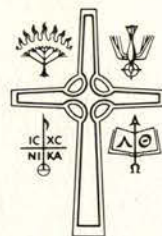


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Converse and Civil War Censorship
Joseph Ruggles Wilson
Periodical Articles of Presbyteriana
Book Reviews



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Converse, *The Christian Observer* and Civil War Censorship

DESPITE THE PRESENCE OF A VERITABLE MOUNTAIN of books and articles relating to the Civil War, few historians are aware that for a brief period of time there was a Presbyterian newspaper, *The Christian Observer*, that was published simultaneously in the Confederacy and in the North. From 3 January 1861 to 1 June 1861, when federal authorities forbade written or printed communication between the United States and the Confederate States, Amasa Converse published his paper in Philadelphia and Richmond. Shortly thereafter, government agents invaded his Philadelphia office and suppressed the journal. The incident persuaded Converse to move to Richmond, where he reestablished *The Christian Observer* as a patriotic Southern newspaper—one that seemed to justify Yankee claims that it had always been pro-Dixie in its bias.

Amasa Converse, editor of *The Christian Observer*, was both a veteran newspaperman and an ordained minister affiliated with the New School of the Presbyterian Church. A native of Lyme Township, New Hampshire, he had graduated from Andover Academy and Dartmouth College and had attended Princeton Theological Seminary. Poor health forced him to leave Princeton before completing the required program of study, and he resolved to seek a teaching and preaching position that would enable him to continue his studies during his leisure hours.¹

In 1825, he moved to Nottoway County, Virginia, where he taught school and preached in a vacant church. Presbyterian officials in Richmond were favorably impressed with Converse, whom they named as their home missionary for Nottoway and Amelia Counties. Apparently their enthusiasm was shared by Con-

verse's parishioners, who, in the spring of 1826, requested that the Presbytery of Hanover ordain their spiritual counselor. That April Converse "was duly examined and ordained to the work of the ministry by laying on the hands of the Presbytery."²

By all accounts Converse was an able and popular clergyman, but he soon decided that because of his weak voice and impaired health he would be of more use to the Church in a non-preaching capacity. Friends advised him to consider newspaper work, and on 20 February 1827, he became the editor of the *Family Visitor*. This paper merged with the *North Carolina Telegraph*, another struggling Presbyterian weekly, and came to be known as *The Family Visitor and Telegraph*. Newspaper work suited the transplanted New Englander, and so in 1828, he decided to buy the paper. It was a difficult decision for Converse to make, for the purchase meant that he would have to assume responsibility for paying off more than \$2500 in debts incurred by the journal's previous owners. Nonetheless, he agreed to buy the paper. The new owner built-up an impressive following, but to his chagrin he discovered that he was making little progress at paying off his predecessor's bills. To remedy the situation he began to send copies of his paper to ex-subscribers of *The Evangelical and Literary Magazine*, a defunct monthly, in which he had once had a financial and literary interest.³ Apparently this proved to be a shrewd move, for Converse's journal, which he renamed *The Southern Religious Telegraph*, prospered and circulated throughout the slave states.

Unlike most Presbyterian ministers in the South, Converse affiliated himself with the New School Presbyterians, and in 1837, he publicly endorsed the split in the church. His forthright stand won him several admirers in the North, and in 1838, a group of New School ministers invited him to meet with them in Philadelphia. During his visit, he charmed his hosts, and they asked him to take over the editorship of the Philadelphia *Observer*, which was then in financial trouble. Since the *Observer* was the oldest Presbyterian paper being published in the country and one of the most prestigious religious organs in the North, he found it impossible to refuse their offer. In January 1839, he moved to Philadelphia to assume control over the twenty-six-year-old *Observer*. With him he brought a list of the subscribers to *The Southern Religious Telegraph*, and, as he had done before, he sent them copies of his new paper.⁴ A significant number became subscribers, and to give the Philadelphia *Observer* greater appeal outside Pennsylvania, he renamed it *The Christian Observer*.⁵

According to Converse, when he was offered the editorship of the *Observer*, it was on the condition that he would attract readers from all sections of the country. He therefore resolved that he would not discuss the slavery question in his editorial pages.⁶ After

1846, however, it became impossible to avoid the issue, and he soon became a sharp critic of the antislavery movement. So unrelenting was his willingness to attack foes of slavery, abolitionist Presbyterians made strenuous efforts to wrest control of the paper from his hands. They struggled in vain, for their activities only made him more determined not to yield his editorial pen to men whom he considered to be "higher law" fanatics.⁷ Though he never had owned slaves during his fourteen-year stay in Dixie and though he favored the colonization of free blacks in Liberia, he insisted that the slavery question was a matter to be handled by the legislatures of the individual states.⁸

With great dismay he noted that abolitionist sentiment was growing in the North, and he used his editorial columns to castigate William Lloyd Garrison, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and John Brown. These antislavery leaders, he declared, were hypocritical zealots using the slavery issue as "their hobby" to gain "public notoriety." In his opinion, only those who had lived in the South for four or five years and who had had the opportunity to observe Dixie's peculiar institution first hand had the right to moralize about the pros and cons of human bondage. How, he wondered, could Harriet Beecher Stowe think that she could accurately describe southern slavery in her novel when she had only made a few brief trips into Kentucky? Neither Garrison nor Brown had traveled widely in the slave states, but both thought themselves competent to tell southerners how to conduct their lives. Worst of all, Converse believed, was that the malicious teachings of the abolitionists were invading the churches of the North. Some northern clergymen, he discovered, openly collected money to finance the purchase of guns for abolitionist immigrants to Kansas. As he had expected there was bloodshed in the Kansas Territory, but to his chagrin many Yankees defended the violence of John Brown and others. Such misguided praise, he insisted, encouraged Brown later to raid Harper's Ferry, a deed which made him a martyr to many opponents of slavery. With increasing frequency *The Christian Observer* warned its readers of the dangers to the country of the abolitionist "menace." If the intemperate antislavery leaders ever achieved positions of power in the United States, he predicted, they would "sever the Union into fragments and kindle the flames of civil war through the land."⁹

