

Grant R. Brodrecht. *Our Country: Northern Evangelicals and the Union during the Civil War Era.* New York: Fordham University Press, 2018. 278 pp. \$40.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-8232-7991-3.

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In his book *Our Country: Northern Evangelicals and the Union during the Civil War Era*, Grant Brodrecht argues that during the Civil War era, Northern evangelicals were primarily focused on preserving the Union as a Christian nation. He challenges existing scholarship that emphasizes the Christian origins of abolition and instead posits that evangelical Christians in the North focused on preserving and building the United States as a Christian nation, often ignoring, subordinating, and even excluding slaves and African Americans from their abstract definition of the American nation. Brodrecht's research highlights the deep roots of racially charged nationalism, the use of political and military force to assert white Protestant values over dissenting voices, and the willingness of evangelicals and their ecclesiastical institutions and leaders to prioritize common ground with white Southerners over the needs and rights of subjugated people, including African Americans and Native Americans.

Brodrecht's scholarship highlights the extent to which Northern Methodist, Presbyterian, and Congregationalists conflated spiritual and political matters and viewed ecclesiastical and political institutions as fundamentally intertwined. In particular, his careful examination of clergy close to presidents Abraham Lincoln, Andrew Johnson, and Ulysses Grant substantiates his argument that

these politicians were influenced by evangelical Americans directly and were not merely borrowing popular rhetoric to broaden their appeal. However, the limited discussion of other evangelical denominations such as Baptists, Lutherans, Disciples of Christ, and low-church Episcopalians together with the inclusion of only a few African American evangelicals and their denominations make it difficult to generalize Brodrecht's conclusions. In particular, his assertion that Northern evangelicals were primarily found in denominations of British origin and were wedded to a covenantal understanding of Christian service may be as concerning as his focus on white Christians. Were Northern evangelicals as a whole less committed to abolitionism and the rights of African Americans and more concerned with preserving a homogenized Christian nation because they were evangelical? Or was this an artifact of their white race, their British heritage, their Northern locale, their distance from slavery, or their socioeconomic privilege?

The book's chapters follow a chronological progression, matching an evolving evangelical mind-set with the changing political and military scenes. The first chapter covers the first three years of the Civil War (1861-63), emphasizing the covenantal obligation (white) Northern evangelicals held to protect the existence of the United

States as a Protestant republic. If the United States was a chosen nation whose destiny was in the hands of Providence, they believed proper humility, repentance, and gratitude were necessary to win God's favor. Because Lincoln himself acknowledged in 1861 his hope that "I shall be an humble instrument in the hands of the Almighty and of this, his almost chosen people," (white) Northern evangelicals honored Lincoln as a Christ-like savior to redeem the nation from the plague of secession and the threat of disunion (p. 23).

The second chapter focuses on the year 1864, a year, Brodrecht argues, in which (white) Northern evangelicals downplayed the factors of slavery and emancipation in discussion about the 1864 presidential election and the ongoing Civil War. Evangelical support for Lincoln's reelection embraced Lincoln's commitment to the Union in contrast to the peace agenda of the Democrats and John Frémont's insistence on the Ironclad Oath. This hyper-focus on reunion with their Southern brethren meant that even after the Emancipation Proclamation (1863), (white) Northern evangelicals remained convinced that most (white) Southerners were deceived by domineering proslavery men and that reunion and reconciliation would be straightforward. Such an argument challenges the conventional narrative that the fracture between white Christians and African American Christians occurred as a result of competing interests during Reconstruction. Rather, Brodrecht suggests that the (white) Northern evangelical vision of nation always imagined the United States as a homogeneous (white) Christian nation, and even when (white) Northern evangelicals supported emancipation, they primarily did so because ending slavery was a vehicle to preserve the Union.

The third and fourth chapters explore the year 1865, with Lincoln's assassination as a point of inflection. Under Lincoln's leadership, 1865 seemingly promised an open and swift national reconciliation. Importantly, Brodrecht reminds the reader that the (white) Northern evangelical view

of the United States was always exclusionary. They viewed secessionists as un-American and imagined an easy reconciliation with deluded or brainwashed white Southerners who would ultimately be drawn back by their "common history, language, culture, and religion" (p. 83). In this imagined version of the postbellum nation, African Americans and freedpersons merely played a passive, secondary, or even invisible role. Following Lincoln's death in 1865, these (white) Northern evangelicals largely supported Johnson with his openness to rapid reconciliation and widespread use of the presidential pardon.

In the fifth chapter, Brodrecht argues that (white) Northern evangelicals broke with Johnson over his conflict with Congress and not because of his lenient Reconstruction policies. Johnson's unwillingness to compromise with Congress and his propensity to veto Congressional bills gradually convinced (white) Northern evangelicals that Johnson's leadership threatened the integrity of the country. If Johnson's leadership bred conflict rather than reunion, he had betrayed their evangelical purpose. Grant's candidacy in 1868 represented to these evangelicals a hope to rescue the Union from certain destruction, and his victorious leadership in the war suggested to them a capacity to heal the growing rifts within the nation.

The sixth chapter covers Grant's presidency (1869-77), an era of "the great Protestant republic," as Brodrecht calls it (p. 141). Having supported Grant's bid for office, (white) Northern evangelicals hoped that Reconstruction would create a unified nation that eliminated dissent and plurality. Brodrecht writes that this mind-set of (white) Northern evangelicals "implied that [ex-slaves] needed to cease being culturally distinct, irrespective of two centuries of bondage that had contributed to the creation of a unique African-American culture; Anglo-American Protestant culture must subsume African Americans" (p. 148). Furthermore, Grant's promotion of Native American assimilation and his open criticism of Catholic op-

position to public education signaled to (white) Northern evangelicals his commitment to a homogenized Protestant nation.

The concluding chapter suggests that (white) Northern evangelicals found Reconstruction incomplete and unsatisfactory but not because of its failure to secure rights and equality for freedpersons. Rather, their dream of national Christian unity, their focus during both the Civil War and Reconstruction, remained unrealized. Eulogies following President (and former minister) James Garfield's assassination in 1881 emphasized the disruption to Christian unity caused by the ongoing sectional tension and distrust. Secularization and theological modernization further threatened the already shaky Christian republic, and, over time, (white) evangelicals embraced efforts such as Christian imperialism and Christian opposition to communism as means to maintain political relevance and to establish a unified platform by which to advance efforts to preserve the image of a Christian nation. These efforts notably prioritized the interests and image of white Anglo-Saxon Protestants, excluding African Americans and immigrants while perpetuating a narrative of American history centered on a covenantal obligation to be an exceptional Christian nation.

While Brodrecht's text may be narrower in its subject than it admits, his scholarship challenges conventional interpretations of Northern attitudes during and after the Civil War, interpretations which emphasize the game-changing strategy of emancipation and the demand for radical change after the war. If a measurable amount of Northern ideological language placed the Union ahead of emancipation and the needs of enslaved and freed persons during and after the war, which Brodrecht's evidence supports, then perhaps the failure of Reconstruction had deeper roots than Lincoln's assassination, Johnson's pride or incompetence, the in-fighting of Reconstruction officials, and the paramilitary violence of white Southerners. In that case, white Northerners bear some re-

sponsibility for the limited rights and justice granted to freedpersons and some burden for contemporary problems of inequality, injustice, and exclusion. As Brodrecht puts it, "When it comes to [white] northern evangelicals and the Civil War era, the irony remains—[...] in subsuming the ex-slaves to their vision for Christian America, northern evangelicals contributed to a Reconstruction that failed to ensure the ex-slaves' full freedom and equality as Americans" (p. 179).

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