A Kingdom Divided: Evangelicalism in the American Civil War

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[0:00] Hello, hello, hello. Welcome to the Providence Podcast. My name is Chris Oswald, Senior Pastor at Providence Community Church. This is a very short podcast, I think, intended to discuss some reading I've been doing about the Civil War, specifically the way that evangelicals handled the issues of the Civil War, and even more narrowly, how some sought a pathway of spiritualized neutrality that they hoped would allow them to navigate this issue without splitting their churches and so on and so forth. This is a fascinating book written in 2017 or published in 2017 by April Holm. I believe she's a professor in a Louisiana state school, if I remember correctly.

The book is called A Kingdom Divided, Conflicting Worlds, New Dimensions of the American Civil War. And originally, I thought I might read one of the main chapters to you.

This is a book that if you're at all interested in the Civil War, would be maybe the first book to grab because it attempts to navigate a lot of the issues from a theological perspective, which I think many of you would actually find interesting. It's $15 on Kindle, and it's like super expensive. It's one of these academic books that are just not published very often or there are very few copies of, so you probably are only going to want to buy this on Kindle. One of the things I think maybe would be helpful to communicate to you before I read this little section that I've chosen is just to remind you that I think this is pretty relevant for our time, and of course, the reason I'm reading all of this is because I'm seeing some relevance.

So the Civil War starts in 1861, about a month and a half from today, in April of 1861. And what I want to draw to your attention that is an underlooked fact is that just how influential church Christian culture was at that time, right? I mean, you know that. And how the three main denominations, the three main Protestant denominations, which held just overwhelming sway in the culture at that time, were the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Presbyterians. And well before the Civil War, each one of those denominations split over this issue. I need to qualify that with one thing, but just give me a second. So the Methodists actually split over this issue in 1844, and the Baptists split in 1845. The Presbyterians held out longer, but only because they had already split over some other theological issues that sort of were tangentially related to slavery, enough so that they retained some semblance of unity until 1858. The specifics there is they split in 1837 over theological issues, which also tended to shuffle the parties in Presbyterianism into pro- and anti-slavery camps to some degree. And then in 1858, three years before the start of the Civil War, even the

Presbyterians split. Now, what I think is really important to note is that this evangelical reshuffling we're seeing right now is falling along very similar lines to the evangelical reshuffling we saw at that time leading up to the Civil War. And two things to note. One, the church was divided on these things before the country was. So, well, the country was divided, but there was no Civil War.

[4:22] The church, the denominations were having their own quote-unquote Civil Wars, you know, around 10 years prior to the Civil War breaking out in the United States. And there were many wise senators, both in the North and the South, around the time of these denominational splits that saw that as essentially a death warrant for the Union. Their logic, which seemed pretty sound, was essentially that if these denominations, which hold so much sway over our country and over our people, are splitting over this issue, then it's only a matter of time until outright war breaks out. And I think they were correct on that. And so there were three divisions, essentially three positions. And one would, we could just say, was exceedingly pro-slavery. And then the other one would be an abolitionist perspective, which was sort of, you know, exceedingly anti-slavery. And then there was some kind of, typically some kind of a compromise, some kind of a third-way position. And it's really the third-way position that April

Holm considers to be significant and worth considering. Now remember, one of the features of the Civil War was a geographic war, right, North and South. And so you had, even just in geography, these border states. And one of the main thesis of her books is that these border states had sort of a built-in incentive to attempt a neutral position, which wound up being basically a theologically spiritualized position. So in that day, the border states were the, the border state pastors, the border state churches, or the churches that argued that slavery was a political issue, and that the church had no business being in politics. So you would see a very pro-slavery position taken amongst ministers in the South, a very anti-slavery position taken against many ministers in the North, though not all by any means. And then you would see a, this sort of third-way neutrality sort of attempt that was, in my opinion, transparently political. So I think that many times when these hotbed issues arise in a culture, those that are seeking to, quote-unquote, you know, remain neutral, they're making the most political calculations of everybody. They're really trying to keep a body, an institution, a church together, and so on and so forth. So those are some backgrounds, some background details. Now let me just read, she wrote a conclusion at the end of her book,

April Holm did, that I think would be worth reading to you, and it's relatively short. Looks like it's probably five or six pages. Okay, the conclusion is titled, The Right As God Gives Us to See the Right.