Fear of eventual conflict between North and South over slavery was but one of the reasons Converse defended Dixie's peculiar institution; another was his belief that slavery was sanctioned in the Bible by "the unerring word of God." As a college student he had once defended the right of a slave to commit murder to secure his freedom, but a subsequent examination of the Scriptures "convinced . . . [him] that this doctrine was false and pernicious." Thereafter he never seemed to question the propriety of

owning or selling slaves. Not only did he cite biblical passages to prove that slaveowning was permissible, but he also quoted Christian and Jewish authorities who defended the right to hold humans in bondage as a further proof that the abolitionists were wrong. To Converse, one of the most authoritative commentators on the subject was Rabbi Morris J. Raphall of New York City, who had once declared, "There are those who do not believe in the lawfulness of slavery, but they are persons who have not been religiously educated." To these sentiments Converse added his hearty "amen," and he insisted that since antislavery teachings were "at variance with the explicit teachings of the Bible," it was no wonder that they promoted skepticism, division in the church, and alienation of devout southern Christians from their Yankee brethren. In the words of one of Converse's admirers, abolitionists were "dividing the church and thereby [were] destroying that brotherly love and unity which is essential to the progress of pure religion." Given its approval of these beliefs, it is not surprising that *The Christian Observer* breathed a sigh of relief when the 1860 General Assembly of the New School Presbyterians defeated a motion not to receive communion from slaveholders.¹⁰

Since Converse had many southern friends, he frequently used his editorial pages to assure his northern readers that from first hand experience he knew that the slaves were not living in misery. Southern planters, he declared, were as good a group of Christians as any to be found in the North. Because of their religious training, Dixie's whites did not mistreat Negroes; on the contrary, they "civilized" the blacks and encouraged them to become Christians so they would not die "in pagan darkness." For these "noble" deeds white southerners deserved the thanks of all Americans, but instead of being honored for their work, they were unfairly assailed by meddling abolitionists who spread their antislavery tracts "like the locusts of Egypt . . . for the purpose of effecting a social and political revolution" in Dixie. Yet, in *The Christian Observer's* view, these "holier than thou" advocates of "dissension and strife and incessant turmoil" were hypocrites, for though they protested the alleged evils of slavery, they treated their free black neighbors far worse than slaves.¹¹ To Converse the choice before the nation was simple: "The North would manumit the negro and exterminate him, the South would hold him as a servant and preserve the life of his race; which is the most [sic] accordant with the law of God?"¹²

As might be expected, *The Christian Observer* was greatly displeased by the election of Abraham Lincoln as president. It feared that a Republican chief executive who was "elected to office by a geographical party" might be influenced "by the reckless spirit of abolitionism." Southerners were understandably worried that despite his protestations to the contrary, Lincoln might seek to

interfere with slavery, and they began to call for the secession of the slave states. Such talk was especially unwelcome to sixty-five-year-old Amasa Converse. He had just purchased the *Richmond Presbyterian Witness* and had made plans to merge it with *The Christian Observer*, into one paper that would simultaneously be published in Richmond and Philadelphia. Starting on 3 January 1861, the masthead of *The Christian Observer and Presbyterian Witness* indicated that the newspaper was being printed in both cities. Understandably Converse feared that war would jeopardize the financial success of his new business venture, and so he did what he could to persuade "fire-eaters" and abolitionists to cool their passions and to cease their "misrepresentations of the South at the North and of the North at the South." Separation, he maintained, would not solve the problems of the nation, for "there is no redress of present ills in division, [but rather there will be] . . . financial ruin devastating the commercial interests of our cities—or in the strife, blood-shed and anarchy which will ensue if the demon of Revolution shall break up the government of the Union."¹³

Since he desired peace, Converse championed all compromises that were likely to avert secession and thus prevent the outbreak of war. Believing that the nation was governed by a "compromise constitution," he declared: "It is the duty of wise men to gather together in meetings, and, if necessary, [to] call a Convention in which sober counsels might be brought forward and the sacredness of the ancient compact [the United States Constitution] be made evident." The most promising plan to save the Union was the Crittenden Compromise, and Converse hailed this as the answer to America's problems.¹⁴ *The Christian Observer* gladly reported Union demonstrations in its behalf and confidently predicted that, if submitted to the voters of Pennsylvania, it would overwhelmingly be endorsed. Even those who voted for Lincoln, it added, were desirous of some honorable means of compromise to "suppress the agitations and elements of discord which . . . create sectional alienations . . . [and] threaten the dissolution of the government and the Union."¹⁵

But the Crittenden Compromise was not adopted, and the secession movement grew in popularity. Converse had urged that southerners remain in the Union "until every proper means has been tried to secure their rights," but he realized that unless decisive action was taken, separation was inevitable. Though by birth a Yankee, he was most sympathetic to the grievances of the southerners, whom he considered to be reluctant disunionists. "Secession ordinances," he declared, "are signed by strong men in tears, not because they desire it, but from the conviction that honor and self-respect demand the sacrifice."¹⁶

