

# Lincolns War Against the Bible: The American Tract Society and the Confederacy

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Abraham Lincoln warred against women, children, the aged and infirmed in the South. He sent out Sherman, Sheridan, Butler and many others to execute total war upon the defenseless. He even used human shields. Long before Saddam Hussein used hostages around his missile and military sites Lincoln used them on Morris Island in Charleston Harbor [James Ronald and Walter Donald Kennedy, *The South Was Right*, 119 ff]. He desecrated church edifices through his army [Charles A. Jennings, *Cultures in Conflict: Union Desecration of Southern churches and Cemeteries*, Truth in History Publications]. He incarcerated preachers and even killed chaplains who were only doing their duty [Horace Jewell, *History of Methodism in Arkansas*, 182-183]. Why imprison preachers and banish some of them to the North [Alice M. Paynter, *Henry Martyn Paynter*, 79 ff.]? Some incarcerated ministers, because of age and prison conditions became ill and died. This, for example, caused the death of Virginia Baptist minister Richard N. Herndon who was incarcerated at Culpeper Court House [George Braxton Taylor, *Virginia Baptist Ministers*, Third Series, 67]. Lincoln made medicine contraband of war. Why did he make medicines contraband of war? If he was such a compassionate humanitarian surely he would not have done so [E. Merton Coulter, *The Confederate States of America*, 430].



Not only did he war against the weak and defenseless but he warred against the souls of the people of the South. How did he do this? God's Word was made contraband of war. Why were Bibles and Testaments declared contraband of war if he was not warring even against the souls of men as Satan and his demons do [J. William Jones, *Christ in the Camp*, 148]? Jesus the Lord Christ said, "Woe unto you ... hypocrites! For ye shut up the kingdom of heaven against men: for ye neither go in yourselves, neither suffer ye them that are entering to go in" (Matt. 23:13). Lincoln was not one who believed that Christ was the only way of salvation, and he was not a member of the earthly body of Christ (a local church). Consider how one of the Confederate soldiers considered this act, "I am a poor sinner and have no chance to be any other way, for I have no Bible. Yankees want us to loose our souls, same as our lives. It is an aggravation for breakfast, dinner and supper" [Pitt, 32].

The American Bible Society received strong support by Southern people before the War of Northern Aggression. With the division of denominations between the North and South also came the division of Christian organizations. Perhaps ABS was an exception. The forty-fourth annual meeting of the American Bible Society occurred around seven months before South Carolina withdrew from the Union. Within the next six weeks Mississippi, Florida, Alabama, Georgia and Louisiana seceded. Then Texas, Virginia and Arkansas joined their sister Southern states. On May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1861 the president of the American Bible Society called the organization to order, and nine of the Southern states were no longer in the nation. A few weeks later North Carolina and Tennessee seceded. However, to the leadership of the ABS the war made no difference in their relationship to the Southern people [John M. Gibson, *Soldiers of the Word*, 131 ff].

Yes, the ABS purposed to continue furnishing the Word of God as before. The intentions were to provide Bibles to Confederate soldiers and sailors through Southern entities as of old. The president of ABS Frederick Frelinghuysen asserted in his address to the May 1861 meeting, "While there is much to alarm and afflict us in the political agitations of our country, one thing is our special comfort in the cause of the Bible Society: We are still one, bound together by the bands of Christian kindness, animated by like hopes, earnest in like purposes and cheered by the same sympathies" [Gibson, 132]. One Southern agent for the ABS in the Florida and South Georgia area said, "The Bible Society knows no North, no South, no East, no West; its field is the world."

Confederate Chaplain J. Wm. Jones pointed out that the ABS did make "liberal donations of their publications, and did it with a Christian courtesy and charity which arose above the passions of the hour..." [*Christ in the Camp*, 151]. This appears to be the only such group in the North that made such donations [Jones].

The Southern states had maintained Bible Societies in conjunction with the ABS. A very short distance from Fort Sumter was the headquarters of the Charleston Bible Society. The CBS had voted before the conflict to donate \$5,000 dollars to the ABS to assist with the distribution of Scripture in foreign countries. The CBS carried through with the donation. The close-working abilities between brothers in Christ, North and South, were blighted by Lincoln's War. One said, "The corroding acids of war hatreds were too much for them" [Gibson, 133]. The many Bible societies in the South met in Augusta, Georgia on March 19<sup>th</sup>, 1862 to organize the Confederate Bible Society to try and take up slack caused by the difficulties fomented by the Lincoln administration, and the American Bible Society's many hindrances in delivering Bibles below the Mason-Dixon Line [Gibson, 133]. The impediments caused by the hostility of Lincoln's forces will be considered further in this article.

