

Heaping coals of fire on the enemy's head

The political uses of Christian benevolence in the Civil War

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Shortly after the Battle of Gettysburg, a young Philadelphia minister called John Scott sat with a group of wounded Confederates. He was trying to get them to pray for their immortal souls: they were trying to convince him to get them some tobacco from the hospital stores. Scott struck a bargain. 'Well, if you all read the 14th Chapter of John's Gospel', he told them, 'tomorrow I will bring you the tobacco faithfully.' Both parties kept their side of the bargain, and when Scott next visited the Rebel patients, he was delighted to find 'they had read the New Testament every day and had made up their minds to serve the Lord with all their hearts, the Lord being their helper'. Scott recorded the rest of their conversation in a handwritten report reflecting on his work at Gettysburg. 'I asked them if they was not tired with the service of so unholy a war,' he wrote. 'They all answered in the affirmative. I then asked them if they would not be glad that this unholy war was brought to a close and us all to become one people again, they said yes.'¹

John Scott was a delegate of the United States Christian Commission, an evangelical relief organization set up by northern clergy and laymen to minister to Union troops during the American Civil War. Over the course of a period of around two weeks in September 1863, Scott worked among the wounded still recuperating in the hastily assembled hospitals outside the Pennsylvania town. In the exit report submitted at the end of his service, he estimated that he had personally spoken with upwards of one hundred men, led several prayer meetings, delivered three sermons and liberally distributed hymn books, Bibles and religious tracts to the men he encountered. His meeting with the wounded Confederates was only one small part of his service, yet he wrote at length and with pride about his successful use of prayer, compassion and mercy to erode his impromptu congregation's dedication to the Confederate cause. He proposed a motion to them: 'that we all come back again and be one people as we was before.' This entreaty, Scott recalled, was met with a chorus of emphatic 'ayes'.

Scott's apparently sincere belief in this mass repentance strikes the modern reader as naïve: he showed no awareness that his (literally captive) audience's acquiescence might

have been driven more by their quest for tobacco than by a genuine rejection of the Confederacy. Yet Scott's report offers more than an insight into the author's optimism. It – and the wider work of the Christian Commission – reveals much about the nature of philanthropic activity during the American Civil War, and the ideological tensions and practical challenges faced by philanthropic actors. The Civil War created new and often unanticipated needs, and (especially in the North, where there already existed a robust and well-networked charitable tradition) catalysed what George Frederickson called an 'organised response to suffering'.² Philanthropic organizations emerged – or adapted – in an attempt to meet these needs, on both the home and battlefronts.³ These organizations attempted to harness the conflict to further their own agendas, writing political and – as we will see – religious narratives onto the war and positioning their actions and contributions as central to the successful execution of these visions.

The United States Christian Commission was a case in point. One of several large, non-governmental bodies established by northern civilians during the sectional conflict with the aim of aiding the Union war effort, the Christian Commission (USCC), was established in late 1861 by a group of white evangelical Protestants, most of whom had some ties to the Young Men's Christian Associations. YMCA branches had emerged in major American cities in the decade before the Civil War, their proponents motivated by concern for the moral health of newly arrived urban migrants who, shorn of the guidance of familial networks, were considered susceptible to temptation and vice.⁴ The roots of the USCC went back further than the 1850s, however. The organization, in both its personnel and its methods, built on established antebellum patterns of 'philanthropy', a word proponents and critics used interchangeably with 'benevolence' and 'charity' to describe a staggering range of activities aimed at improving and ultimately perfecting the world.⁵ Largely undertaken by middle-class volunteers alarmed at how urbanization, immigration and industrialization were apparently creating and compounding poverty and lawlessness, philanthropic work became increasingly organized and bureaucratized in the northern states before the Civil War.⁶ Philanthropic activities ran the gamut from conservative, paternalistic attempts at imposing a moral vision based on sobriety, industry and piety, to advocating the radical dismantling and reinvention of existing social structures. Yet whether encouraging a stricter observance of the Sabbath, distributing Bibles, establishing utopian communities or campaigning against prostitution, intemperance or slavery, what united Americans engaged in 'philanthropy' before the Civil War was the ardent belief, as Wendy Gamber puts it, that 'a better world was not only possible but also inevitable'.⁷ Much of this philanthropic activity drew upon the religious enthusiasm of the Second Great Awakening, and in particular the urgent millennialism of the flourishing evangelical churches, which posited that human beings must play an active role in preparing the way for Christ's Second Coming.

The Protestant evangelicals associated with the Christian Commission drew on this same 'mixture of anxiety and hope' in their work.⁸ They saw the Civil War as an unparalleled opportunity to convert the entire Union army to Christianity, and to begin a snowball effect that would transform and redeem the world, ridding the earth of sin and bringing about the Second Coming of Christ. As the Commission president, dry goods merchant George Hay Stuart – a leading light of the Sunday School movement

before the war – claimed: ‘the harvest is ripe as well as great, and the sickle should be vigorously thrust in with the least possible delay.’⁹ Fuelled by this confidence and energy, the USCC head office in Philadelphia sent a total of approximately 5,000 volunteer workers – known as delegates – to the Union armies for six weeks at a time to minister to the spiritual and bodily needs of Union soldiers and to encourage men in their struggle towards conversion. These delegates (who were, with only a handful of exceptions, men) were primarily evangelical clergymen, theological students and lay preachers associated with northern congregations. Reflecting the roots of the organization in the pre-war YMCAs, most were compelled to volunteer their services by their concerns over the moral health of young men removed from the spiritual guidance of their families and thrust into the unfamiliar environment of the army camp, a place associated not only with physical danger but with sinful temptations such as profanity, gambling and intemperance.