To be sure, Converse was upset by the idea of the disruption of

the Union, but he had only harsh words for those “war shriekers” who proposed using the sword to restore the divided nation. Better “to divide the Confederacy without an appeal to arms,” he thought, than to maintain the country “by the bayonet.” Given these sentiments, it was not surprising that he would oppose those calling for coercion of Dixie. Rather strong words were used in *The Christian Observer* to denounce those “belligerent” Yankee clergymen willing to wage war against the Confederacy:

[These ministers,] we presume, would imitate the example of Pope Urban II of the eleventh century, who, after inflaming the minds of many thousands by his soul-stirring eloquence to march against the Infidels of the Holy Land, was careful enough to keep his own precious self out of harm’s way while the myriads of the crusading hosts were dying of pestilence and starvation. But we will not presume that abolition pastors are thirsting for blood even though they preach with vehemence—“no compromise.”¹⁷

To counteract the influence of these preachers Converse eagerly printed letters from subscribers who warned that war would financially bankrupt the American people, kill thousands of men and thereby create a large number of widows and orphans, promote crime, and discredit the United States in the eyes of the world. F. Bartlett Converse, a son of the editor and manager of the Richmond office of *The Christian Observer*,¹⁸ agreed with his father but warned that “fearful as is the carnage and slaughter of the battlefield, and piercing as are the agonizing cries of its dying victims and its tens of thousands of widows and orphans, they are far more endurable than the moral and social death which civil war engenders.” In his opinion, the wisest course for the Lincoln administration to pursue would be one that would give “no occasion for an assault.”¹⁹

War, of course, did come. Privately Converse blamed the outbreak of hostilities on Lincoln, a foe of compromise “whose idiosyncracies and partisan views did not qualify him to act the part of pacificator between the contending parties,” and on the “perfidious” Secretary of State William Seward, who, the editor alleged, had deliberately provoked the South into firing the first shot at Fort Sumter.²⁰ Publicly, however, Converse was more moderate in his views, and *The Christian Observer* speculated that the conflict might be a sign that the Almighty was “inflicting judgment on the Church and the country for their sins.” Those who welcomed the war, the paper added, were to be pitied, for all Christians should realize that the Prince of Peace would have no “pleasure in the terrible results of this deadly conflict between brethren.” War was no proper remedy for the nation’s troubles, for the horrible conflict was likely not only to kill men but also to destroy constitutional government as well. Bloodshed, Converse concluded, would never restore the Union.²¹

Editorially *The Christian Observer* castigated both antislavery crusaders and southern fanatics for bringing about the war, but it voiced no objections when one of its correspondents argued that “abolition is principally to blame. Had it not reared its official front, this great nation would have been a *Unit* still, and gone on its glorious course, perhaps for ages.” Another reader agreed, adding, “I am clear in the conviction that ‘to crush rebellion’ at the South and leave abolitionism rampant at the North would be to relieve the patient of one disease while he is left with another more dangerous.”²²

After the attack on Fort Sumter, many of Philadelphia’s Presbyterians called for the raising of a volunteer federal army to suppress the rebellion. Moreover, patriotic residents of the nation’s second largest city made it known that they would tolerate no “treason” in their city. Mobs frequently visited those foolish enough to express sympathy with the South or to voice criticism of the Lincoln administration. In his autobiography Converse admitted that “his life was threatened by some of the self-styled patriots who had been roused to action.”²³ These threats, however, were ineffective, for Converse refused to moderate his pro-peace editorial policy.

Presbyterian leaders were embarrassed by the editorials appearing in *The Christian Observer*, and influential members of the church demanded that Converse give up his paper. A delegation visited him and offered to buy *The Christian Observer* from him for \$20,000, a price that far exceeded its market value. Not only did Converse spurn this offer, but he also refused to shut his Richmond office. His was the only paper published simultaneously in the United States and in the Confederacy, but since he never openly endorsed secession, he did not consider himself to be disloyal to the nation of his birth. In fact, he was of the opinion that he was a mediator, a “humble servant of Christ . . . speak[ing] the words of peace and avoid[ing] all epithets calculated to increase existing alienations.” Many disagreed with his evaluation of what he was doing, and scores of ministers in Pennsylvania warned members of their congregations not to subscribe to *The Christian Observer*. At first Converse professed to be unconcerned with the loss of revenue that resulted when hundreds stopped their subscriptions to his paper, but before long he was asking his readers to send him the names of potential subscribers who shared his political philosophy.²⁴

Federal authorities were distressed that Converse did not shut down his Richmond office. In May 1861, they informed him that after 1 June 1861, the United States Post Office would accept no mail addressed to residents of the “so-called” Confederate States. Converse flabbergasted them when after that date he continued to list Richmond on his paper’s masthead. Furthermore, he was

still filling *The Christian Observer* with communications from the South; these ranged from a letter sent by a Tennessee bishop who called for recognition of the Confederacy to a note from a Virginian who argued that "Re-union is an utter impossibility." In addition to the above, he gave considerable coverage to the antiwar movement in the North. Articles were featured describing the adoption of peace resolutions by the Connecticut Legislature and the staging of antiwar rallies in Pennsylvania's Monroe, Venango, and Wayne Counties.²⁵ Unlike most Yanks, he was not surprised at the northern defeat at Bull Run, and he warned that continuation of the fighting would lead to even more military disasters. To him the lesson of Bull Run was clear: "It should constrain Christian patriots who love their government and their country to humble themselves before God, beseeching Him in His holy providence to put an end to the effusion of human blood and restore the peace and prosperity of the country."²⁶

To many this was treason, and several influential northern newspapers, including the *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, denounced Converse as a foe of the United States government. These accusations from his journalistic peers profoundly disturbed him, and on 1 August 1861, he announced that *The Christian Observer* was no longer being sent to residents of the Confederacy. No longer would he list Richmond on his masthead, and one of his sons, F. Bartlett Converse, was directed to close the *Observer* office in that city.²⁷