And she begins by quoting Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address in 1865. With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds. So Abraham Lincoln charged the nation in his 1865 second inaugural address. As he faced the challenge of reconstruction, Lincoln referenced the divisive potential of religious conflict. In his war, he observed, both sides, quote, read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes his aid against the other. In acknowledging that both Northerners and Southerners claimed God's support for their side, Lincoln was drawing attention to the deeply divergent interpretations of the civil war that existed in two regions. Lincoln argued that God gives to both North and South this terrible war. Therefore, each side should accept blame, bury their antagonism, and reunite to rebuild the nation.

His call for malice toward none reflects the depth of enmity that existed between the sections. Malice, of course, also persisted between the northern and southern branches of the major evangelical Protestant churches in the United States. Sectionalized religious responses to the end of the war suggested that reunion in the churches would not come swiftly. Northerners demanded loyalty to the Union and prompt denominational reunion. Southerners rejected calls to celebrate the reunited nation and assumed their denominations would remain separate. Along the border, evangelicals hoped that the end of the war would mean the end of politics in the pulpit. The civil war in the churches began well before 1861. This is the point I was making at the beginning, that the denominations actually had, you know, had a civil war before the civil war. The civil war in the churches began well before 1861 with the division in major evangelical denominations, and it lasted well beyond the Union victory.

[9:41] Reconstruction and redemption, C. Van Woodward observed, that the rupture between the north and the south had come earliest in the great Protestant sects, and there it was the slowest to heal. This was because, he argued, the southern churches became for a time centers of resistance to the invasion of the northern culture. The enduring rift in the major evangelical denominations has largely been ignored in explanations of the failures of Reconstruction and the limitations of Reunion, but the southern churches remain demonstrable strongholds of southern exceptionalism. The story of division in the churches serves as a reminder that Reunion did not occur evenly and equally across all facets of civil society.

Northerners and southerners may have reunited and experienced reconciliation in some areas, but in other areas sectional difference and sectionalism persisted. This was particularly true of the churches. They did not reunite after the war. Instead, they institutionalized sectional division.

So I think that if we are witnessing an evangelical civil war right now, I think one thing that take away is that it probably takes a lot to cause that division, sharp disagreements. And to be clear, in the case of the civil war, one side was just flat out wrong in a substantial way. I'd say both sides were wrong to some degree.

But there was massive theological error taking place in particular in the south. Because they were not just saying slavery is okay, but it is a biblical good.

So this division that occurred, it wasn't going to be quickly healed. And as we look at sort of evangelicalism today, I identify essentially three positions.

[11:48] One would be a conservative, almost reactive, anti-woke position. And that would be the position I hold. And that would be essentially the identification of Marxism and so on as an actual cult that is seeking to seduce the minds of my flock and my neighbor and so on and so forth.

And so I've taken a reactive, explicitly anti-Marxist position, seeing it as the god of this age in some respects. So there's that position.

That would be where you would see Moscow, Idaho, Doug Wilson, and many others, quite frankly, that don't make the news. So there's that position.

And then there's essentially a decidedly pro-woke position, which is rainbow flags out in front of the church. And if not that now, then that soon.

And then there's a neutral, a borderlands kind of position that essentially seeks the moral high ground by calling both sides over-politicized.

[13:03] And so these three positions are pretty well established now. It's worth noting that those three positions have corollaries in the Civil War between the interdenominational Civil War from 1844 to, say, 1858.

And that those things did not go away after there was a resolution to the Civil War. The narrative of the evangelical churches after the Civil War, I'm back to reading now.

The narrative of the evangelical churches after the Civil War intersects with two histiographic schools. One is the study of the myth of the lost cause that took root in post-war South.