The Christian Commission’s work on and near the battlefield included a range of spiritual and bodily ministries designed not only to promote the comfort and well-being of Union soldiers but also to maintain moral standards in the armies, and to urge soldiers to consider the state of their souls, to reject the vicious temptations of the army camp, to repent of their sins, and to turn to Christ. The varied ministries performed by Christian Commission delegates on the battlefield included disseminating Bibles, Testaments, religious tracts, hymn books and religious newspapers, organizing prayer circles and Bible reading groups, holding religious services, praying with the ill, injured, or dying, presiding over funeral services, distributing food, drink and clothing in hospitals, managing portable libraries of appropriate religious and moral literature, and writing letters on behalf of the incapacitated. There was an overtly political motive to this religious philanthropy. The members of the commission were politically aligned with the Republican Party and the Union cause; few were ardent abolitionists in the Garrisonian mould, but most evinced a robust opposition to slavery, and moreover were firm in their belief that the Union was a political entity ordained by God and crucial to the salvation of the world. They subscribed to the ‘redeemer nation’ vision of America, which held that the United States and its social and political systems represented the pinnacle of human endeavour, and would eventually, by example and strenuous evangelizing, transform the rest of the world into a utopia ready and worthy to welcome Christ.¹⁰ Therefore, ensuring that the northern armies emerged victorious from the struggle to salvage the American experiment was crucial, and the Commission believed they had an important role to play in bringing that victory about. For USCC delegates, the remaking of Union bodies symbolized and hastened the renewal and reparation of the nation and the Christian values it was assumed to embody. In ministering visibly and relentlessly to northern troops, they cast the federal soldier as the saviour, not only of the American Union but also of the divine mission bestowed upon the United States by the Almighty: to convert the entire world to evangelical Christianity and catalyse the millennium. The philanthropic remit of the USCC, therefore, hinged upon the conflation of piety and patriotism. One Executive Committee member loftily described the USCC as ‘one of the grandest special works ever opened to Christian patriots.’¹¹

Casting ministry among Union soldiers as both spiritually and politically righteous was relatively straightforward. However, the chaos of war frequently brought Commission delegates into contact with enemy soldiers. Whether in hospitals, prison stockades, transport depots or on the battlefield in the aftermath of combat, it was near impossible for delegates to avoid Confederate personnel, whom they invariably found in a state of vulnerability and need. These unexpected and unregulated encounters – and the ways in which they strained the fusion of piety and patriotism embedded in the USCC's mission – are the subject of this chapter. When faced with Confederates in need, Commission leaders found that their religious and political agendas did not always neatly align, and they confronted pressing questions from sceptical critics and irate donors about the purpose and worth of their philanthropic endeavours. How much autonomy ought philanthropic organization be granted in their operations? How was philanthropic labour at the coal face – especially when performed by volunteers – monitored and regulated? Most importantly, who was a worthy recipient of aid? The heightened political polarization of the wartime scenario lent questions surrounding the purpose of organizations like the Christian Commission an added piquancy. This was a time when new philanthropic models – increasingly bureaucratic, professional and secularized – were emerging in competition.¹² Rival organizations, most notably the United States Sanitary Commission, dismissed the USCC's work as sentimental and amateurish. Within this competitive philanthropic landscape, encounters between Christian Commission delegates and Confederate soldiers raised difficult questions for the delegates. On the one hand, making the choice to extend their aid to Rebel troops was consistent with Christian teaching on compassion and mercy. On the other hand, these acts of mercy could just as easily be interpreted as overt betrayals of the Union war effort. This prompted agonizing at all levels of the USCC's operation. Executive Committee members, fighting to demonstrate that the USCC's brand of benevolent voluntarism still had a role to play in improving American society, struggled to neutralize scandalous rumours that called the Commission's loyalty to the Union into question. At the same time, ordinary delegates brought to their work their own interpretations of benevolent duty and devised a scriptural justification that framed their work with Confederates as both pious and patriotic. The work of the Christian Commission – and in particular its contentious work among Confederate soldiers – illustrated that philanthropy, regardless of its intentions, can never be apolitical.

The question of how to treat enemy combatants was not merely one for individual delegates to weigh against their consciences. Rather, this question was part of a larger public debate about the meaning and limits of loyalty in the Civil War. Treason (theoretically a capital offence) became a malleable vocabulary employed inconsistently and zealously by people from all walks of life to condemn and police the supposedly disloyal behaviour – and even thoughts and words – of others.¹³ As William Blair explains, what constituted treasonous action was unclear, and 'routine activities considered personal in peacetime became potentially dangerous in a civil war'.¹⁴ Arguably, religious ministers were held to even higher standards than others, given their public status and role as community spokespeople. The behaviour and political sympathies of northern ministers, Sean Scott has recently noted, was closely monitored by their congregations and the wider public, and instances of apparent

disloyalty were punished with ostracization, removal from the pulpit or even arrest.¹⁵ That is to say, Christian Commission delegates had to tread carefully. Within the heightened spiciness of wartime public discourse, the Christian Commission feared that acts of personal ministry to individual Rebel soldiers might be interpreted as expressions of disloyalty. The USCC had been founded to further the military and spiritual victory of the United States and cast the secession of the Confederate states as not only a rebellious act but also an overtly sinful one that rejected God's plan for the nation, and jeopardized the project of perfecting the world. Ministering to the perpetrators of this 'wicked' rebellion could serve to undermine the Union war effort, and cast serious doubt upon the dedication of the Commission and its workers to the Republican project.