Temporarily this quieted Converse's critics, and hostility towards his paper might have died down had he not had the poor taste to reprint a letter that a Virginian had supposedly sent to a friend in Philadelphia. This note, which was published in the 22 August 1861, *Christian Observer* luridly described how northern soldiers had pillaged the Confederate States. According to the writer, Yanks had shot a woman because they had mistakenly assumed that her husband was a secessionist. "Does Northern morality," the Confederate asked, "approve and honor the deliberate assassination of ladies in order to inflict pain upon those whom they believe to be political heretics?" Because of "the gross, brutal, fiendish, demonical outrages perpetrated by the chicken stealers sent here to ravage the country, pillage the houses and burn them, outrage the women, and shoot down for amusement peaceable citizens and even children," the writer proclaimed, there was no hope that the South would ever rejoin the Union.²⁸ To Converse the letter was proof that war was evil and that negotiation rather than bullets or intimidation was the best way to bring about a satisfactory settlement of the conflict. To his critics, however, it was evidence that *The Christian Observer* was a seditious publication that would do anything to weaken morale in the North.

Upon reading this issue of *The Christian Observer*, government officials decided that the paper was knowingly encouraging resistance to the laws and would have to be suppressed. They acted quickly. On 22 August 1861, United States Marshal William Millward and six deputies accosted Converse in his printing office, handed him a warrant for his arrest, and announced that because he had violated the 13 July 1861, Act of Congress punishing traitors, they were directed to confiscate all of his newspaper equipment and his financial records. Converse was given permission to run some errands and to get some refreshment before he surrendered to authorities. This he did, and though he protested that he had been guilty of no offense against the government, he gave Millward the keys to his office and to his iron safe.²⁹

Reaction to the news of the suppression of *The Christian Observer* was mixed. Several Presbyterian leaders quietly expressed pleasure that Converse would have no further opportunity to embarrass them. Many voiced no opinion at all about the arrest, preferring to withhold judgment on the incident until evidence was presented in the courts. A few ministers, however, believed that no matter how misguided Converse's editorials might have been, they had not been treasonable. After all, they reasoned, was it not the duty of the editor of a religious paper to condemn the slaughter and destructiveness of war? The secular press was also divided in its opinion of the arrest of Converse. Prowar journals such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer* hailed the move as "a wise and judicious step" and dismissed the accused as being the owner of the only "traitorous sheet published in this city." The *Wilkes-Barre Luzerne Union* disagreed and expressed surprise and dismay that authorities had chosen to silence "one of the ablest religious organs in the land." Most Philadelphia dailies avoided making any editorial comments about the fate of the Presbyterian weekly; perhaps they thought it best to avoid all controversies involving freedom of the press.³⁰

Naturally Converse was greatly disappointed at the lack of public outcry protesting his arrest and the suppression of his paper. As soon as he posted bail, he and one of his sons, Henry Converse, began to send letters to government officials to inform them of the "outrage committed" on *The Christian Observer*. Evidently these had some effect, for on 17 October 1861, J. Hurley Ashton, assistant United States Attorney for Philadelphia, announced that he had received orders to drop the case against Converse and that the editor could resume the publication of his paper.³¹

Though Converse hailed this decision as "a moral victory," he had no intention of resuming the publication of *The Christian Observer* in Philadelphia. In fact, sometime during September 1861, he had fled to Richmond, Virginia, where he relocated his paper.

On 24 October 1861, Henry Converse published a special issue of *The Christian Observer* in Philadelphia to announce that because of the controversy concerning the journal's loyalty, it would no longer be printed in that city. No mention was made of his father's departure from the city or that the paper was then being published in the Confederacy. Philadelphians soon found out about these developments, and many claimed that Amasa Converse's decision to flee to the South vindicated those who had called him disloyal.³²

As might be expected, Converse had a different explanation for his relocation in Richmond. According to him, he had been most reluctant to leave Philadelphia, for he considered himself to be the only editor in the North willing to warn the public of the evils of the Civil War. Even after his paper had been suppressed, he boasted, he had "continued to receive new subscriptions from different sections of the North." He had moved not because he was a traitor but rather because Lincoln was a tyrant, who, unlike Jefferson Davis, refused to tolerate freedom of the press. Though his was primarily a religious journal, he admitted, he felt it his duty from time to time to speak out on political matters and he would allow no one to tell him what he could print. Therefore, it was necessary for him to leave Pennsylvania and join his son, Bartlett, in Richmond.³³

To Confederates Converse was something of a hero, and when the Presbyterian Synod of Virginia met at Staunton in November 1861, it enthusiastically passed a resolution welcoming him to the South and urging church members "to secure for that valuable journal, [*The Christian Observer*,] a wider circulation." Residents of Dixie were gratified to learn that Converse's political views matched their own, and it was soon apparent that Confederate authorities would have no reason to regret his having left the North. In fact, his frequent denunciations of Yankees as being a crafty, avaricious, and intolerant people made his readers marvel that he was a native of New Hampshire.³⁴

Few southern religious journals offered as much encouragement to the men in gray to defeat the Union Army as did *The Christian Observer*. To Converse the war had become a religious struggle and the northern military defeats of 1861 and 1862, he exulted, were proof that God wanted the South to win the war. "Has not Divine Providence," he asked, "laid the greater sufferings upon those who have perpetrated the greater wrong?" Thus it was only fair that Yankees should suffer "the disruption of the Union, the repudiation of the Constitution and the laws, the erection of a military despotism . . . and the crimes and sacrifices of the civil war." Converse was so certain of a speedy Confederate victory that he warned his readers not to forget that God was re-

sponsible for the prowess of their army, for it was "the Lord who giveth . . . victory."³⁵

