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CONSCIENCE AND CHRISTIANITY: A MIDDLE TENNESSEE UNIONIST RENOUNCES HIS CHURCH, 1867

Edited by Stephen V. Ash

Secession and war in the 1860's pitted not only North against South, but southerner against southerner. Nowhere was this more strikingly and tragically exemplified than in Tennessee. East Tennessee's civil war within a civil war is a familiar episode; but Tennesseans elsewhere endured similar, if less epidemic, political discord and fraternal strife before and after Fort Sumter. In the letter below, one stalwart Middle Tennessee Unionist poignantly describes his travail in 1861 as secessionism swept his region and enthralled his people.

William Taylor (c. 1800-1890), author of the letter, was a Bedford County farmer, lawyer, and justice of the peace. In 1860 he owned three slaves and lived on a 260 acre farm near Unionville with his wife and son. Until 1861 he was an active and devoted member of Enon Primitive Baptist Church of Unionville. His letter, dated 1867, justifies his six year absence from the church as an appropriate response to the Enon brethren who viciously persecuted him for his stand in 1861 and after. Upon receiving this letter, the church granted Taylor's request to strike his name from the roll of members: "he was unanimously Excluded for refusing to give the church any satisfaction," the minutes record, "so he is not of us."

The profound divisions among Tennessee's people lingered even after Appomattox, as Taylor's letter so compellingly bears witness. But time bridged even the widest and deepest chasms. In 1883 Taylor asked to be restored to membership in Enon Church. Gladly welcomed back by the congregation, William Taylor spent the remaining seven years of his life in the fellowship of the small, rural church which had nurtured him for decades before the passions of war severed him from it.¹

¹A photocopy of this letter is in Enon Primitive Baptist Church Records, Church Letters (Tennessee State Library and Archives, Nashville). The letter is reproduced here in full and without editorial

At home in Bedford County Tennessee
and Dist. 9 the 18th day of August 1867

To the Primitave Baptist Church at Enon in the County & State a
fore said and Dist no 10

I was in hopes that I would have been saved the painful duty of
haveing to explain the reason of my haveing so long absented myself
from the Church, but haveing been notified by James Sheeffield² sent
by the Church to attend at Enon on Saturday the 24th Inst. for that
purpose, I adopted my pen in place of my tongue to make the
explanation.

And before I make the explanation, let me say to you that I believe
the doctrine taught by the Primitave Baptist is the true doctrin of the
Bible, and the only true doctrin that is taught

The explanation

In 1860 we all remember there was an exciteing Presidential
election, four candidates ware before the people, two of them were
national, the other two were Sectional.³ I had always opposed sectional
principals in a Government, believeing them to be unsafe and I
voted for a national man, but the Sectional man North was elected.

I then wanted him to take his seat quietly, and administer the
Government for I was always in favour of a majority ruleing, but the
sectional men South was opposed to the rule of a majority, and rather

emendations; the author's spelling, grammar, syntax, and punctuation are preserved.

Enon Church was established in Bedford County at least as early as 1821. William Taylor's
membership dates to 1837 or before. A native North Carolinian, he emigrated to Bedford no later than
1830. He became a magistrate while still young and continued in that office until his resignation in
1866. Concurrently he practiced law and continued to practice until 1873, when at age 73 he retired to
his farm to raise apples and peaches and manage his cotton gin and steam-powered grist mill. At his
death in 1890 the *Shelbyville Gazette* lauded him as "a careful guardian of the people's interest" who
"was an excellent husband and an indulgent parent and died with few if any enemies."

For information on Taylor see Enon Primitave Baptist Church Records, Session Minutes, 1837-61,
passim, December, 1862, June, 1866, August, 1867, October, 1883; Bedford County, Tennessee,
County Court Clerk's Office, County Court Minutes, Vols. A, B, C, D, 1863-74, *passim* (Tennessee
State Library and Archives); State Commission Books, Vol. 1840-56 (Tennessee State Library and
Archives); 1830 Census of Bedford County, Tennessee, p. 82; 1860 Census of Population, Bedford
County, District 9, p. 113; 1860 Census of Agriculture, Bedford County, District 9, p. 25; 1860 Census
of Slaves, Bedford County, District 9, p. 32; 1880 Census of Population, Bedford County, District 9, p.
13; 1880 Census of Agriculture, Bedford County, District 9, p. 10 (all census reports from microfilm
copies, Main Library, University of Tennessee, Knoxville); *Goodspeed Histories of Maury, Wil-
liamson, Rutherford, Wilson, Bedford & Marshall Counties of Tennessee* (Columbia, Tennessee, 1971
[1886]), 863, 864, 867; *Shelbyville Gazette*, February 13, 1890.

²James W. Sheffield was clerk and deacon of Enon Church.

