Living History How-Tos: The Man

"OUR HOLY JOHN"

Understanding the Chaplain's Role in a Federal Regiment: A Guide for Military Reenactors

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A familiar but often misunderstood portrayal in Civil War reenacting is the army chaplain. As with many such specialist roles, the chaplain is represented with varying degrees of accuracy and appropriateness. At a typical Civil War event the role of the chaplain, if one is present, is often confined to Sunday worship services, but this limited involvement is often inaccurate.

Many chaplains marched, camped, suffered, fought, and died with the troops they served. It would not be inaccurate to say that in many regiments the chaplain was as prominent a figure as the adjutant or surgeon. It is my experience that many reenactors are surprised to see a chaplain participate for the duration of an event, and are unsure how to behave or act around a chaplain. This article therefore offers information on the duties, background, and character of Union army chaplains, and also attempts to describe what the soldiers thought of their chaplains. I hope that this article will benefit others portraying chaplains and, more importantly, assist reenactors in military roles in achieving an improved understanding of how soldiers viewed and interacted with their chaplains, and inspire them to guide their conduct accordingly.

The author (right) portraying the chaplain of the 147th Pennsylvania, with Lt. Jeff Sherry (left), at the Gettysburg living history in July 2003 (Teresa Piering photo).

Typically a chaplain was assigned to each regiment, although attrition and a scarcity of military chaplains often meant that one or two clergy might serve an entire brigade. Chaplains were also assigned to military hospitals. A regimental chaplain was carried on the rolls of the regiment's field and staff, would typically mess with the officers and, while he held rank equivalent to that of captain, he was in reality neither officer nor enlisted man, being free to circulate among all ranks. Chaplain H. Clay Trumbull of the 10th Connecticut recalled that this freedom gave the chaplain "a position utterly unlike any other person in the army; and it was his own fault if he did not avail himself of it, and improve its advantages".[1]

For Trumbull, a wise chaplain earned this position by offering his pastoral services "at all times'' to the entire regiment, visiting the tents of private soldiers and officers, enquiring as to their home lives and offering counsel and encouragement, accompanying them into battle, visiting the sick and offering soldiers prayer and hope over the graves of their comrades. Trumbull made the important point that a good chaplain, who "had the qualities and experience to fit him for such fellowship", could be the one man who united an entire regiment; officers and enlisted men could, with complete freedom, take their cares and troubles to a chaplain, without worrying about the lines of class and rank that ruled army life.[2]

A good chaplain would have his finger on the pulse of regimental life and morale. In fact, Congress required that the chaplain submit a report to the colonel at the end of each quarter describing "the moral and religious condition of the regiment, and such suggestions as may conduce to the social happiness and moral improvement of the troops".[3] A wise colonel did well to consider these reports.

Since the beginning of the Republic there had been provision for chaplains in the Regular Army, but the rapid expansion of the United States Army in 1861-1862 created a need for many clergy to offer their services to the troops. Initially Congress required that chaplains be ordained clergy of "some Christian denomination" and did not specify any age or educational requirements, allowing the officers and men of each regiment to select their chaplain.[4].

Chaplains were selected from the civilian clergy and represented the spectrum of religious life. In mid-Nineteenth Century America, roughly two thirds of the population attended Protestant churches[5] and of these, 60 percent, roughly four million people, identified with the evangelical churches (including Methodist, Baptist, Christian or Disciples of Christ, low-Church Episcopal). These churches emphasized the penitent sinner's experience of individual conversion, and today we would characterize this type of faith as "born again" Christianity.

[1] H. Clay Trumbull, *War Memoirs of an Army Chaplain*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898), pp. 3-5.

[2] Ibid, 3-4.

[3] Richard Eddy, *History of the Sixtieth Regiment, New York State Volunteers* (Philadelphia: 1864), 68. My thanks to Steve Tyler for providing me with this source.

[4] Warren B. Armstrong, *For Courageous Fighting and Confident Dying: Union Chaplains in the Civil War* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1998), 2-6.

[5] Steven E. Woodworth, *While God is Marching On; The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2001), 26.

About 10 percent of Americans were non-evangelical or formalist Protestants (Presbyterian, High-Church Episcopal, Lutheran) and 15 percent were Roman Catholic. One percent of Americans were Jewish, and the remaining 15 percent had no religious affiliation.[6]

Union chaplains echoed the religious face of the North. Benedict Maryniak, the first scholar to compile a complete roster of Union Army chaplains, describes their distribution as presented ni the following table, together with the religious makeup of American society in the antebellum years:

Denominational Shares of Religious Adherents in the U.S., 1776 to 1850[7]		**Union Army Chaplains By Denomination**	
Denomination	**Share**	**Denomination**	**Share**
Methodist	34.2%	Methodist	38%
Baptist	20.5%	Presbyterian	17%
Roman Catholic	13.9%	Baptist	12%
Presbyterian	11.6%	Episcopal	10%
Congregationalist	4.0%	Congregationalist	9%
Episcopalian	3.5%	Unitarian/ Universalist	4%
Lutheran	2.9%	Roman Catholic	3%
Unitarian/ Universalist	1.9%	Lutheran	2%
German/Dutch Reformed	1.9%	All Others	1%
"Christian" followers of Stone/Campell	1.8%		
Quakers	1.6%		