Converse was convinced that the Almighty wanted the men in gray to triumph over their opponents. Furthermore, he believed that Confederate independence would be as much a blessing to the North as to the South, for it would overthrow the Republican Party "and sink its leaders to the shades of infamy." Also it would crush the "malign fanaticism" of abolitionism "which has corrupted religion extensively in the North." Defeat would force the Yankees to silence their "vaunting spirit of pride and wealth" and teach them to humble themselves "under the mighty hand of God." Therefore, *The Christian Observer* concluded, the defeat of United States forces on the battlefield would promote a renewed interest in religion in the North and might "prove a great blessing to them as well as to us."³⁶

While in the North Converse had disapproved of the division of the Union. In Dixie, however, he insisted that it was "too late for a sane man to think of a restored Union or of reconstructing the Federal government so as to meet the claims of both the North and South. Separation is the inevitable and sure result of th[is] crisis." The moment that the Yankees attempted to coerce and subject the Confederacy to their will was the precise time when the division had been consummated and been "given its permanency." Independence for the South, he added, was a good thing, for it would encourage the industrialization of the region, "exert a humane influence on the African race," and promote prosperity in Dixie. Such a future, Converse mused, was undoubtedly "the destiny which God has assigned to the people of this land." To reunite with the North would be to join a despotism where it was "a crime to advocate pacific measures" and where men were daily being arrested for such trivial offenses as refusing to pray for the welfare of "King Abe."³⁷

In 1861 and during the first half of 1862, most southerners were optimistic about victory, and it was easy for Converse to predict a speedy end to the fighting. By the summer of 1862, however, food shortages, war profiteering, an increase in crime, and military reverses made it apparent that independence was not imminent and that the conflict would continue for some time.³⁸ Predictably, *The Christian Observer* tried to make the best of things and explained that the southern defeats at such battles as Roanoke Island and Fort Donelson were not due to any lack of bravery on the part of the Confederate soldiers or any lack of experience on the part of their military leaders, but were instead a punishment to the southerners because they no longer lowered their heads in prayer to God. By depending solely on their army rather than on the Lord for their salvation, they had sinned and

God was using the military forces of one of "the most wicked nations of the earth to punish the idolatry of His chosen people." Similarly this failing of Confederates was responsible for poor harvests, immorality, and general discontent. If southerners would "humble themselves under His mighty hand, looking unto Him, as the Grand Arbiter of national rights," He would elevate the Confederate States, give them peace, and restore their prosperity.³⁹

Though he constantly insisted that prayer was necessary if the South was to win the war, Converse believed that such devotion to God had to be complemented by activity on the battlefield and on the homefront. It would be best, he thought, if the southerners did not underestimate the tenacity of their enemy. "Stimulated by fanaticism and urged on by sectional hate," he warned, the Yankees would "fight with the desperation of tigers." Nonetheless they could be defeated, and it was essential that they "be met and [be] driven from our borders." He warned that, "whatever the cost, our country must be saved from the anarchy, plunder, pollution, destruction, and infamy which must follow should it be subjugated by the ruthless marauders who are now arraigned against us." Naturally Converse hoped that peace would soon be at hand, but if it was God's will that the war continue, he expected "everyone who inherits a particle of the Spirit of '76" to repel the forces of Lincoln.⁴⁰

Converse had little use for Lincoln, who he believed was a "bloodthirsty barbarian" capable of the most wicked deeds that man could conceive. This, of course, was an extreme view, but even in the North many Democrats, unable to appreciate their president, likened Abraham Lincoln to the devil and called him the "widow-maker" and the "modern Attila."⁴¹ Thus there was considerable criticism of Lincoln both in the United States and the Confederate States when he issued the Emancipation Proclamation. As might be expected, *The Christian Observer* was among his most vociferous critics. The paper considered it fitting that God would choose him to effect "one of the . . . blackest most atrocious crimes which man can perpetrate." Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, it alleged, was "nothing less than appeal to the slave populations of the South to rise in insurrection with the implied promise of the aid of the whole military and naval power of the United States." The infamous document would promote scores of "Nat Turner revolts" and would transform untold numbers of docile blacks into "fiendish savage[s,] infatuated by wickedness, bringing . . . down swift destruction upon their own heads." Even if freed, the Negroes would be unhappy and mistreated. Converse, who made no efforts to conceal his racism, frequently argued that the true friend of the black was not the Yankee abolitionist but rather the southern slaveholder who understood how to educate the Negro:

The highest state of civilization to which they [the slaves] have attained is witnessed among those who are servants in Christian families in the slaveholding States. To sever the bond which holds them under the guardianship and care of their masters is to doom them to penury, idleness, want, and annihilation. And is there any benevolence or humanity in this mode of destruction? If a million of semi-barbarians from Africa were thrown upon our shores to-day, in what way could they be more readily and efficiently provided for and civilized than by separating and scattering them in a thousand families to be trained under the care and authority of masters, just as the slaves are?⁴²