And the other is the study of reconciliation and reunion between the North and the South. Polemical denominational histories demonstrate that post-war Southerners dedicated a great deal of energy to constructing a history that legitimized the Confederate cause and glorified Southern culture and virtue.

Evangelicals played an important role not just in shaping the lost cause narrative in Southern civil religion, but also in developing their own internal denomination-specific myths of causes lost in one.

[14:14] These later myths would persist even as reconciliation occurred elsewhere in Southern society. The Methodist conflicts over the plan of separation, Southern Baptist grievances about post-war Northern missionaries, and the memories of the wrongs done to the Declaration and Testimony Synods in the Presbyterian Church all became fodder for this mythology.

The persecution of border evangelicals and the response of border moderates became key components in constructing an account of non-political Southern churches that predated the Civil War.

Unlike scholars who examined the myth of the lost cause, historians of post-war reunion focused on the national process through which the North and South were reunited by agreeing on an acceptable version of the past, usually at the expense of civil rights and social justice.

Like studies of lost cause mythology, however, reunion studies also emphasize the retelling of the past and shaping of public memory of the Civil War. Continued division in the major evangelical churches stands in marked contrast to the sort of national reunion that occurred through milestones of reconciliation, such as veterans' gatherings, tourism, the Spanish-American War, the election of Woodrow Wilson.

Reunion could only occur because so much sectionalism still existed. The post-Reconstruction decades might look different if we viewed late 19th century reunion events as secular analogies, I'm sorry, as secular analogies of fraternal relations and comedy agreements in the evangelical churches during the same period.

[15:49] These agreements did not so much hasten real reunion as prolonged the process. They served to curtail overt sectional antagonism while protecting and acknowledging sectional difference.

By the end of the 19th century, border evangelicals were no longer central to narratives of denominational difference. So here we, what we're seeing here is that the three positions, the position that became just obviously wrong, obviously, perhaps remarkably most unchristian, was the position that was purely apolitical, intentionally neutral.

See, there's an argument to be made that the anti-woke and the woke are more theologically aligned in one respect. They expect that the teachings of the gospel would manifest in policy, in life, in the way things go.

And so at the end of the Civil War, you had these three positions. You had the border position, which was a neutral, a spiritualized neutrality position. You had the southern position, which was a spiritualized pro-slavery position.

And then you had the north position, which was everything ranging from abolition, which was really a radical position, to something less than abolition but was still anti-slavery. And by the time the Civil War is over, you really, those neutral people are the ones that look, are in some ways, it's hard to say this because obviously the pro-slavery people were just wrong.

[17:32] But there's an argument to be made in some respects that at least they argued for their position from this expectation of God's word having an effect in the world.

And so did the northerners. But these border folks were really, like I said before, in some sense, the border folks were playing the most politics.

They were trying to keep their churches together. In another chapter, there are all these letters presented by April Holm from border state pastors and missionaries, including Kansas and Missouri.

And they will just straight overtly in their letters to make an inventory of their congregations and say, okay, I have a few people here who own slaves.

I have a few other families here who are from slave-owning traditions. And they're literally playing politics in their church because their church is a border church.

[18:46] It's a split congregation on this subject. Okay. By the end of, back to reading, by the end of the 19th century, border evangelicals were no longer central to narratives of denominational difference. However, their stories served as the justification for separate sectional faiths after the Civil War.

They became part of the history of the southern branches and therefore part of the frequently rehearsed catalog of wartime Yankee abuses. This was an ironic turn, given that it was the border evangelicals themselves who first opposed division over slavery and prioritized the preservation of denominational unity.

In their opposition to division and conflict within the church, border evangelicals embraced a theology of spirituality and political neutrality.

I thank God, this is a quote, I thank God that I'm not responsible for the state of things existing, wrote Elisha Phelps after the Methodist Baltimore Conference lay meeting late in 1860.