Maryniak found that the "average" Union chaplain "was a Methodist, thirty-eight years and eight months of age, who served thirteen and a half months".[8] Regiments that were raised along ethnic lines, such as Pennsylvania German Lutherans or New York City Irish Catholics, typically had one of their own as chaplain. Roman Catholic priests only served in regiments where Catholics were in the majority,[9] and they were spread thin, with only forty priests serving 200,000 Catholic soldiers (of whom 145,000 were Irish).[10]

Civil War chaplains varied in the quality of their education and in their readiness for their military calling. The more formal churches—Catholic, Episcopal, Lutheran and Presbyterian—had clergy that were generally well-educated and highly literate. In contrast, the typical Methodist clergyman received an education that was quite sketchy by modern seminary standards. If he could convince his church that he was fervent, had good command of scripture and could preach well, a man would be ordained by his elders or by a Methodist bishop. In March 1863, the Lutheran John Stuckenberg, chaplain of the 145th Pennsylvania and a graduate of a prestigious German seminary, wrote in his diary, "I am surrounded by Methodist Chaplains, who are very clever, but lack cultivation".[11] Another Lutheran, Francis Springer, chaplain of the 1st Arkansas Infantry (U.S.), described a Methodist colleague as:

> A devout man - of average education - very earnest in voice and manner - of vociferous eloquence, labors hard in preaching, ends many of his expressions with the distasteful aphorism "ach!" and exclaims frequently "Blessed be God!" He holds, I doubt not, with a numerous class of his Methodist brethren and others to whom light is of less account than heat. When done [with] his discourse, this preacher sits down, exhausted, and frequently said "Amen!" as another led in prayer. [12]

Such men were known by their contemporaries as "shouting Methodists". However, the life of a Methodist circuit rider or a frontier preacher, which included long miles of horseback riding in all kinds of weather, often sleeping under the stars, was excellent preparation for being a regimental chaplain on campaign.

Many clerics from more established churches found the rigors of camp life to be quite different from the comfortable life of parish and parsonage. Patrick Guiney, an officer in Boston's 9th Massachusetts Infantry, wrote with regret that his regiment's Catholic chaplain was "living in a little tent that would scarcely shelter a primitive hermit."[13] Such hardship ruined the health of many chaplains, including James Curry, a Methodist chaplain with several West Virginia regiments, whose obituary reported, "He returned home, so seriously impaired in health as to preclude the resumption of the ministry".[14] One extremely sad case was Aaron Van Nostrand, an Episcopal priest from a parish near Cleveland, age 33, who died of "camp fever terminating in a rush of blood to the head" in the winter of 1862, only two weeks after arriving in camp as the new chaplain of the 105th Ohio.[15]

Troops in a volunteer regiment might very well know their chaplain as their parson from civilian life. James Curry appears to have played a lead role in recruiting the 3rd West Virginia Infantry, and presumably enjoyed the same moral authority over his men that he had enjoyed in civilian life as their circuit rider.[16]

Even if the troops did not know him from civilian life, the chaplain was a distinctive figure within a regiment. He was allowed to ride a horse provided that he could afford the forage, drew a private's rations, and until the mid-war period did not wear a uniform, going about in the trademark black clothes and white necktie that signified the Nineteenth Century clergy.

Army regulations of 1861 specified a black frock coat with black buttons, black trousers and felt hat or cap, without adornment. Chaplains appear to have been divided as to whether their appearance should be military and include captain's bars, sashes, and sword. Chaplain Alonzo H. Quint of the 2nd Massachusetts had little patience for "preaching officers" wearing "gilt and tinsel" and noted that chaplains with straps and swords "have always excited the ridicule of

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[6] Curtis D. Johnson, *Redeeming America: Evangelicals and the Road to Civil War* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1983), 4-6.

[7] Mark A. Noll, *A History of Christianity in the United States and Canada* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992),153.

[8] Benedict Maryniak, "Union Army Chaplains", *Faith in the Fight: Civil War Chaplains*, eds. John W. Brinafield et al (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2003), 43-44

[9] Benedict Maryniak informed this writer of one exception, the Rev. Richard C. Christy, a Catholic priest assigned to the largely protestant 78th Pennsylvania Infantry. While Christy was a controversial appointment, he "succeeded in securing the love & confidence of the soldiers and officers".

[10] Randal M. Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War", in *Religion and the American Civil War*, ed. Randal M. Miller et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 265.

[11] John. H.W. Stuckenberg, *"I'm Surrounded by Methodists": Diary of John H.W. Stuckenberg, Chaplain of the 145th Pennsylvanian Volunteer Infantry*. Ed. David T. Hendrick and Gordon Barry Davis, Jr. (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1995), 56.