The Emancipation Proclamation served as a catalyst to encourage the spread of antiwar sentiment in the North. There was an increasing number of peace Democrats in the North, who persuaded themselves that the primary purpose of the war was not to restore the Union but rather to crusade against slavery. Converse was delighted to learn of the growth of peace factions in the United States and he enthusiastically predicted that a majority of the Yankees would soon realize "that the division of the country is a FACT already . . . consummated—and there is no hope of undoing it." With apparent glee, *The Christian Observer* reported protests in Philadelphia following the suppression of *The Evening Journal*, a newspaper that had printed an editorial critical of Lincoln; draft riots in New York City; and the election of peace advocates to state and national offices. Such events, the paper hoped, would impress that Yankee "Dictator" Lincoln that his first priority should be to negotiate an immediate end to the war. But, alas, the war continued, and Converse could only express amazement at the "lengths abolition fanaticism and hatred may go in their desperate efforts to accomplish their purposes." Peace would come, he assured his readers, but it was likely to be preceded by "a night of conflict, slaughter, and death."⁴³

Although he professed to see Copperheadism⁴⁴ in the ascendancy throughout the North, Converse's devotion to the southern cause blinded him to antiwar sentiment in the Confederacy. On occasion he printed letters from readers who called for negotiations "to stop the effusion of blood and to terminate the most horrible war that was ever recorded in the annals of the world," but he warned that southerners would not agree—and could not agree—to any peace requiring them to "live as a *subjugated people* to the North or any other power." Thus it was not surprising that *The Christian Observer*, which devoted considerable attention to the New York draft riots of 1863, minimized discontent in Dixie. In the spring of 1863, when bread riots occurred in Richmond, Converse was barely willing to concede that they had taken place. His explanation of the incident was that:

A mob of LOW LIVED women, led on by a few men, consisting of thieves and foreigners, collected on Cary Street and broke into half a dozen shoe,

hat, and tobacco stores, demanding goods at "government prices," and carried off such articles they could lay their hands on. Their object evidently was to plunder—for the sake of gain—not to get bread.⁴⁵

Converse nonchalantly concealed mounting dissatisfaction on the homefront, but it was not so easy for him to ignore the southern military defeats which snowballed after 1862. Predictably, he tried to look on the bright side of things. These reverses, he thought, "may be intended to try our faith in God," and though he deplored the bereavements and privations coming out of such calamities, he was persuaded that Providence would bring "good from evil." Yankee victories were forcing Confederates "to acknowledge as they never did before their dependence on God and to think as they never before thought of their relations to Him as their God and Saviour." What was needed was faith and trust in the Lord, for "when we have been a praying people, our armies have been victorious—and at times when a proud self-reliant spirit prevailed, ignoring our dependence on God, our best planned campaigns have been failures." There would be no peace, he warned, "as long as the name of God is daily profaned, His Sabbaths desecrated, all His laws violated, His Gospel rejected, and His mercy despised by very many of the people throughout the Confederacy."⁴⁶

To the very end of the war *The Christian Observer* insisted that the Confederate States were invincible. Instead of lamenting Lincoln's reelection in 1864, the paper saw it as a good sign—one that would "produce union among all intelligent men at the South." Yankees would not forever sacrifice their lives and money to placate the "coarse, vulgar jester" who, with his "deluded supporters," ruled the United States. Similarly *The Christian Observer* professed to be delighted when a peace conference between Lincoln and Confederate Vice President Alexander Stephens turned out to be a failure.⁴⁷ In the opinion of Converse, the conference proved beyond a doubt that the North had resolved to subvert "every vestige of liberty, every social, political, and religious right which the Constitution of the United States was intended to secure to the several States and to the people." The realization of the true motivation of the Yankees would "be worth more to us than a victory," for it would "unite all hearts and hands in defense of the sacred inheritance bequeathed to us by our fathers."⁴⁸

This, however, was not the case. In April 1865, the guns of war were stilled, and the nation was once again at peace. There is no record of Converse's sentiments as the Yankees invaded Richmond and set fire to the city, for no issues of *The Christian Observer* were printed from March 30 to June 1, 1865. Doubtless he was disgusted to see the cause he had so avidly espoused come to such a degrading end. By June 1865, when it was apparent that the Confederacy was destroyed forever, Converse accepted the inevi-

table and urged his readers to promote the reconciliation of the North and the South. Once again *The Christian Observer* became more of a religious than a political journal.⁴⁹ It was extremely difficult for the seventy-year-old Converse to readjust to the new situation in the South. Issues of his paper appeared irregularly, and for a brief while the journal was published in North Carolina.⁵⁰

Reconstruction most assuredly was a trying time for Converse. Ex-Confederates were disfranchised, black males were made voters and legislators, and southern whites were temporarily denied representation in Congress. Admittedly, modern historians have shown that Reconstruction was not as severe as it could have been,⁵¹ but Converse would have probably disagreed with them. In 1869, he made a momentous decision; that is, he relocated his journal from Richmond, Virginia, to Louisville, Kentucky. This turned out to be a wise move, for in Kentucky, a slave state that had remained in the Union during the Civil War, *The Christian Observer* prospered. Subscriptions reached an all time high, and Converse discovered that he had more "influence than at any previous period in his life as a journalist." On 9 December 1872, the seventy-seven-year-old Converse died. Appropriately his last words were, "I shall not want."⁵²

While he was too old to don the gray in 1861, Converse deserves to be recognized as a Confederate veteran; he wielded the pen rather than the sword. Even though he had been a fervent supporter of the Crittenden Compromise in the winter of 1860-61, his sympathies had always been more pro-southern than pro-northern. The invasion of his Philadelphia printing office on 22 August 1861, had a profound effect on him. In his view, the incident provided positive proof that the North was a despotism intolerant of free speech and of a free press. So disgusted was he with the United States that even before he had an opportunity to defend himself in court, he fled to Richmond to reestablish his newspaper in the more congenial climate of the Confederate States. Once in the South he abandoned any pretense of being a neutral, and he proved to be as passionate a supporter of Dixie as Jefferson Davis. At great personal expense he regularly donated thousands of copies of his paper to the soldiers to boost their morale. Oblivious to the increasing vulnerability of the South, he persuaded himself that God would not allow the Confederacy to be defeated. Converse denounced the Yankees for waging a crusade against slavery, and for him the war became a crusade against despotism, arbitrary centralized government, and abolitionist fanaticism. He constantly criticized his opponents for their intolerance, not realizing that he was equally guilty of the same offense. Never could he concede that his enemies might really hope to promote racial justice; to him they would always be despotic fiends more reprehensible than the worse slaveowners. Himself a native of New