Both the conference and the nation itself threatened to divide. Despite his own effort to maintain the unity of the church, Phelps feared the politicians in church and state would drive the conference apart.

[19:59] A border Baptist was, quote, determined to take a high neutral stand, knowing no north or south. A Missouri Presbyterian remarked, quote, It can hardly be said that we belong to either north or the south.

Border state evangelicals clung to the hope that political neutrality and spirituality could prevent the division of God's kingdom in the United States.

Ultimately, these strategies proved ineffective. That's, to me, the key sentence. Border state evangelicals clung to the hope that political neutrality and spirituality could prevent the division of God's kingdom in the United States.

Ultimately, these strategies proved ineffective. Remaining neutral in the debates over slavery and succession meant valuing church unity over the freedom of millions of enslaved African Americans.

Still, it is not difficult to understand the appeal of neutrality in the face of divisive moral and political conflicts. Border moderates were profoundly disturbed to see debates over slavery and succession break up their churches and denominational institutions.

[21:15] As a result, they came to view the debates instead of slavery itself as the most pressing problem their churches faced. Let me say that one again.

As a result, they came to view the debates instead of slavery itself as the most pressing problem their churches faced. In the polarized landscape of mid-19th century, political arguments could generate explosive conflict.

Sound familiar? Within this context, attempting to remain neutral was not only appealing. Oh, this is such a good sentence. It also acquired a patina of virtue.

It also acquired a patina of virtue. Thus, moderate white border clergy convinced themselves of their moral superiority to those who engaged in partisan debates.

They could not see that the ability to dismiss the slavery debate as purely political was a privilege not available to everyone.

[22:20] African Americans, for example, had no such luxury. Now, I don't want to get too preachy. But these people who are claiming the moral high ground of a spiritualized neutrality are really, they're clueless.

They don't live in a world where people are suffering as a result of statism, Marxism, queer theory, and so forth.

They simply don't see the people perishing and suffering. It's exactly as it was with the border state neutrality.

It is a position that belongs to those who do not live amongst the slaves. It is a position available to those who are enough removed from reality.

Often, often professional clergy with very little dirt under their fingernails. Very little redemptive, neighbor-loving dirt under their fingernails.

[23:30] I'll stop. That's far enough. Within this context, attempting to remain neutral was not only appealing, it also acquired a patina of virtue. Thus, moderate white border clergy convinced themselves of their moral superiority to those who engaged in partisan debates.

They could not see that the ability to dismiss the slavery debate as a purely political matter was a privilege not available to everyone. African Americans, for example, had no such luxury.

In fact, as parties on both sides pressured them to declare their loyalties and the possibility of remaining neutral dwindled and disappeared, neutral evangelicals began to perceive themselves as victims.

When the war was over, neutrality about slavery was no longer an option in the northern churches.

Border evangelicals who had once affiliated with the north and who had hoped to return to pre-emancipation status quo felt persecuted by their denominations. This sense of persecution led them away from the northern churches.

[24:31] As they began to affiliate instead with southern churches, which continued to defend slavery even after it had been abolished. Thus, attempts to remain neutral regarding slavery ultimately led to membership in pro-slavery denominations.

This attempt by moderates to remain neutral in the face of moral disputes reverberates in present-day conflicts. No kidding, April. I'm so glad you said that. It reveals why many people turn to moderation or neutrality as a strategy in the face of intensely charged conflicts.

And it offers an explanation for why people who attempt to remain neutral come to feel that they occupy the moral high ground. This is the logic that led many Americans to advise to go slow in response to demands for equality during the civil rights movement.

This reasoning likewise found voice in the proponents of colorblindness rather than affirmative action. Now, this chick's a leftist, so she's going to give prescriptions here that I don't agree with.

But I agree there should be prescriptions. I think that's the universal takeaway here is we've got to do something. Now, you know, she's going to be colorblind is bad, affirmative action is good, so on and so forth.

