attorney General of Virginia John Randolph Tucker delivered to the Young Men's Christian Association a lecture entitled *The Southern Church Justified in its Support of the South in the Present War*. Tucker, a Presbyterian, presented his argument slightly different from that of the Methodists, but his address was remarkably similar to Reverend Duncan's *Address to Christians Throughout the World*.

Like Duncan, Tucker believed they were fighting a war of "defense, not of aggression." Tucker stated that where civil liberties cannot exist neither can religious liberties. He fully embraced the tenet of separation of church and state; however, the church could not stand by to watch the destruction of civil liberty. This was why, according to Tucker, in that situation the church had an obligation to involve itself in political and social matters:

*God has ordained the State Power, as the shield of His Church: and it is the right and the duty of the Church, entrusted with the interest of His religion, to sustain the State Power, when it is a shield against wrong - and to oppose it when it is a sword wielded for outrage and oppression.*¹⁴

Duncan and Tucker shared the opinion that slavery was supported by scripture and therefore part of the Divine order. Tucker blamed fanatical abolitionists for the woes they were currently experiencing. He claimed the abolitionist stance against slavery was wrong and anti-Christian. He disputed the abolitionist idea that "to hold a slave, was to hold damning heresy."¹⁵ Tucker stated that the Christian slaveholders quoted the Bible in vain to their Northern counterparts. They did not want to hear that Peter and Paul taught that slaves must obey their masters and that Jesus tolerated slavery.¹⁶ Instead, Tucker announced, "the answer of Abolition was simple: 'If the Bible sanctions slavery, it is not from God! If Christ tolerated slavery, he is not a divine teacher!' Thus, anti-slavery became anti-Christ! And Abolition became Infidelity and Atheism!"¹⁷

Tucker, like Duncan and most other Confederates, believed they were helping to save blacks from a life of barbarism. Tucker contended

¹⁴ John Randolph Tucker, *The Southern Church Justified in its Support of the South in the Present War: A Lecture, Delivered before the Young Men's Christian Association of Richmond on the 21st May 1863* (Richmond, VA: W.H. Clemmitt), 1-9.

¹⁵ Tucker, 12.

¹⁶ Tucker, 13.

¹⁷ Tucker, 13.

that the church could not be neutral in such times. According to him if the abolitionists had their way, four million slaves would be raised "ignorant and debased, into brutal insurrection against their masters - and drench Southern fields in blood, or stain Southern homes with murder, rapine and rape."¹⁸

Tucker called out to all Christians everywhere to pray for them. He believed they were doing good work in the South and were leading Christian lives. Tucker declared that God placed the African under their authority "to regulate him - to make him useful, instead of being unthrifty - industrious and not idle - Christians and not savage."¹⁹ Even though he felt the world was against them, God was with them and would see them through the crisis.

Tucker echoed many of Reverend Duncan's ideas. Both men were on the defensive. Tucker tried to explain why it was the prerogative of the church to be involved in the war; Duncan tried to defend the church's participation so far; and both were attempting to rally Christians the world over to their cause. These two, as well as the pastors who signed Duncan's address, assumed they were in the right, but it was obvious that they felt pressure from all sides regarding their positions. Otherwise they would not have found it necessary to lecture on these points.

While the Protestant denominations of the South had their theological differences the major denominations felt the war was a justified, fight for their families, homes, beliefs, and constitutional liberties. Ministers such as Duncan realized the importance in presenting a united front among the different religious entities of the Confederacy so that they could garner support for their cause. This is why Duncan sought a variety of ministers to endorse the *Address to Christians Throughout the World*. Generally, the various denominations in the South were in agreement with the Methodists and their views on slavery. They immersed themselves in the conflict, fully embracing the cause of the Confederacy and openly proclaiming that everything they held dear, including the right to own slaves, was sanctioned by God. †

18 Tucker, 23.

19 Tucker, 34.

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