England descended from Puritans, he was convinced that his native region had been taken over by Germans, Irish, Dutch, and French immigrants, "who in their universal scramble to outshine each other have eclipsed or destroyed the noble aspects of the Puritan character as seen of old."⁵³

Converse's mind was closed, and he could not immediately adjust to the defeat of the South. From March to June 1865, he printed no papers not because of the destruction in Richmond, for his office had not been gutted, but rather because it was difficult for him to readjust to the new political situation. Once his paper reappeared he did call for reconciliation and eventually he resumed publication of a vigorous journal. By the time that he died he had again become one of the most celebrated of southern Presbyterian editors.

NOTES

¹Amasa Converse (1795-1872) wrote a brief autobiography that carries his life up to 1861. Part of it has been published in Paul D. Converse, ed., "Autobiography of the Rev. Amasa Converse," *Journal of the Presbyterian Historical Society*, XLIII (1965), 197-218, 254-63. In addition there is a short sketch of Converse in Alfred Nevin, ed., *Encyclopaedia of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1884), p. 155.

²Converse, "Autobiography," p. 204. Nevin, *op. cit.*, p. 155, however, states that Converse was ordained on 5 May 1826.

³In February 1827, Converse had become editor of both the *Family Visitor* and the *Evangelical and Literary Magazine*. Within a few months, the latter of these two suspended publication. Converse, "Autobiography," pp. 205-08.

⁴*Ibid.*; *The Christian Observer*, 5 January 1865.

⁵The paper was briefly called the *Philadelphia Telegraph and Observer*; it became *The Christian Observer* in 1840. Converse, "Autobiography," pp. 211-f.; *The Christian Observer*, 24 January 1861, 5 January 1865; Lewis Vander Velde, *The Presbyterian Churches and the Federal Union* (Cambridge and London, 1932), pp. 150, 370-f.

⁶This does not mean to imply that Converse shunned controversies; his was not a bland paper. After he printed a series of articles critical of the Methodist Episcopal Church, he found himself to be highly unpopular with members of that denomination. See Francis Hodgson, *The Great Iron Wheel Reviewed, or a Defence of the Methodist E. Church Against the Calumnious Assaults of Rev. F. A. Ross and Rev. A. Converse, D.D.* (Philadelphia, 1848), *passim*.

⁷In 1854, Converse was offered \$10,000 for his subscription list and a promise that he would publish no newspaper or journal in the Philadelphia area. After he rejected this offer, his critics established the *Philadelphia American Presbyterian* to compete with *The Christian Observer*. Unsuccessful efforts to buy the paper were again made at a later date. Converse, "Autobiography," pp. 256-58.

⁸Since he did favor such things as colonization and he occasionally called slavery an evil, some southerners wondered if he was secretly an abolitionist. *The Christian Observer*, 5 January, 2 February, 17 May, 5 July, 22 November 1860; 5 January 1865; Ernest Trice Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South* (3 vols., Richmond, 1963-73), I, 344, 381.

⁹*Ibid.*; see also Converse, "Autobiography," pp. 217f, 260.

¹⁰*The Christian Observer*, 5 January, 8 March, 14 June, 20 December 1860; 24 January 1861; Converse, "Autobiography," p. 214. For more on Rabbi Raphael

see Rabbi Bertram Korn, *American Jewry and the Civil War*, Meridian ed. (Cleveland, 1961), pp. 16-20.

¹¹Much evidence exists that blacks were mistreated in the North, even by abolitionists. Perhaps this helps explain why Converse believed that if slavery was an evil, abolition was not the solution. See Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago, 1961), pp. 215-30; Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, I, 381.

¹²*The Christian Observer*, 5 January, 22 November, 13 December 1860; 3 January, 21 February 1861.

¹³*Ibid.*, 8, 15, 22 November 1860; Converse, "Autobiography," p. 261.

¹⁴In brief, Senator John Jordan Crittenden's plan to save the Union provided for 1) the prohibition of slavery in national territory north of the line 36°30', 2) the compensation of slave owners for fugitive slaves not recovered, and 3) the promise that Congress would not interfere with slavery in states where it existed or in the District of Columbia. James G. Randall and David Donald, *The Civil War and Reconstruction* (Boston, 1961), p. 150; Samuel Eliot Morison, Henry Steele Commager, and William E. Leuchtenburg, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 6th ed. (2 vols.; New York, 1969), I, 614.

¹⁵*The Christian Observer*, 15 November, 13 December 1860; 10, 31 January 1861.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 13 December 1860; 24, 31 January 1861.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 24 January 1861.

¹⁸Francis Bartlett Converse succeeded his father as editor of the paper and held that position until 1907.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 3, 24, 31 January, 28 March, 11, 18 April 1861.

²⁰Converse, "Autobiography," pp. 261f.

²¹*The Christian Observer*, 25 April, 1 August 1861.

²²*Ibid.*, 4 July, 22 August 1861.

²³Converse, "Autobiography," p. 263. For other evidence of bands of patriots threatening alleged Confederate sympathizers see *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 16 April 1861; *Philadelphia Evening Bulletin*, 16 April, 7 May 1861.