Early in the war Bibles and Testaments were easier to bring in, but there were reasons that a shortage developed as the war lingered. *First*, many copies of the Scripture being imported from England through the British and Foreign Bible Society, which gave the Confederate Bible Society unlimited credit, were captured in the attempts to run the blockades. These captured Bibles were then scattered through the North as souvenirs [Jones, 148, 151]. The pressure exerted by the Federal Government's "'unholy crusade against all that the Southern people hold dear.' As a result of the steadily tightening naval blockade, it said, Southerners had even been 'denied the privilege of importing the Word of God bought in the Bible House.' Thus 'the south had no option but to look to her own resources for the Book of Life'" [Gibson, 134]. *Second*, the South before the war

had depended on publishers in the North for Bibles, but when these sources eventually ended obviously the South needed to produce Bibles. The Southwestern Publishing House in Nashville, Tennessee began to print the first Confederate Bibles [*Chaplains in Gray*, Charles F. Pitts, 31]. However, due to the limitations posed by a single publisher and the shortage of goods which developed, there were still never enough Bibles. *Third*, the greatest of the hindrances to bringing in enough Bibles had to be Abraham Lincoln's policy of making God's Word contraband of war. This has been mentioned previously. The *Tennessee Baptist* paper reported the good news on the Southwestern Publishing venture stating, "Lincoln no longer binds the Word of God" [Pitts, 31]. However, this was only a band aid solution when considered in the light of the great demand from the Confederate Army and Southern citizens for Bibles. Chaplains and colporteurs often said that the demand was never satisfied. Many of the homes in the South were depleted of their Bibles in order to try to quench the thirst for the water of life in the Confederate Army. The moving of God the Holy Spirit in the awakenings in the armies of the Confederacy added to the need for Bibles. The new born babes in Christ hungered for the milk of the Word, and the older believers hungered for the meat of the Word.

Perhaps it would be profitable to examine a little further the *third* and greatest hindrance to having enough Bibles in the South. One must remember Lincoln's declaration of Bibles as contraband of war. This problem was succinctly described, "The great societies at the North generally declared Bibles and Testaments 'contraband of war,' and we had at once to face the problem of securing supplies through the blockade, or manufacturing them with our poor facilities" [Jones, 148]. After the ABS agreed to supply Bibles to the South in May of 1861 what followed is an example of how Bibles bound for the South were considered, "The first books sent in the West were held up as contraband of war. Early in 1862 Federal officers at Cairo, Illinois, stopped a parcel of New Testaments, as contraband, which was addressed to General (Bishop) Leonidas Polk's Army at Columbus, Kentucky" [Henry Otis Dwight, *The Centennial History of the American Bible Society*, 262].

The ABS did not give up on their purpose of the society, and that purpose was the publishing and spreading of the Word of God. The organization tried to help their Southern brothers as best they could. Yes, the American Bible Society's Board of Managers "kept up the search for means of getting its Scriptures over the high wall of war" [Gibson, 135]. The sending of Bibles into the South under such circumstances was spoken of as "a truce of God." The ABS claimed that more than 30,000 volumes were sent from their depository by purchase and donation to the Virginia Bible Society through the Maryland Bible Society [137]. One North Carolina pastor sought out Governor Zebulon B. Vance's help in contacting the ABS for copies of God's Word for soldiers and citizens in his state. He declared that Bible poverty was so extreme in his state that it would make "the hearts of Christians ache" [145].

The Confederate government was just the opposite of the United States government regarding Bibles being sent over her lines to Federal prisoners. The Maryland Bible Society arranged to send 5,000 New Testaments to Richmond for the purpose of them being distributed to Federal prisoners of war. The Testaments were received safely in Richmond and distributed to said prisoners. Some of the prisoners desiring monetary gain from their brand new Testaments sold their gifts. They received twelve to fifteen dollars for their New Testaments [144]. Yes, the Southern people were willing to pay exorbitant prices to have a copy of God's Word.

"A truce of God" was a welcome arrangement to the CSA. God's sacred Word did not pose a hazard to the mind of Southern people. This puts Lincoln's treatment of God's holy and divine Word as contraband in an even a darker light. But Lincoln also, through his army, destroyed and desecrated the houses of God throughout the Confederacy. When the Rev. G. S. Griffin an agent for the ABS visited the Shenandoah Valley just after conflict ended he was overwhelmed by the devastation to church buildings. He had been sent to ascertain how the ABS could help, "What he saw appalled him. Many of the churches had been completely demolished. Many others were in such damaged conditions that they were 'unfit for Divine service.' In their great poverty, the residents of those communities were not able to do much toward making them serviceable" [152].

ABS agent Rev. W. P. Ratcliffe was in southern Arkansas just after the conflict. He was trying to raise money for Bibles. Ratcliffe related an event that moved him. A fatherless child showed up at the depository the next day. This was after a meeting Ratcliffe had conducted to raise awareness of the need for financing the purchase Bibles. He said of the fatherless child, “In her hand she clutched a pair of newly knitted socks. ‘Mother was at the meeting last night,’ she told the minister, ‘and she hasn’t any money. She sent these. It is all she had to send the Bible to the poor’” [158]. This showed how the impoverished Confederates even immediately after the War of Northern Aggression loved God’s Word and desired others to have a copy and especially the poor. Interestingly the widowed woman did not consider herself poor though she had no money.

Lincoln, who was to his friends Herndon, Lamon, etc. a self confessed agnostic, lost his battle against the Word of God. He, as the rich man in hell, would most likely desire a drop of water to cool his tongue, but he cannot. This man’s hands were covered with the blood of Southern and Northern people, but he also died an enemy of God. The Psalmist reminds us, “*Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days*” (Ps. 55:23). We must remember, “*The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the Word of our God shall stand for ever*” (Isa. 40:8).

Do you know the Lord Jesus Christ in pardon and forgiveness of sin? How much do you love the eternal and inspired Word of God? Are you as hungry for the Bible as were our Confederate ancestors? In Bible reading a part of your daily life? “*Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the Word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15). Jeremiah confessed as should we, “*Thy words were found, and I did eat them; and Thy Word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart: for I am called by Thy name, O LORD of hosts*” (Jer. 15:16).

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