And yet delegates were given very little guidance on how they should deal with the enemy. Applicants were asked to provide a letter of reference attesting to their good Christian character, and their membership of an evangelical congregation. They were expected to be fit, healthy men who would obey without question the instructions of Commission superiors. Even more importantly, given the notorious impatience certain generals displayed towards meddling, do-gooding non-combatants on the battlefield, they were expected to respect the army chain of command, and, in the paper commission issued to each delegate upon commencement of their service, 'in general strictly to observe all Army and Navy regulations, and abstain from casting reflections upon the authorities, military, medical, and clerical'.¹⁶ Given the potentially disastrous reputational consequences of offering aid to Confederate troops (not to mention the Executive Committee's fondness for specific and copious instructions), it is surprising that delegates were not issued with clearer guidance regarding their behaviour towards the enemy. Delegates' loyalty to the Union cause was largely taken for granted (in some cases, this faith was misplaced, as we will see later), and at no point were delegates explicitly forbidden from ministering to Confederate troops. Rather, the issue was entrusted to their best personal judgement. Delegates were obliquely charged with doing 'whatever the case might demand, or Christian sympathy might devise'.¹⁷

These vague directions are all the more surprising considering the Commission's fears that their work might be misconstrued or misappropriated for ungodly ends were not without foundation. On several occasions, as frantic letters between Executive Committee members revealed, delegates were suspected of harbouring Rebel sympathies, and some were accused of applying for a commission as a pretext for espionage. This was a legitimate concern. The respect, and the assumption of righteousness, afforded to men of the cloth, meant that ministerial credentials provided an ideal smokescreen for would-be spies: the Confederate scout and Methodist preacher Thomas Conrad, for instance, notoriously used his position to deflect suspicion.¹⁸ The USCC itself fell foul of southern spies masquerading as delegates and taking advantage of the relative immunity this identity provided. On one occasion, Confederate sympathizers marked their wagon – assumed to be carrying illegal goods or stolen information – with the initials 'USCC' to bamboozle Union forces, and the Commission concluded regretfully that 'the name of the Commission was frequently counterfeited by those who had no sympathy with our Government'.¹⁹ Some delegates actively sought out Confederate troops for ministry and aid at the expense of Union

men. William Schaeffer, labouring at a hospital in Frederick, Maryland, reported one of his colleagues to the USCC head office, recommending that the man be dismissed and complaining that the man 'wears the [Christian Commission] Pin and gives *all* his attention to the Rebels . . . our men feel this very tenderly, they are very sensitive on that point'.²⁰ Summarily dismissing another offender, Commission president George Stuart wrote angrily, 'under no circumstances are ministrations to be at a sacrifice to our own brave Union soldiers. We commission none but loyal delegates.'²¹

In addition to these individual rogue delegates, the Commission found itself embroiled in a string of scandals that demonstrated just how damaging and costly accusations of disloyalty, whether founded or not, could be. The response to these incidents illustrated the potency and bitterness of public discourse surrounding treason; it also proved that philanthropic actors found themselves increasingly held to account, with their methods, aims, and recipients monitored and policed by a public ever more sceptical of the motives of self-appointed administrators of benevolence. Notably, the scandals in question occurred in spring 1865, when Union victory was secure, and the question of suitable recrimination and punishment for the defeated South was taking on a new urgency. As northerners debated the terms of surrender and the proportionality of prosecuting Confederate politicians and military leaders for treason, the interactions of northern aid workers with enemy personnel received greater public scrutiny and were subject to stronger censure when found wanting or suspicious.

Hamstrung by Grant's ten-month siege of Petersburg, Richmond finally fell on 3 April 1865, precipitating a mass military and civilian evacuation from the beleaguered Confederate capital, and leaving those too poor or weak to flee with little recourse to aid. Fires set by the retreating Confederate forces devastated large portions of the city, and crime, food shortages and inflation reached extreme levels among both impoverished whites and newly emancipated African Americans.²² The Christian Commission immediately sent delegates to Richmond to minister to Grant's armies now billeted in the city, and to the remaining Confederate troops (many of them convalescing in Richmond's huge Chimborazo hospital). Soon, these delegates were engaged in alleviating the civilian crisis and smoothing the transition to peacetime, demonstrating compassion across sectional lines. Initially, delegates in Richmond dealt with individual cases, like Mary Bell, a Confederate widow granted a railroad pass to safety in Memphis by Joseph Albree.²³ However, with the plight of civilians showing little sign of abating, and with destitute citizens flocking to makeshift USCC stations in search of food and clothing for their families, the delegates in Richmond, led by two field agents from Massachusetts, Edward Williams and Samuel Fitz, set about distributing supplies to women and children in a more organized fashion.²⁴ 'During these eventful days', Williams remembered, 'the Commission was ready with willing hands and abundant stores, to comfort and relieve the suffering.'²⁵ The USCC set up depots distributing food to stranded and impoverished civilians, and delegates worked closely with local ministers to identify families in dire need, visiting individual houses and devising a ticket system to ensure basic foodstuffs like flour were distributed as fairly as possible.²⁶ A defunct soup kitchen was taken over and reopened under USCC management.²⁷ 'It is wonderful how those poor starving women + hungry little children

instinctively come to the Christian Commission for help,' Robert Patterson wrote to a colleague a week into the work, reporting that his team had swiftly exhausted the stores on hand.²⁸