³The two "national" candidates in 1860 were Stephen A. Douglas of the Democratic party and John
Bell of the Constitutional Union party. Sectional interests were represented by Abraham Lincoln, a
Republican, and John C. Breckinridge, a Southern Democrat.

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the Democratic party and John
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than to submit to it, attempted to distroy the Government by Re-
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I was one that was well pleased with my Government & did not
 wish to see it distroyed therefore I took my stand against it & in favour
 of the Government and I took my stand as an honest man believing
 then as I have ever since and do now that it was wrong, for that reason
 I with the few Union men were denounced by the Rebels as being
 traitors, Abolitionists and black republicans, and every vile epithet
 that a wicked heart could imagine and a bitter tongue express, and
 some of those persons who call themselves Christians indulged
 freely in the abuse. This at once convinced me that they ware my
 personal enemies as well as my political enemies, and the horrid
 wishes too that was hurled against the Union people was shocking to
 hewmanity, and those wishes indulged in too by some who call
 themselves Christians, all prooveing deepe personal animosity. Now
 I am the identical man in principal now that I was when so abused for
 being a Union man, and how could those who ware so opposed to
 Union principals fellowship me, it seems to me allmost unreasonable
 that it could be so, and I should feel my self out of my place & an
 intruder which is a position I was never willing to occupy

I also contend that I took the right stand when I took it against
 rebellion and that the sequel of the war has proven it, and it is a
 matter of great consolation to me to know that I have not the stain of
 blood upon my garments. When my mind is carried to the battle field
 where the blood ran like rain almost, and the sufferance on the field
 and at the hospittles, of the wounded and dieing, that no pen could
 discribe my conscience is clear for I had no agency in it

When my mind runns over the length & breadth of America &
 imagine the number of Widowe women and orphan children (made so
 by the war) without the common necessaries of life my skirts is clean
 for I opposed rebellion, go to the southern prisons, Andersonville in
 Georgia, Cahawba, Ala, Richmond Verginia,⁴ and imagine the suf-
 ferance of the prisonors, and it was caused by rebellion. house
 burning, rape, robbery, and the murdering of innocent persons were
 the fruites of rebellion. And all the dreadful train of calamities that
 was indured during the war was the fruites of rebellion

⁴The notorious Andersonville military prison in southwestern Georgia was in existence 1864-65; at
 least 13,000 Union captives died there under abominable conditions. Cahaba prison in Dallas County,
 Alabama, smaller but similarly abhorrent, operated from 1863 to the end of the war. Richmond was the
 site of two infamous Confederate military prisons, Belle Isle (1861-65) and Libby (1862-65).

There is no one to divide those dreadful calamities amongst but the rebels. Those who done the most is most guilty, and those who done the least is less guilty, but rebellion is responsible for it all—and a heavy tax burthensome to be born which will not be paid off for the next half century, and a portion of the people who were once American citizens is now disfranchised,⁵ the fruites of rebellion

I will now give it to you as my honest opinion that when rebellion took place against the government of the United States, that the great god of the world was not pleased with it. If he had his arm was sufficient to have carried them through, as he did Moses through the read sea, but I believe on the other hand that through his servant Washington, he established this Government as an Asylum for the oppressed of every tongue and people, and make it the land of the free & home of the brave

I have no acknowledgements to make, nor do I ask any, not with standing, I believe that that strong hostile feeling with rebels against the Union party is as strong now as at any other time, and I think the last election⁶ fully developed that and were it posable for them to ever git in power again (which they cannot) they would have the same tyranical disposition that they did exhibit in in 1861, and I have often thought the analogy is good between the position the Egyptians occupied when Moses led the children of Israel from the Egyptian bondage, for you well remember, that so soon as a plague was remooved that Pharios heart would become calous again and he would refuse to let the people go, untill about a dozen grievous plagues ware sent, last of all the distroying Angel came over and smote the first born of all the Egyptians, nothing but weeping and mourning was heard through Egypt next morning. Phario then hurried Moses off, and after Moses had been gone a while, Phario started his hosts to bring him back and they all were ingulphed in the Read Sea

I have not intended any thing personal in this letter nor do not wish it so understood

I remain yours &c William Taylor

⁵The Reconstruction Acts passed by Congress in March, 1867, excluded many former Confederates from voting in the elections which would begin the political reconstruction of the Southern states. Tennessee was exempted from these acts, but ex-Confederates there had been disfranchised by state law since 1865.

⁶In state and federal elections held after the war, defiant ex-Confederates (except in Tennessee, where they could not vote) demonstrated their unreconstructed attitudes by voting into office many former Rebel leaders and by rejecting the proposed Fourteenth Amendment.

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PS, I have no objections but rather this letter should be read publicly,
also that my name be arraised or taken from the Church book

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