²⁴*The Christian Observer*, 2 May, 20 June, 8 August 1861; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 August 1861.

²⁵*The Christian Observer*, 30 May, 27 June, 11, 18 July, 8, 22 August 1861.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 25 July 1861.

²⁷*Ibid.*, 11, 18 July, 1 August 1861.

²⁸*Ibid.*, 22 August 1861.

²⁹Converse's arrest was not unique or remarkable. David Donald estimates that "over three hundred Northern newspapers were suppressed, for varying periods, because they opposed the administration's policies or favored stopping the war." David Donald, "Died of Democracy," in Donald, ed. *Why the North Won the Civil War*, Collier ed. (New York, 1962), p. 87. For more specifics on Converse's imprisonment see *The Christian Observer*, 19 September 1861; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 August 1861; *The New York Day Book*, 26 August 1861.

³⁰*Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 August 1861; *Wilkes-Barre Luzerne Union*, 6 November 1861.

³¹*The Christian Observer* (Philadelphia ed.), 24 October 1861; *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 10 October 1861.

³²*The Christian Observer* (Philadelphia ed.), 24 October 1861; *The Christian Observer* (Richmond ed.), 21 November 1861; Suzanne Colton Wilson, comp., *Down South* (Flagstaff, Arizona, 1960), p. 177.

³³*The Christian Observer*, 19 September 1861. Hereafter all citations refer to the Richmond edition of this paper.

³⁴*Ibid.*, 19 December 1861, 10 April, 8 May 1862.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 28 November 1861.

³⁶Soldiers had ample opportunity to read Converse's editorials since each week he distributed up to 3000 complimentary copies of his paper to the men in

gray. *Ibid.*, 8 May, 10 April 1862; T. Watson Street, *The Story of Southern Presbyterians* (Richmond, 1960), p. 70.

³⁷*Ibid.*, 20 February, 10, 17 April, 22 October, 6 November 1862. For persuasive arguments that the Lincoln administration was overly prone to arrest war critics and brand them as traitors, see Frank Klement, *The Copperheads in the Middle West* (Chicago, 1960), *passim*.

³⁸Conditions behind the lines in the Confederacy are well treated in Bell Irvin Wiley, *The Plain People of the Confederacy* (Baton Rouge, 1944), 36-9, and in Wiley, *The Road to Appomattox* (Memphis, 1956), pp. 43-75.

³⁹*The Christian Observer*, 9 January, 13 March, 8, 22 May 1862.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 20 February, 13 March, 15 May 1862.

⁴¹See, for example, Ray Abrams, "The *Jeffersonian*: Copperhead Newspaper," *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, XLVIII (1933), 260-83; William Russ, "Franklin Weirick: 'Copperhead' of Central Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History*, V (1938), 245-56.

⁴²*The Christian Observer*, 9 October, 11 December 1862, 8 January 1863.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 12, 19 February, 23 July, 6 August 1863.

⁴⁴*Copperhead* was a term applied to the peace faction of the Democratic Party. The exact origin of the word is unclear. Republicans alleged that antiwar Democrats were like the copperhead snake which strikes at its victim without warning; that is, they were traitors unnecessarily criticizing the war effort and seeking a dishonorable solution to the conflict. Peace Democrats adopted the term and fashioned "copperhead" buttons and badges from one cent pieces which then featured the Goddess of Liberty. This, they insisted, symbolized their devotion to civil liberties and their opposition to Lincoln's unconstitutional handling of the war. *Indianapolis Journal*, 25 December 1860; Clearfield (Pa.) *Raftman's Journal*, 29 April 1863.

⁴⁵*The Christian Observer*, 16 October 1862, 9 April, 6 August 1863. The Bread Riots were a more serious sign of discontent than Converse was willing to admit. See Wiley, *Plain People*, p. 49; Randall and Donald, *Civil War*, pp. 518f.

⁴⁶*The Christian Observer*, 9 July 1863, 11 August, 6 October 1864, 16 February 1865.

⁴⁷At Hampton Roads, Virginia, Alexander Hamilton Stephens met with Abraham Lincoln on 3 February 1865, to discuss a peaceable solution to the war. Lincoln insisted that peace could come only with reunion, southern acceptance of emancipation, and the disbanding of the Confederate Army. These conditions were not acceptable to the South, and the conference adjourned without making any progress at ending the conflict. Randall and Donald, *Civil War*, p. 524.

⁴⁸*The Christian Observer*, 7 November 1864, 16 February 1865.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 1, 22 June 1865.

⁵⁰Converse had lost a large sum of money during the war because of inflation, the high cost of paper, and the expense of donating thousands of copies of his paper each week to the soldiers. His financial problems doubtless contributed to the irregular publication of *The Christian Observer*. Street, *Southern Presbyterians*, p. 70; Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, II, 439.

⁵¹For evidence that Reconstruction was not as harsh as it might have been see John Hope Franklin, *Reconstruction: After the Civil War* (Chicago, 1961), *passim*; Kenneth Stampp, *The Era of Reconstruction* (New York, 1965), *passim*; Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Black Power, USA: The Human Side of Reconstruction*, Penguin ed. (Baltimore, 1969), *passim*.

⁵²Converse was succeeded as editor by two of his sons, Francis Bartlett (see note 18), and James Booth. The second of these left the paper in 1879; F. Bartlett Converse was still editor at the time of his death on 29 September 1907. Thompson, *Presbyterians in the South*, II, 439f.; Nevin, *Encyclopaedia of the Presbyterian Church*, p. 155.

⁵³*The Christian Observer*, 30 October 1862, 20 October 1864.