But while the work in Richmond was well organized and apparently appreciated by recipients – 'there were multitudes who appreciated most thoroughly our entire mission,' Samuel Fitz reflected – it was not without its critics.²⁹ In May 1865, reports in the *Chicago Tribune*, the leading Republican daily in Illinois, accused the USCC of diverting funds intended for Union soldiers to feed Rebels.³⁰ While it was conceded that women and children in need were indeed entitled to Christian aid, one *Tribune* writer complained that 'no able-bodied Rebel should be supported from any eleemosynary fund'.³¹ Certainly, the work at Richmond did not only benefit non-combatants. The collapse of the Confederacy in the spring of 1865 meant that in the weeks following the surrender soldiers were overwhelmingly left to their own devices to cope with the psychological and material burdens of defeat.³² Faced with thousands of wounded Rebels recuperating in the hospitals around Richmond, or surrendered troops trying to reach home, delegates provided food and clothing, reading and writing material and a place of shelter for Confederate soldiers waiting to travel back to their home states.³³ They also organized regular prayer meetings for all military personnel – federal or Confederate – passing through the city. These activities fed critics' claims that 'influential' or 'unrepentant' Rebels had benefited from funds contributed by loyal northerners. The *Tribune*, incensed by this prospect, condemned the white population of Richmond as 'a haughty, insolent tribe . . . who cannot understand how they are under any obligations to anybody for the food or raiment donated to them'.³⁴ Not only did the *Tribune* call the Commission's competence into question, ridiculing the USCC's plan to 'buy the allegiance of these Rebels' as 'simple-minded but transparent folly', but the newspaper also called the loyalty and integrity of the workers involved into question.³⁵

Attacks on the Commission's actions warned that well-meaning donors would be tarnished by their association with the Commission, and admonished the Commission for abusing their donors' trust by diverting funds and re-allocating resources that had initially been donated by patriotic northerners wanting to support the Union cause. Commission secretary Lemuel Moss, upon hearing of the rumours circulating in the *Tribune*, was anxious to refute these accusations and to clarify the Commission's stance on ministering to Confederates (whether civilians or soldiers). 'What was done by us did not intrench either upon our proper work or upon the funds contributed for it,' he wrote to his colleague Robert Patterson. 'We did not feed influential or unrepentant Rebels, but the starving citizens of a desolate and conquered city'.³⁶ Patterson himself wrote to the *Tribune* to deny the claims. Stressing that aid had been given only to those in direst need, Patterson tried to reassure readers in Chicago and beyond that, the USCC had done 'just what any humane person would have done'.³⁷ The scandal, and the Commission's attempts to neutralize this negative publicity, demonstrate that northerners disagreed – often vehemently – over what constituted acceptable philanthropic activity, and who was a worthy beneficiary of this philanthropy.

At the same time, another kerfuffle in Richmond hammered home how damaging suspicions of disloyalty could be to an organization's reputation. Barely a fortnight

after the Confederate surrender, six delegates who had been working in Richmond paid an impromptu visit to pay their respects to Robert E. Lee, general-in-chief of the defeated Confederate armies, at his home near the fallen Rebel capital. The meeting was apparently short but cordial, with Lee praising the work of charitable organizations such as the Christian Commission. When news of this meeting reached the northern press, the fallout was swift and damaging. While Lee's reputation as the embodiment of Old South chivalry and as a Christian man of honour forced by his conscience to bear arms against his country persisted for many northerners after Appomattox, others were not so forgiving. Republican and abolitionist newspapers gladly condemned Lee as a traitor and a hypocrite and were happy to tar the Christian Commission delegates who visited him with the same brush.³⁸ One Boston newspaper denounced the incident as 'one of the most shameful pieces of flunkeyism' and asked indignantly, 'didn't these men have a particle of shame in their natures, or are they anxious to once more hear the crack of the slave-holder's whip all over the country, as well as in Congress?'³⁹ Another scathing editorial read: 'if they truly represent the Christian Commission, then the Christian Commission does *not* truly represent the loyal North, which sent that Commission into the field, and hitherto has supported it by generous contributions.'⁴⁰ The *NY Independent* built on this accusation that public trust and funds had been abused: 'Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been poured into its treasury in aid of this work, and now the agents paid from that treasury forsake the hospital, abandon the bedside of the dying Union soldiers in Richmond, to pay a visit of "respect" to Robert E. Lee.'⁴¹

The Executive Committee was frantic at the wave of criticism directed their way. Lemuel Moss, mortified to hear that one of his own congregation had been among the wayward group, wrote to Edward Williams, the field agent in charge of operations in Richmond, 'it has occasioned the greatest scandal throughout the country + the severest censure. Scarcely a paper, secular or religious, has not noticed + condemned it in unmeasured terms.'⁴² Williams, Moss and other high-ranking members of the Commission soon began devising schemes to, as one member said, 'save a miserable scandal from doing us harm'.⁴³ Much was at stake. Emotions were at a fever pitch as the war ended, and popular perceptions that the terms of surrender had been too lenient, rumours of the suffering endured by Union prisoners of war at Confederate hands and the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, all served to fuel northern anger.⁴⁴ In a bid to prevent this anger being funnelled towards the USCC, the guilty delegates were swiftly and publicly dismissed from the Commission's service, and the president of the Commission, George Stuart, hastily sent a strongly worded denunciation of those involved to the influential editor of the *New York Herald*, James Gordon Bennett, distancing the Commission from the delegates' errant actions and accusing them of 'an utter misapprehension of the work for which [they were] sent to the army'.⁴⁵ While it was clear the delegates had no ulterior motive in visiting Lee, the fallout of even this isolated and fairly innocuous incident was enough to call the loyalty of the entire Commission into question in the eyes of the northern press.

