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DOCTMENTS

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 Primitive 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 having to explain the reason of my having so long absented myself from the Church, but having been notified by James Sheffield 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 Primitive 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 exciting Presidential election, four candidates were before the people, two of them were national, the other two were Sectional. 3 I had always opposed sectional principals in a Government, believing 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 favor of a majority ruleing, but the sectional men South was opposed to the rule of a majority, and rather than to submit to being subjugated to rebellion.

I was one who wished to see the greatness of the Government in the blood of my adopted son, 1 with the few that were traitors, Abraham Lincoln and they were good men; I am the idea of a good man being a Union man. I am a Union man and in 1860 I voted for a Union man, and I am sorry that it could not have been otherwise.

I also consider the rebellion a matter of great importance, the blood upon the Southern soil, where the blood was shed, and at the hands of the South, I discribe much.

When my turn to come, I imagine the Southern men of my age were more fit for I opposed the Southern men of the South Georgia, Georgia, the most dangerous of the burning. and of the Southern boys. The Southern boys was induced in their youth.

3 The 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.
than to submit to it, attempted to destroy the Government by Rebellion.

I was one that was well pleased with my Government & did not wish to see it destroyed, 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 were my personal enemies as well as my political enemies, and the horrid wishes too that were hurled against the Union people was shocking to human nature, and those wishes indulged in too by some who call themselves Christians, all proving deep 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 were so opposed to Union principals fellowship me, it seems to me almost 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 hospitals, of the wounded and dying, that no pen could describe my conscience is clear for I had no agency in it.

When my mind runs over the length & breadth of America & imagine the number of Widow women and orphan children (made so by the war) without the common necessities of life my skirts is clean for I opposed rebellion, go to the southern prisons, Andersonville in Georgia, Cahawba, Ala, Richmond Virginitia, and imagine the sufferance of the prisoners, 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 devide 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, the frites 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 red 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 election fully developed that and were it posable for them to ever git in power again (which they cannot) they would have the same tyrannical 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 ingulphe in the Read Sea.

I have not intended anything personal in this letter nor do not wish it so understood.

I remain yours &c William Taylor.

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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 unrepentant attitudes by voting into office many former Rebel leaders and by rejecting the proposed Fourteenth Amendment.
PS, I have no objections but rather this letter should be read publicly, also that my name be arrayed or taken from the Church book.