[12] *The Preacher's Tale: The Civil War Journals of Rev. Francis Springer, Chaplain, U.S. Army of the Frontier,* ed. William Furry (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001), 46.

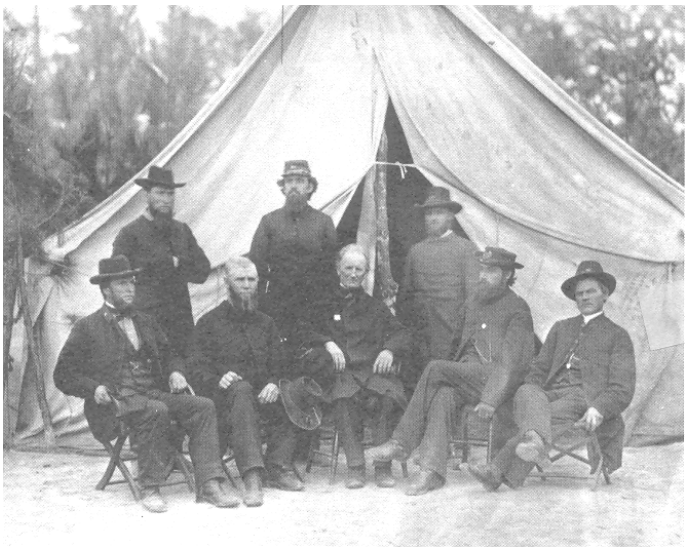
[13] Christian G. Samito, ed., *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth: The Civil War Letters of Colonel Patrick R. Guiney* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1998), 87.

[14] *Altoona Tribune,* Nov. 5, 1892, courtesy of the Altoona, PA Historical Society.

[15] *Long Island Farmer*, March 3, 1862, transcribed for me by the Queens, NY Public Library.

[16] *Altoona Tribune,* Nov. 5, 1892.

army officers".[17] Photographs of clergy in the Civil War military show a mix of uniforms and civilian attire.



Chaplains of the Ninth Corps at Petersburg, Virginia in 1864. All these men appear to be wearing the regulation black frock coat with black buttons. Other than the man standing in the center with a military forage cap, the appearance is decidedly *un*military. (Library of Congress)

A much more military appearance; Chaplain Thomas G. Brown, 21st Connecticut Infantry.[18]

Generally speaking, it would be appropriate for reenactors to voice their amusement at any chaplain who cultivated an overly military appearance, such as wearing a sash and sword. In addressing their own priest/chaplain, Catholic soldiers would likely use the term "Father" or possibly "Domini", while Protestant soldiers might use the terms "Parson" or "Reverend" or simply "Chaplain". "Padre" is a term from the modern military; and this writer has yet to see it occur in any period accounts and, as a rule, reenactors should avoid using it.[19]

Once he joined a military unit, the chaplain was expected to do much the same pastoral duties as in civilian life, included visiting the sick, preaching, and leading worship or (if Catholic, saying Mass), offering private counseling, and public Christian education. He assisted soldiers' families by seeing that the men's pay and mail were sent home. The greatest challenges of army chaplaincy were battle and its aftermath, as well as the singularly unpleasant duty of ministering to condemned soldiers in their final hours.

Despite the variety of his duties, the chaplain was not officially accountable to military authority or even required to be present with the regiment. Soldiers, however, used these duties as a barometer to quickly decide which chaplains were good or who was worthless. John T. McMahon, a pious New Yorker, wrote in 1863, "Our chaplains are a class of men that could not get employment at home and by underhanded work have got to be Chaplains".[20]

Some chaplains did not help their profession by being proficient gamblers, avoiding the front lines, or by keeping dubious female company. Army surgeon John H. Brinton wrote with grim satisfaction that after he could find no chaplain willing to serve in a smallpox hospital: "I finally selected one of the most inefficient chaplains under my command, and detailed him, despite his protest, to the hated office", which the unfortunate minister performed most reluctantly.[21] Thomas Stevens, a captain in the 28th Wisconsin, complained to his wife that his chaplain was absent from the regiment "where he belongs" and petitioned with his fellow officers that the chaplain resign and "make room for a good man with us. It would suit nine tenths of our line officers, & nearly all the men". As Stevens wrote indignantly, it was the duty of a chaplain "to labor for others & for their Master's cause" rather than to shirk in the rear.[22] Then, as is now, clergy were held to high standards, and their misdemeanors were widely circulated.

To be successful the army chaplain had to earn the respect of his comrades, and a good chaplain could expect the gratitude of the men in return. When Patrick Guiney of the 9th Massachusetts fell ill in 1862, he wrote appreciatively, "Father Scully has been very kind to me during my illness".[23] Peter Welsh, color sergeant in the 28th Massachusetts, wrote to his wife that he had sent $20 home to her via Irish Brigade chaplain Fr. William Corby and, perhaps in gratitude for this service, he contributed one of his hard-earned greenbacks to a subscription to purchase Corby new vestments. The 28th Massachusetts as a whole gave $250 to Corby's subscription; some doubtless acted out of Catholic piety, but for many Corby had earned the men's respect by his unflagging energy and by sharing their lives and hardships.[24] Corby's own memoirs show a great deal of modesty with regard to his pastoral activities, preferring to give glory to God and to the power of the holy sacraments, but do afford some glimpses why the men would have valued a hard-working chaplain. Corby offers an interesting account of how he played a role in keeping the men in touch with their families back home:

[17] Maryniak, "Union Army Chaplains", 20.
[18] Ibid, 23.