The controversies surrounding the USCC's presence in Richmond demonstrate that the northern public – and the secular and religious press alike – took a keen interest in the affairs of large charitable endeavours like the Christian Commission. Philanthropic

activity undertaken in the name of, and funded by, the Union citizenry was scrutinized, critiqued and – wherever a whiff of treason or disloyalty could be detected – publicly and scathingly held to account. Evidently, displaying compassion towards the enemy was a dangerous game for northern charity workers. But, having been instructed to act according to ‘God and their own consciences’, Christian Commission delegates did not ignore the Confederate soldiers they encountered. Many of them were simply unable or unwilling to turn away from men in need, regardless of their political and sectional affiliations.⁴⁶ Walter Carter, a delegate from Wisconsin, found his heartstrings tugged by the wretched sight of hundreds of wounded men, ‘loyal and Rebel, white and black’, strewn across the lawn of a formerly grand mansion near Aiken’s Landing, Virginia, in September 1864. In Carter’s view, what united them was not political or denominational allegiance, but their shared ‘moans of agony and cries of help.’⁴⁷ Another delegate at Point Lookout, Maryland, similarly stressed the universality of his ministry and his commitment to aiding anyone in need: ‘We preached in the chapel, we preached in the hospital, and we preached in the prison. We preached to our own men and we preached to the Rebels, and wherever we went the dullest eyes brightened and welcomed our coming.’⁴⁸

While in the above-mentioned examples delegates flattened their work with Confederates into a narrative of indiscriminate compassion that did not discern between Confederate and Union, some delegates reported going out of their way to minister explicitly to Confederates, and to treat them kindly. While working at Fairfax Courthouse, Edward Williams – who, as we have seen, would learn just how toxic interactions with the enemy could become – took time away from his work among Union wounded to take refreshments to a group of Rebels. When he distributed a cup of coffee to an enemy colonel, the man expressed surprise, saying, ‘Well, this beats me. We don’t treat our prisoners so.’⁴⁹ At Phillipsburg, in a scene of ‘singular solemnity’, A. M. Palmer baptized a North Carolinian man who was close to death.⁵⁰ Another delegate, encountering a South Carolinian prisoner, recalled how he and his co-workers ‘gave him refreshing drink, laid him in cool shade, giving him good counsel’, making the most of the opportunity to begin a conversation about the state of the man’s soul.⁵¹ For some delegates, ministering to enemy soldiers did engender some soul-searching about the right course of action. Working in various aid stations along the Susquehanna River in 1863, E. Clark Cline reflected on his decision to help enemy prisoners of war (POWs): ‘although we felt they were enemies to us and our beloved country’, he ultimately concluded, ‘they were our fellow men suffering far from home and friends, and we could do no less.’⁵²

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In their accounts of working with Confederate troops, delegates frequently reflected on their motivations for ministering to Rebels, advancing justifications for undertaking this work, and spelling out the results they hoped to achieve. Given that a large proportion of the evangelical volunteers who constituted the USCC’s workforce were preachers or theological students, it was natural that they repeatedly and consciously turned to scripture to explain their attitude towards the enemy. In particular, delegates turned to Romans 12, where Paul commands his audience: ‘if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink.’ This snippet was echoed constantly in the recollections of delegates. At Gettysburg, George Duffield,

a Presbyterian minister from Adrian, Michigan, came across a group of wounded Confederates lying on the bare ground in a barn. He took it upon himself to share food and drink with the men, and recalled, 'the distribution of the bread was in solemn silence, reminding me strangely enough of distributing on a communion-day the emblems of Christ's body and blood, as well as of the command, "if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink."⁵³ Similarly, another delegate, working at an ambulance depot overseeing hospital transports, related the following conversation with a wagon driver appalled at the suggestion that he offer some comfort to a Southerner:

'Have you any wounded in this wagon, driver?' 'Yes, two; one a Reb, and one of ours.' 'Well, give each of them a cup of that punch.' 'What! Give punch to Rebs?' 'Why not? If the man is fainting, it won't hurt him.' 'That is new doctrine,' said an officer, standing by. 'That is the Christian Commission doctrine. If thine enemy hunger, feed him. If he thirst, give him drink.' 'Well,' said he, after a moment's reflection, 'I go in for that Commission.'⁵⁴

The phrase was employed so often in delegate writings that the title of one chapter of a post-war commemorative volume compiled by the Commission was simply: 'Prisoners: If Thine Enemy Hunger, Feed Him.'⁵⁵ Paul's advice on philanthropic action – unlike the second commandment, to 'love thy neighbour as thyself' – explicitly set aside the recipient of aid as an enemy, rather than merely a neighbour or a stranger. The frequent invocation of this verse by USCC delegates helped them to rationalize their distribution policy, maintaining their political allegiance and preserving their patriotism intact by condemning Confederate subjects as enemies, even as they ministered to their bodily needs.

For delegates who sought to justify this controversial ministry, the wider context of this verse helps explain how providing aid to the enemy, far from being an act of potential treason, actually constituted both piety and patriotism of the purest order:

¹⁹ Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. ²⁰ Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. ²¹ Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good.

While the 'if thine enemy hunger, feed him' refrain appeared most commonly, delegates who quoted from the verse in their reports would no doubt have been aware of the long passage and its implications. According to Paul in this passage, aid rendered to an enemy would constitute a purifying fire cleansing the recipient's conscience and eliciting remorse and shame for his crimes. Therefore, for the USCC, what appeared to be selfless acts of kindness and compassion were also calculated to undermine the subject's loyalty to the Confederacy and to encourage repentance for his disobedience. By embodying Christian benevolence, delegates believed that they might dispel southern misconceptions about northern godlessness and cruelty (and, by comparison, cast the South in a poor light), remind Confederates of their shared American heritage

and provoke in the recipients of their aid sufficient guilt and remorse that they would ultimately renounce the shameful sin of rebellion.