[25:54] In fact, let me read the next sentence. This reasoning likewise found voice in the proponents of colorblindness rather than affirmative action as a solution to structural racism in the late 20th century. Indeed, it is the logic of those who responded to the Black Lives Matter movement of early 21st century with the Blythe rebuttal, All Lives Matter.

These responses are available only to those who are not themselves victims of segregation and racism. Such responses might seem like solutions. See, and here in 2020, when there was such great racial disharmony at play, I was not an All Lives Matter guy in that sense.

I was a urban community repent of your forsaking of fathering. Repent of your striving for revenge.

You know, I was just as political. I just I wasn't I wasn't trying to make the issue go away. I was not trying to just sort of outlast the issues, trying to argue that this is a great moment to take aside and trust in the Lord and so on and so forth.

So that's that's that's enough of it's about the whole chapter. There's one more thing I just read that I thought was. Pretty.

[27:13] Pretty descriptive of my journey. This is written by a Methodist. Memory says Kentucky or Ohio or something like that in the 1850s.

When moral principles are the ground of controversy and when the discussion turns upon the great questions of human rights, then no tongue should be dumb. No press should be silent. This is Matthew Simpson in response to the Fugitive Slave Act in 19 in 1850.

Now listen to how Holm describes Simpson's own journey. At 38, Simpson had served as president at two Methodist colleges and had spent two years as the editor of the influential Cincinnati Western Christian Advocate.

He had become a leading light within the church and he had also, in remarkable contrast to his early beliefs, become a vigorous controversialist. Seven years prior, during his tenure as president of Indiana Asbury, Simpson scrupulously avoided revealing even a hint of his own political views.

My most intimate friend has not heard me express an opinion even as to my own vote Simpson had avowed in 1843. I am not active in political life. In 1848, Simpson accepted the editorship of a Western Christian Advocate with a pledge to avoid controversy and make the paper strictly a church paper for the defense of the doctrines of the polity of Methodism.

[28:38] This non-confrontational ethos was representative of antebellum broader evangelicals. However, the Compromise of 1850 and the passage of the Fugitive Slave Act in particular impelled Simpson to take a public stand on a political issue.

Simpson, always privately anti-slavery, published an editorial in opposition to the act in his newfound political voice. The harshest criticism Simpson received for his editorial came not from Southerners but from fellow broader Methodists.

Not only will you be illuminated, you know, slandered, but the whole Methodist church may be drawn into the whirlpool of politics, an Indiana resident cautioned.

This correspondent also warned Simpson that he was at risk of being branded, quote-unquote, an abolitionist. A former student from Western Virginia urged Simpson to leave off the Fugitive Slave Law from this time henceforth and forever, arguing that the political debate could never make the church one whit more spiritual.

Another reader from Indiana-Kentucky border urged Simpson to abide by the fact, by the act, and allow prudence and a little time to let the controversy come to rest.

[29:56] But much to the dismay of border moderates, it seemed that prudence and patience had vanished from the formerly silver mines in the North and the South. Simpson was just one of many evangelicals who publicly engaged with the moral and political debates surrounding slavery and westward expansion.

During these years, however, border evangelicals often clung stubbornly to the hope that the careful separation of the moral and the political was possible, and that moderation could prevent alarming agitation.

That's pretty representative of, I think, a lot of men, you know, that are in my camp. We have a pretty robust history of being non-controversialists.

And then just there was some moment where there was a recognition of these are moral issues, these are spiritual issues, these are gospel issues, we have to speak into them.

And then most of the pushback not coming from the people that are actually, you're actually opposing slaveholders or, you know, whatever, but from people who were supposedly in your camp essentially telling you to sit down and don't rock the boat.

[31:07] So, okay, well, that went a lot longer than I expected. 31 minutes is a long podcast for me. Thank you so much for listening. I will get out of this hopefully with only, you know, a few controversies raised.

Not my intention to be controversial, but boy, I've been reading this and thought this is something I think can really give folks a bit of historical context to understand their current situation.

Okay, well, be well. May God bless you and richly keep you. Have a wonderful week. Goodbye. skill