[19] Benedict Maryniak informed this writer that he has seen the term "Padre" used by Civil War-era Regular Army soldiers who had served in the West, where they were likely in contact with Hispanic Catholics. Even so, the term does not appear to have been at all common in the Union armies.
[20] Woodworth, *While God is Marching On,* 150.
[21] *Personal Memoirs of John H. Brinton. Civil War Soldier, 1861-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996, 340.
[22] *Dear Carrie: The Civil War Letters of Thomas N/. Stevens*, ed George M. Blackburn: (Mt. Pleasant, MI: Central Michigan University Press, 1984) 230. 237-39.
[23] Samito, *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth*, 96.
[24] *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh*, Ed. Lawrence Frederick Kohl and Margaret Cossé Richard (New York: Fordham University, 1986), 59-60.

> Frequently, also, some good soldier, who had not the time or the facilities for writing, requested the priest to do so for him. Such letters would, invariably, be addressed to a dear wife, mother, sister, or brother, who was only too anxious to know how John or James fared at the "front". Hundreds of such letters passed homeward, and in time the dear ones would write to the chaplains of the brigade, asking for more information. ... The priest was a go-between, exercising, as best he could, his offices of Christian charity in numerous ways. It was touching to see how those who had never seen us wrote confidingly of their family affairs; just as children to their fathers, not only Catholics, but also non-Catholics.[25]

How should a military reenactor view the chaplain? There is no easy answer and, like the original soldiers, it will vary for each reenactor. As Steve Tyler has observed, a man can enhance his impression by thinking about the religious denomination and opinions of the man he is portraying. This does not mean that the reenactor must portray a deeply religious man. As Tyler notes, the soldier a reenactor might portray can vary "from the enthusiastic saint who consciously tries to live a holy life, to the conservative Protestant confident in his salvation and whose thoughts may turn to the spiritual infrequently, to the man who disregards and ignores his religion".[26]

Human beings are complicated, and can participate in religious activities for a wide variety of motives. A good example is Cyrus Boyd, a sergeant in the 15th Iowa, who appreciated preaching and Sunday school while in garrison but who also went to church for the same reason that many young men did, to see "the young ladies who seem to take a great interest in the soldiers".[27] The same complexity of motive and range of belief can be seen in Union Catholic soldiers, whose piety might range from sincere reception of the Mass to superstitious use of the rosary to hearty sinning and occasional repentance.[28] A good example of a Catholic soldier's practical approach to religion is Patrick Guiney of the 9th Massachusetts, who wrote to his wife before the Peninsula campaign that "I went to Communion last Sunday morning. This will be pleasant news for you - a good precaution for me".[29] Likewise Peter Welsh of the 28th Massachusetts could assure his pious wife that "I can relieve your anxiety about me going to confession[.] I was to confession last night and received holy Communion to day thank God for his goodness in allowing me to approach his holy sacraments once more".[30] Throughout their letters Guiney and Welsh show themselves to be fairly typical lay believers, whose faith was real, if uncomplicated, and who took comfort from their beliefs. As observant Catholics, the chaplain commanded the same importance and reverence as their parish priests back in Boston and New York, and likely moreso given the scarcity of Catholic chaplains in the Union army.

William T. Sherman once observed, "Soldiers are Christians if anyone is".[31] While it is often and rightly said that religion and piety were more common in Victorian America than they are today, Union troops varied greatly in the fervency of their faith. The troops who kept diaries, such as Elisha Hunt Rhodes or Wilbur Fisk, were men of some education and culture, and their journals reflect an interest in religion and morality. A reenactor portraying a soldier with some education, like a Rhodes or a Fisk, might wish to interact with the chaplain, or then again he might not if he was of an independent mindset.

An interesting example of a freethinking soldier is William R. Ray, an enlisted man with the 7th Wisconsin, whose mother sent him uplifting reading in the form of the *Northwestern Christian Advocate*, who read scripture regularly and who disapproved of the "rowdyism and card playing" of his tentmates.[32] One would expect Ray to have gone readily to church parade, but on at least one occasion he declined a pass to attend church in town because he had letters to write and "I don't like to be led to Church anyhow".[33] Possibly Ray was a low-church Protestant who preferred to be the master of his own soul. He certainly did not have much time for formal religion and clerical pretensions. While wounded he wrote of the hospital chaplain, "I don't like his profession. He wears the cross, he preaches & has meetings often through the wards & distributes books, tracts, &c".[34] Ray offers an interesting example of how a reenactor might develop very individual and independent religious opinions for his portrayal.