Several delegates endorsed this patriotic weaponization of benevolence in their recollections. The words of one prisoner from Tennessee emphasized the power of Christian compassion to erode dedication to the cause of secession: 'how kind you Northern people are! [. . .] I used to have a prejudice against you, but since I have been in the army, and have seen what you do for the soldiers, I think you are a wonderful people.'⁵⁶ Another delegate, Joshua Cowpland, expressed his belief 'that many of the prisoners will bear away to their homes undying memories of the attentions of Northern Christians'.⁵⁷ This interpretation was not confined to the private writings of individual delegates: the Commission leadership wholeheartedly and publicly approved this instrumentalization of its work. An annual report published in 1863 and widely distributed to evangelical congregations across the North concluded, 'in many instances kindness to [Confederates] has opened their hearts, and induced free expression of penitence as well as gratitude'.⁵⁸ A year later, the Executive Committee boldly claimed that their organization was 'acting an important part in showing the South the groundlessness of its hatred to the North'.⁵⁹ Humanizing the Union by overcoming evil with good – that is, debunking myths that all northerners were cruel, mercenary and godless – was considered vital to diluting Confederate adherence to their cause. In emphasizing their role in bringing about political repentance, Commission workers cast their philanthropy, not as disinterested, apolitical or neutral, but as explicitly and actively political.

In their recollections, delegates frequently framed these moments of political repentance as conversions – crises of conscience in which remorse and shame gave way to eventual relief and ecstasy. What is striking in many of these reports is the visceral and involuntary emotional response of the penitent Rebel. There are clear echoes, in these reports of grown men moved to tears, of the conversion narratives which were a fixture of evangelical revivalism during the Second Great Awakening.⁶⁰ As John Corrigan and others have argued, displays of emotion 'announced religious faith and spiritual striving', and were signs that a sinner's struggle to accept the grace of the Holy Spirit had reached its climax.⁶¹ Christian Commission delegates employed the structure and language of antebellum conversion narratives to remark not only upon the tearful anguish of *spiritual* conversions to which they bore witness during the Civil War but also of the *political* conversion of repentant Confederates. For instance, P. B. Thayer, working with the wounded at Martinsburg, recalled a rough, violent Confederate moved to tears by the kindness of the Commission. 'I am no coward,' the man said; 'I can face the enemy and not wink; but this kindness kills me, it breaks me all to pieces.'⁶² Like other delegates, Thayer implied that the resolve and loyalty of Confederate soldiers could be undermined and fatally compromised, not by increasing their suffering, but rather by alleviating it, and by demonstrating the compassion and Christianity of the North. In several accounts, the powerful and transformative impact of Christian compassion on the enemy soldiers exposed to it was manifested in their visibly emotional responses. Men broke down and sobbed as they gratefully and incredulously received kindness and aid from their supposed enemy. 'When we're wounded, you come to us here not like angels, but like the

Lord Jesus Christ himself, washing our feet', one weeping Confederate, wounded at Antietam, told Reverend D. Merrill, 'and I can't stand it – I can't stand it'.⁶³ Another, a South Carolinian taken prisoner at Gettysburg, was overcome by the kindness of a delegate who offered him a handkerchief steeped in cologne, saying, 'I can't understand you Yankees; you fight us like devils, and then you treat us like angels. I am sorry I entered this war'.⁶⁴

When their subjects did not express their repentance verbally or through tears, delegates looked for other signs that their commitment to the Confederate cause was waning. Observing Union and Confederate patients converse cordially together gave delegates hope that 'henceforth all would be Union men, true to the starry banner of Freedom'.⁶⁵ Even more encouraging was the receptivity of Rebel soldiers to the printed material handed out by Christian Commission delegates. Distributing religious literature – in the form of denominational newspapers, tracts, Bibles, prayer books and hymn books – was a huge part of the delegate's daily routine, with delegates asked to record carefully the numbers of texts disseminated. The emphasis placed upon colportage by the Christian Commission reflected their belief that reading, and reflecting upon that reading, could serve to hasten spiritual awakening and eventual conversion.⁶⁶ However, the texts distributed by delegates also served patriotic ends; hymn books were frequently organized around political themes such as 'battle', 'patriotism' and 'victory', and prayer books and Bibles printed for the Commission were embossed on the cover with the American flag.⁶⁷ While committed Rebels refused to accept these books, wishing to avoid any association with the United States, one delegate reported that, at Camp Douglas, 'few now remain who have not become possessors of the books and flag'.⁶⁸ As with Scott's tobacco deal which opens this chapter, the delegates here chose to interpret small gestures such as these, not as pragmatic and cynical attempts by prisoners to find any means of alleviating boredom, but as meaningful signs that men were embracing both Christianity and the United States. 'It was truly pleasant', one delegate reported, 'to see the "Christian Banner" with its stars and stripes lying upon the face of one who had so recently been fighting against it'.⁶⁹

The delegates who performed this work were frequently convinced that they were actively contributing to Union victory. This may appear at first glance hopelessly naïve. The Confederates to whom Commission workers ministered were vulnerable and isolated; convincing a handful of prisoners or wounded men to renounce secession could hardly have a tangible impact on the overall strength or lethality of the southern armies. Yet delegates displayed remarkable patience in suggesting that the spiritual warfare they performed against Confederate souls acted as a vital and potent counterpoint to the physical warfare being waged by the Union army against their bodies. 'The Day of Judgement alone will reveal the worth of the great missionary work of the Christian Commission here,' William Paddock wrote while stationed at the POW camp at Fort Delaware. Using the verb 'disarm' in both a military and an emotional sense, he continued, 'That it disarms our enemies more than the weapons of our national warfare we daily hear'.⁷⁰ Thomas Rogers, a delegate from Hoosick, New York, was even more convinced that his work with wounded Confederates in hospitals in City Point, Virginia, was helping to win the war and to win it righteously. 'I am firm in my conviction that the US Christian Commission is doing much to bring this

rebellion to a close,' he wrote in his exit report. Like Paddock, he considered the moral work of the Commission a necessary complement to armed combat. He continued:

It enlightens the prisoners, it lays before them facts and dispels the dark clouds of prejudice and error that obscure their vision. . . . While the army wages war against the enemy and slowly but steadily presses on to victory, the Christian Commission, with quiet but powerful advance, pours the healing oil of Christian sympathy into the wounds of the soldiers, strengthening our men in their cause, but disarming by their kindness the most bitter enemies of our Union.⁷¹

The volunteers of the Christian Commission, as they encountered enemy soldiers, began to improvise a 'weaponised' benevolence which aimed through overbearing kindness to convert Confederates away from rebellion and towards evangelical Christianity. Through these efforts, the solitary kindness of individual delegates towards the enemy became subsumed into a wider political narrative. Piety once again became patriotic and was framed as contributing directly to the defeat of the South and the restoration of the Union. Christian philanthropists like the workers of the Christian Commission used religious benevolence as a political tool to demonstrate the piety and righteousness of the North, to convince Rebels of the errors of their ways, and to smooth the path from war to reconciliation. Needless to say, this agenda largely failed in the years following Appomattox. However, the Commission's concerns over their public reputation and attempts to justify their loyalty and their relevance demonstrate that Civil War philanthropy was never neutral, and was always concerned with imposing a specific political, social and religious vision onto the broken nation.

Notes

- 1 John Scott, report, September 1863, Delegates' Statistical Reports; United States Christian Commission Records, 1861–1866; Records of the Adjutant General's Office; Record Group 94; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. Hereafter USCC.
- 2 George M. Frederickson, *The Inner Civil War: Northern Intellectuals and the Crisis of the Union* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1965), 98.
- 3 See, for instance, Jeanie Attie, *Patriotic Toil: Northern Women and the American Civil War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998); Robert H. Bremner, *The Public Good: Philanthropy and Welfare in the Civil War Era* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980); Judith Ann Giesberg, *Civil War Sisterhood: The U.S. Sanitary Commission and Women's Politics in Transition* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2000).
- 4 Paul Boyer, *Urban Masses and Moral Order in America, 1820–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 108–20; Allan Stanley Horlick, *Country Boys and Merchant Princes: The Social Control of Young Men in New York* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1975), 227–45.
- 5 Susan M. Ryan, *The Grammar of Good Intentions: Race and the Antebellum Culture of Benevolence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 10.
- 6 See, for instance, Robert H. Abzug, *Cosmos Crumbling: American Reform and the Religious Imagination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 77–124; Phillip F. Gura, *Man's Better Angels: Romantic Reformers and the Coming of the Civil War*

- (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017), 14–18; Ronald G. Walters, *American Reformers, 1815–1860* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1978).
- 7 Wendy Gamber, 'Antebellum Reform: Salvation, Self-Control, and Social Transformation', in *Charity, Philanthropy, and Civility in American History*, ed. Lawrence J. Friedman and Mark D. McGarvie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 131.
 - 8 Stephen Mintz, *Moralists and Modernizers: America's Pre-Civil War Reformers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), xiii.
 - 9 George Stuart, circular, 7 January 1865, Scrapbooks; USCC.
 - 10 Sacvan Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978), 174; James H. Moorhead, *American Apocalypse: Yankee Protestants and the Civil War, 1860–1869* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 42–66; Harry S. Stout, *Upon the Altar of the Nation: A Moral History of the Civil War* (London: Penguin, 2006), 72, 188–9.
 - 11 'Instructions to Delegates', pamphlet, n.d.; Reports; USCC.
 - 12 On the rivalry between the USCC and the Sanitary Commission, see Attie, *Patriotic Toil*, 157–64; Frederickson, *Inner Civil War*, 108–11.
 - 13 Robert M. Sandow, 'Introduction', in *Contested Loyalty: Debates over Patriotism in the Civil War North*, ed. Sandow (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 1.
 - 14 William A. Blair, *With Malice Toward Some: Treason and Loyalty in the Civil War Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2014), 37.
 - 15 Sean A. Scott, "'Patriotism Will Save Neither You Nor Me": William S. Plumer's Defense of an Apolitical Pulpit', in *Contested Loyalty*, ed. Sandow, 172–3.
 - 16 'Commission no. 66', n.d.; Scrapbooks; USCC.
 - 17 'Instructions to Delegates', pamphlet, n.d.; Reports; USCC.
 - 18 Michael J. Sulick, *Spying in America: Espionage from the Revolutionary War to the Dawn of the Cold War* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 63–71, 93–9.
 - 19 *United States Christian Commission Second Annual Report* (Philadelphia: The Commission, 1864), 78.
 - 20 William S. Schaeffer, report, 13 August 1864; Delegates' Statistical Reports; USCC.
 - 21 George Stuart to Reverend Dillon, 8 August 1864, Letters Sent; USCC.
 - 22 Stephen V. Ash, *Rebel Richmond: Life and Death in the Confederate Capital* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019), 225–30; Mary A. DeCredico, *Confederate Citadel: Richmond and its People at War* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 2020), 124–48; Ernest B. Ferguson, *Ashes of Glory: Richmond at War* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1996), 341–58.
 - 23 Lemuel Moss to Joseph Albree, 8 April 1865, Letters Sent; USCC.
 - 24 Robert Patterson to 'Jacob', 13 April 1865, Letters Sent; USCC. See also E. F. Williams, 'US Christian Commission', *Richmond Whig*, 29 April 1865, 3.
 - 25 Williams, quoted in *United States Christian Commission Fourth Annual Report* (Philadelphia: The Commission, 1866), 107.
 - 26 George Stuart to C. R. Robert, 24 April 1865; Letters Sent; USCC.
 - 27 'Local and Other Items', *Bangor Daily Whig and Courier*, 13 May 1865, 2; 'News from Richmond', *Baltimore Sun*, 6 May 1865, 4.
 - 28 Robert Patterson to 'Jacob', 13 April 1865, Letters Sent; USCC.
 - 29 *Fourth Annual Report*, 134.
 - 30 Gordon Mayer, 'Party Rags? Politics and the New Business in Chicago's Party Press, 1831–1871', *Journalism History* 32, no. 3 (2006): 141–4.