Some soldiers maintained a spiritual life without the assistance of the chaplain. Richard Eddy, chaplain of the 60th New York, noted in his memoirs that some men of the 60th held regular prayer meetings, which seemed to go better without him: "feeling that my presence embarrassed others instead of helping them, I kept aloof".[35] This was a wise piece of ministry for Eddy, because this writer has found that laypeople tend to defer to a "professional holy person".

Other soldiers appear to have been totally disinterested in matters or faith. The letters of Herman Clarke, an enlisted man with the 117th New York, show absolutely no trace of any religious conviction. If he ever had any dealings with chaplains, they were not important enough to write home about.[36]

Many soldiers were not pious before they joined the army. As Rudyard Kipling observed, "Single men in barracks don't grow into plaster saints", and many soldiers would have had little contact with churches before enlistment. The rough and tumble Regular Army culture continued to dominate the Union ranks even though the spirit of the Old Army was diluted by many thousands of volunteers. Indeed, "Many soldiers remained practical pagans with, in most cases, only a bare nod of respect for Christianity. These men would continue all the unsavory practices that Christians since the outset of the war had deplored in the army".[37] Wilbur Fisk wrote that the 2nd Vermont was a place of "oaths, blasphemy ... coarse jokes and vulgar obscenity", and Henry Marsh of the 19th Indiana described the army as "a fearful place for a young christian", having the qualities of "a bar room and a gambling saloon".[38] Iowan Cyrus Boyd deplored the lack of Sabbath-keeping in the army, where soldiers were "playing cards

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[25] Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 57-58.

[26] Steve Tyler, "'The Army is No Place for a Decent Man': Reenacting the Protestant Union Soldier", Article IV.9, *The Columbia Rifles Research Compendium*, John Tobey et. al., eds. (2001).

[27] *The Civil War Diary of Cyrus F. Boyd, Fifteenth Iowa Infantry, 1861-1863*, ed. Mildred Thorne (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 15.

[28] See Kevin O'Beirne on the religion of the Irish soldier in "Playing Paddy Right: Some Basics of an Irish-American First Person Impression". Article IV.4, *The Columbia Rifles Research Compendium*. See also Randal M. Miller, "Catholic Religion, Irish Ethnicity, and the Civil War", in "Religion and the American Civil War, ed. Randal M. Miller et al (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 261-96.

[29] *Commanding Boston's Irish Ninth*, p. 88.

[30] *Irish Green and Union Blue: The Civil War Letters of Peter Welsh,* 73.

[31] *Religion and the American Civil War*, eds. Randall M. Miller et al (New York; Oxford University Press, 1998), 24.

[32] *Four Years with the Iron Brigade: The Civil War Journals of William R. Ray*, eds. Lance Herdegen and Sherry Murphy (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 2002), 13.

[33] Ray*, Four Years with the Iron Brigade,* 101.

[34] Ibid*,* 151.

[35] Richard Eddy, *History of the Sixtieth Regiment, New York State Volunteers*, 7.

[36] *Back Home in Oneida*: *Herman Clarke and His Letters*. Ed. Henry F. Jackson and Thomas F. O'Donnell (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1965).

[37] Woodworth, *While God is Marching On,* 230.

[38] Ibid, 175-176.

and swearing and dancing just as on other days" and generally increasing in profane habits.[39]

For reenactors who portray one of the many old sweats, rowdies, and lost sheep within each regiment, the chaplain would be an unwelcome and disliked figure. Whereas the Southern armies experienced significant religious revivals in the mid-war period, Northern regiments began to feel the effects of conscripts and substitutes from 1863 onward. Most contemporary accounts agree that these were men of low moral character, and so a late-war Union portrayal might make life even harder for the chaplain!

The successful army chaplain needed to develop a thick skin and a quick wit to deal with the challenges of his often unruly flock. The Irish Brigade's Father William Corby recalled going to sleep beside a road during the Wilderness campaign, his faced covered with a new hat. When he awoke he discovered that a passing and very light-fingered soldier had traded Corby's new hat for his old one, a hat that "had become quite hard, with grease and dirt soaked and ground into every fiber, and it looked as though it had been covered with black wax more or less polished". For the remainder of the campaign, Corby was forced to wear this disgusting article, and often "had to enter into an explanation of the hat business. This was great fun for many, but not for me".[40]

Chaplain Trumbull of the Tenth Connecticut recalled his very first service with the newly formed regiment, and the moment when he discovered as he approached the table where his Bible and hymn-book were placed, that some soldier had put an open pack of cards on the Bible, "as if in mischievous desire to test the new chaplain". Trumbull's reaction was calm and doubtless the best thing he could have done: "Without being disturbed or annoyed, I quietly gathered up the cards, and put them out of sight, saying in a low tone to the colonel, who stood at my side, 'Hearts are trump today, and I've a full hand''.[41] When Chaplain Eddy of the 60th New York tried to reprimand a soldier whose excuse for being out of camp was that he had been attending church in town, he learned that laughter was sometimes the best course:

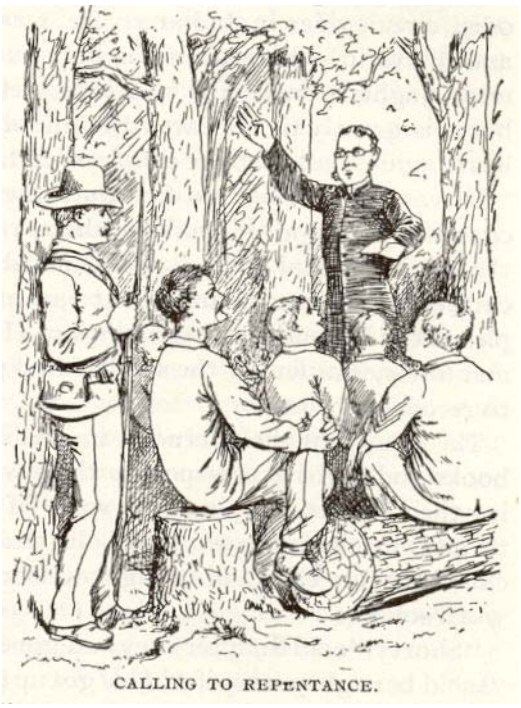
> "You ought to have come back Sunday night; you would have been excused if you were late on account of being at church. You know what the Regulations require?"
>
> "The Regulations! O, but they're awful hard on a fellow! Why, the Bible don't have but Ten Commandments, and the Regulations have five hundred or more! How can they expect a fellow like me to know the Regulations?"
>
> I had to join in the laugh that followed; and heard him remark, as I went away: "I reckon I got well clear of a lecture that time!"[42]

The most visible part of the chaplain's duties, and the one that brought him the most contact with the soldiers, was preaching. American religion of the Civil War period, particularly in the Protestant churches, valued preaching much more than it does today. Preaching was regarded as a source of entertainment as well as edification, and long sermons of thirty minutes to an hour or more were the norm. As is the case in churches today, preaching was the mark by which army congregations often evaluated their ministers. Many soldiers recorded their impressions of preaching in their diaries, and were not sparing in their opinions of good or bad sermons.

One Georgian wrote, "If we had a good preacher I think we would have good times. We have a chaplain by the name of Tracy, but he can't preach much", while another Confederate complained that "Wiatt preached in Captain Marshall's tent on the passion of Christ. I cannot enjoy his sermons, he is so lifeless".[43]

Thomas Stevens of the 28th Wisconsin wrote to his wife that he "heard another dry sermon" and that "The church was cold, but the coldest part of it seemed to me to be the pulpit"[44], while Charles Wainwright, an artillery brigadier in the Army of the Potomac, wrote that he heard "one of the chaplains preach a very poor sermon fifty minutes long; not a good way to induce men to attend [church]".[45] John Beatty of the 3rd Ohio regiment spoke sentiments familiar to many a modern parishioner when he wrote that his chaplain's "prayers and exhortations fill me with an almost irresistible inclination to close my eyes and shut out the vanities, cares, and exhortations of the world".[46]

Austin Stearns, an enlisted man with the 13th Massachusetts Infantry, expressed his disapproval of his regimental chaplain, Noah Gaylord, who singled a rival company for praise in his sermon. "'I thank God for Co. C,' he said; not a word did he utter about I and K, who had labored hard and exposed their lives in an equal degree with the favored company".[47]



This illustration from *Corporal Si Klegg and His Pard* gives an idea of a typical camp sermon.

The key to good preaching is always to make God's word relevant to the congregation, and many army chaplains quickly figured this out. Chaplain Trumbull of the 10th Connecticut based his preaching on the condition of his men, who had never before been "so inspired, so tempted, so best, or so imperiled, and ... had ever lived and faced death in such a time, with its peculiar conditions and necessities" as he found

[39] *Civil War Diary of C.F. Boyd*, 24.
[40] Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 230-31.
[41] Trumbull, *War Memories of an Army Chaplain*, 15-16.
[42] Richard Eddy, *History of the Sixtieth Regiment, New York State Volunteers,* 82-83.
[43] Sydney J. Romero, *Religion in the Rebel Ranks* (New York: 1983), 27.
[44] *Dear Carrie: The Civil War Letters of Thomas N/. Stevens*, ed George M. Blackburn (Mt. Pleasant, MI: Central Michigan University, 1984) 209.
[45] *Diary of Battle; The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, 1861*-1865, ed. Allan Nevins (New York: Da Capo Press, 1998), 316
[46] Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*, 151.
[47] Arthur C. Stearns, *Three Years with Company K*, ed. Arthur A. Kent (London: Associated University Presses). 40.

them in the army, and so he chose Biblical texts that spoke to their experience.[48]

When a chaplain like Trumbull preached well, or when the sermon confirmed the listener's opinions (which for many in the pews continues to be the mark of good preaching!) it was often favorably noted. James Wren of the 48th Pennsylvania wrote in his diary that he "Heard a very good sermon preached by our chaplain", and a Confederate soldier wrote that his regiment's chaplain was a "wonderfully attractive preacher".[49] Cyrus Boyd of the 15th Iowa approved of one abolitionist preacher who "said that human slavery was the Cause [of the war] and we should have no lasting peace until the Curse was wiped out".[50]

Austin Stearns of the 13th Massachusetts later amended his opinion of his Chaplain's preaching when, after the defeat of McClellan's Peninsula campaign and morale had fallen in the Union army, Chaplain Gaylord used his sermon as an opportunity to raise the men's spirits. "He spoke of the many happy homes we had left, of the many days of toil; the many long and weary marches; and the privation that we had endured, and all so patiently up to this time, the end of our first year of service." But then Gaylord reminded his flock that they had not enlisted for pleasure, but to be good and loyal soldiers, who had to "look the danger calmly in the face, to trust in the God of battles, and under all circumstances 'to be jolly'". After this stirring speech, Stearns wrote that the troops' faces "brightened and the regiment marched to quarters with cheers, and ever after remembered the council of the Chaplain".[51]

Father William Corby's Absolution of the Irish Brigade at Gettysburg (*Absolution at Gettysburg* by Bradley Schmehl)

Many troops were willing to forgive the poor preaching of their chaplain if he showed Christian love in his actions and if he shared their hardships. A soldier of the 15th Illinois wrote that his chaplain was "not a gifted or eloquent speaker, yet, I will venture to say that there was not a harder working chaplain in the whole army or one that did more good. With a good education, he combined goodness of heart with an indomitable energy and perseverance. ... [He] could not rest unless doing something for the good of the men".[52]

If a chaplain had what it took to remain in the line or in camp, the men noticed it. Charles Wainwright, a stern judge of men, wrote admiringly of Gordon Winslow, Episcopalian chaplain of the 5th New York Volunteers and later an official with the United States Sanitary Commission, that he was a "famous old trump" who astonished Wainwright by "how well he bore all the fatigues and inconveniences of this hard life; he was as jolly as anyone and made himself agreeable to all".[53]

Chaplain Trumbull recalls two privates comparing the actions of another regiment's chaplain with their own:

> "He's always on picket with his regiment," he said, "and he's always ready to go with it into a fight. You don't catch our `Holy John' up there."
>
> "You don't mean that our Chaplain's a coward - do you?" asked the other in a scornful tone.
>
> "Oh, no! I don't say he's a coward; but, whenever there's any firing ahead, he has to go for the mail."
>
> "Well, but he's got to go for the mail, you know."
>
> "Yes, but if the firing is sudden, he can't stop to get his saddle on".[54]

As this conversation suggests, battle was a chaplain's greatest test. The soldiers of the Civil War lived by a Victorian code that equated public courage with honor, and so for the men in the ranks a chaplain was measured as much by his bravery as by his preaching. One Confederate chaplain wrote home that if a chaplain is "suspected of timidity he loses all influence"[55]. There were no regulations specifying where a chaplain should be in battle, but many did try to stay close to the men when the bullets flew. Chaplain Trumbull of the 10th Connecticut described his position as being "by my colonel and my brigade commander, just back of the line of battle".[56] Chaplain Gaylord evidently kept close to the 13th Massachusetts during the battle of Antietam, as Austin Stearns recorded in his diary, "We were two hours and ten minutes fighting by the Chaplain [sic] watch before we fell back".[57]

Some chaplains stationed themselves with ambulances or litter (stretcher) details, sometimes even taking charge of them. Confederate Chaplain J.H. McNielly remained as near the line as possible with the assistant surgeon. When the wounded were brought in he administered first-aid and, frequently, when medical supplies were exhausted, he rushed to the infirmary to replenish them."[58] One veteran of the 100th Indiana remembered the role of his chaplain in the fighting at Missionary Ridge; "I shall never forget him. Without a thought for his personal safety he was up in the firing line assisting the wounded, praying with the dying, and doing all that his great living heart led him to do. No wonder our boys love our gallant chaplain."[59] John H. Brinton, a Union army surgeon present at the siege of Fort Donelson, witnessed a Methodist chaplain evacuating the wounded "absolutely under the enemy's fire". The clergyman assisted the wounded, sometimes two at a time, onto his horse and thus took them off the field, leaving Brinton to marvel at "his courage, moral and physical, and the sincerity of his religion".[60]

Sometimes chaplains found time to pray with the soldiers during combat. Father Corby's battlefield Absolutions of the Irish Brigade at Antietam and Gettysburg are well known. Chaplain Trumbull of the 10th Connecticut was praised by his brigade commander for his part in the fighting at Petersburg in July 1864:

> I cannot fail to mention Chaplain Trumbull, 10th CT, who was constantly at the front with his regiment, as is his wont at all times. He was conspicuous on this occasion, with revolver in hand, in his effort to stay the crumbling regiment. An hour