- 31 'Feeding Influential Rebels,' *Chicago Tribune*, 20 May 1865, 2.
- 32 Kevin Levin, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home": The Demobilization of Lee's Army', in *Virginia at War: 1865*, ed. William C. Davis and James I. Robertson, Jr. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2012), 85–102; Yael Sternhell, *Routes of War: The World of Movement in the Confederate South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 165.
- 33 *Fourth Annual Report*, 101–9, 134–7.
- 34 'Feeding Influential Rebels,' 2.
- 35 'Northern Flunkysim,' *Chicago Tribune*, 2 May 1865, 2.
- 36 Lemuel Moss to Robert Patterson, 29 May 1865, Letters Sent, USCC.
- 37 'Feeding Influential Rebels,' 2.
- 38 Cayce Myers, 'Southern Traitor or American Hero? The Representation of Robert E. Lee in the Northern Press from 1865 to 1870', *Journalism History* 41, no. 4 (2016): 215–16.
- 39 'Review of the Work,' *Flag of our Union (1854–1870)*; 20 May 1865, 20.
- 40 'General Lee and the Christian Commission', in *The Independent . . . Devoted to the Consideration of Politics, Social and Economic Tendencies, History, Literature, and the Arts*, 4 May 1865, 17, 857.
- 41 'Gen Lee – The Christian Commission', from the *NY Independent*, reprinted in *The Liberator*, 19 May 1865, 1.
- 42 Lemuel Moss to E. F. Williams, 6 May 1865, Letters Sent; USCC.
- 43 Edward Smith to William Ballantyne, 3 May 1865, Letters Sent, USCC.
- 44 Caroline E. Janney, *Remembering the Civil War: Reunion and the Limits of Reconciliation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 46–55; Thomas Reed Turner, *Beware the People Weeping: Public Opinion and the Assassination of Abraham Lincoln* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 25–52.
- 45 George Stuart to James Gordon Bennett, 3 May 1865, letters sent; USCC. George Stuart, undated circular, letters sent, USCC.
- 46 'Instructions to Delegates,' pamphlet, n.d.; Reports; USCC.
- 47 Walter Carter, quoted in *Christ in the Army: A Selection of Sketches of the Work of the US Christian Commission* (Philadelphia: JB Rodgers, 1865), 94.
- 48 *Second Annual Report*, 180.
- 49 Edward Parmelee Smith, *Incidents among Shot and Shell* (Philadelphia: J B Lippincott, 1869), 157–8.
- 50 A. M. Palmer, report, 20 July 1853, Delegates' Statistical Reports, USCC.
- 51 W. W. Condit, report, 20 May 1864, Delegates' Statistical Reports; USCC.
- 52 E. Clark Cline, report, 7 September 1863, Delegates' Statistical Reports; USCC.
- 53 Smith, *Incidents among Shot and Shell*, 80.
- 54 Robert Patterson, 'At the Front', in *Christ in the Army*, 91.
- 55 *Ibid.*, 113.
- 56 Smith, *Incidents among Shot and Shell*, 283.
- 57 Joshua P. Cowpland, report, 6 August 1863, Delegates' Statistical Reports; USCC.
- 58 *United States Christian Commission First Annual Report* (Philadelphia: The Commission, 1863), 13.
- 59 *Second Annual Report*, 78.
- 60 Elizabeth B. Clark, "'The Sacred Rights of the Weak': Pain, Sympathy, and the Culture of Individual Rights in Antebellum America,' *Journal of American History* 82, no. 2 (1995): 476–7; Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 105.

- 61 John Corrigan, *Business of the Heart: Religion and Emotion in Nineteenth Century America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 221–2.
- 62 Smith, *Incidents among Shot and Shell*, 384.
- 63 *Christ in the Army*, 114–15.
- 64 Smith, *Incidents among Shot and Shell*, 177.
- 65 *Fourth Annual Report*, 161.
- 66 Isabelle Lehuu, *Carnival on the Page: Popular Print Media in Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press 2000), 22–4; David Paul Nord, ‘Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America,’ *Journal of the Early Republic* 15, no. 2 (1995): 241–72. As Sonia Hazard has recently noted, not only were the texts themselves important to processes of conversion but so too were the interactions between the distributor and the recipient of religious reading matter (in this case, between the delegate and the soldier). Hazard, ‘Evangelical Encounters: The American Tract Society and the Rituals of Print Distribution in Antebellum America,’ *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 88, no. 1 (2020): 200–34.
- 67 *Hymnbook for the Army and Navy* (New York: American Tract Society, 1863), 2. Many of the songs in this collection blurred the line between hymn and anthem, for instance ‘My Country, Tis of Thee’ and ‘God Save the State.’
- 68 *Second Annual Report*, 220.
- 69 *Fourth Annual Report*, 183.
- 70 William Paddock, quoted in *Second Annual Report*, 143–4.
- 71 Thomas Rogers, report, 23 August 1864; Delegates’ Statistical Report; USCC.