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[48] Trumbull, *War Memories of an Army Chaplain*, 67.
[49] Woodworth, *While God is Marching On*153.
[50] *Civil War Diary of C. F. Boyd*, 18.
[51] Stears, *Three Years with Company K* 83-84.
[52] Woodworth, 154.
[53] *Diary of Battle; The Personal Journals of Colonel Charles S. Wainwright, 1861*-1865, 359.
[54] Trumbull, *War Memories of a Chaplain*, 8.
[55] Romero, *Religion in the Rebel Ranks,* 33.
[56] Trumbull, *War Memories of a Chaplain*, 47.
[57] Stearns, *Three Years with Company K*. 130.
[58] Romero, *Religion in the Rebel Ranks*, 33
[59] Woodworth, 157.
[60] *Personal Memoirs of John H. Brinton. Civil War Soldier, 1861-1865* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996, 125-26.

later he officiated at the burial of our dead, while the skirmish line was still engaged and every moment a renewal of the attack was expected. The sound of prayer mingled with the echoes of artillery and musketry and the crash of falling pines for hastily constructed breast-works. His services to the brigade, not only on this but on so many other like occasions, are gratefully acknowledged.[61]

A final example is that of Henry White, Methodist chaplain of the 5th Rhode Island Heavy Artillery, in his description of the action where he was taken prisoner: "During a lull in the firing, and while the guns were still loading, we all kneeled down around the old flag staff in the center of the fort, and uncovering our heads before God, I offered prayer, seeking the help and protection of the Lord".[62] After the fighting the conscientious chaplain was found with the wounded.

After the battle of Fredericksburg, Chaplain Stuckenberg of the 145th Pennsylvania sought out the wounded of his regiment, who were "glad to see me". He quickly learned a new skill, for "I had never had anything to do before this with the wounded; but I soon learned how to handle them to move them from place to place, to cut off their shoes and socks, to bandage their wounds and make their position comfortable."[63]

The army chaplain thus became intimately acquainted with suffering and particularly with death. Not only was he expected to preside at funerals, either in camp, in hospital, or on the battlefield, he was also summoned to attend men sentenced to death by military justice.

Men of the 9th Massachusetts pose with their chaplain on the Peninsula in 1862

While executions are uncommon and are perhaps questionable as "scenarios" for reenactors, they occur frequently in the chaplains' memoirs examined for this article. Father Corby saw more than his share as one of the only Catholic chaplains in the Army of the Potomac, and he never spared an opportunity to try and save the soul of a condemned man through Confession and baptism. Even though Corby's faith was great, these events took a toll on him and, describing one execution years afterward, he wrote, "more than a quarter of a century has passed since this took place, [and] it still causes a shuddering sensation to think of it; still more to write all the circumstances of such a dreadful spectacle".[64]

Such stories remind us of the ultimate importance of the army chaplain, because for all a soldier's doubts and however strong his faith might be, the reality of death in all its many forms was strong, and the chaplain was the one man who could stand with the soldier as the representative of a merciful God, either in the man's last hour or at the graveside of a beloved comrade. In times when suffering and fear were greater than the influences of brass bands, patriotism and heroism, the chaplain pointed to the will of the loving God who redeems such moments.

Conclusions

This essay has covered some of the ways in which army chaplains were viewed by the soldiers and how they did their ministry within a Civil War regiment. The quality and effectiveness of the chaplains was as varied as the men they served, but they were important figures in regimental life, and made living and dying easier for many soldiers. Reenactments and living history events, unless they are of a largely static nature, may afford little opportunity for military personnel to interact with a chaplain if one is present, but it is hoped that the information presented here will be useful to reenactors when such interactions are possible. A quiet request to help write a letter home, a chance to unburden one's complaints to a sympathetic ear, a need to seek moral counsel or a desire to show off a likeness of a wife and child from home are all first-person reasons why a military reenactor might approach a chaplain, and will perhaps lend the reenactor a greater appreciation of how soldiers perceived chaplains.

While the interactions of soldiers and chaplains varied widely, perhaps the words of Charles Humphreys, chaplain of the 2nd Massachusetts Cavalry, from a letter summarizing his method of operation to a colleague, make a fitting conclusion to this discussion the chaplain's role.

I think my work will be surer if I do not assume any premature dignity of unwarranted authority, but trust to the pervasive influence of charity and love. I prefer to work by my life than by my speech; I rely more on the little kindnesses, attentions, and words of cheer of every day than on Sunday preaching, or week-day advice and counsel [65]

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[61] Courtesy of Benedict Maryniak, from the Official Records.

[62] Henry White, *Prison Life Among the Rebels: Recollections of a Union Chaplain.* Ed. Edward D. Dewey (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1990), 14.

[63] Stuckenberg, *Surrounded by Methodists*, 46.

[64] Corby, *Memoirs of Chaplain Life*, 127.

[65] Charles Alfred Humphreys, *Field, Camp, Hospital and Prison in the Civil War, 1863–1865* (1918), pp 16-17. My thanks to Benedict Maryniak for this citation.