

Divided Faith: Missouri Baptists in the American Civil War

Cameron Franklin, 3454 Swan Cir N, Arnold, MO 63010 (314) 536-1180

Missouri Baptist University

Canaan Baptist Church, Daniel Carr

April 19, 2026

During the American Civil War, Missouri became a divided border state where questions of loyalty extended far beyond the battlefield into communities. Churches and their leaders became central figures as the state sought regulation through legal restrictions, primarily loyalty oaths. These measures placed Missouri Baptist ministers at the center of a conflict between religious duty and political authority by making allegiance to the Union a legal requirement for public leadership rather than a personal conviction. These loyalty requirements were established by the Missouri Constitution of 1865, popularly called the "Drake Constitution," which was drafted by Unionists during the Reconstruction period. The most controversial of the provisions contained in the constitution was the Ironclad Oath, which required individuals holding public office, such as teachers and lawyers, to swear that they had never supported the Confederacy in any capacity. (Charles D. Drake and the Constitutional Convention of 1865, 1953) As the constitution stated, "No person shall assume the duties of... clergyman of any religious persuasion... unless such person shall have first taken... said oath" (Missouri Constitution of 1865, Art. II, Sec. 9). This legal structure made allegiance to the Union a requirement for holding many public offices, placing Missouri Baptist preachers at the center of a conflict between religious obligation and governmental authority during the Civil War era.

While most Baptist members of Missouri believed that the oath was an act that violated their freedom of religion, Union leaders justified its existence as an action taken to preserve peace and loyalty in such a fractured region. Missouri had experienced significant

internal conflict the duration of the Civil War, involving guerrilla warfare, as well as split loyalties amongst the citizens, hence the reason why Union leaders feared the possibility of more trouble even after the end of the conflict. The ministers, especially, were considered important figures in the community, whose opinions could be instrumental in shaping public views, thus creating concerns about their political loyalties on the part of the state authorities. The Ironclad Oath of 1865 was not an isolated legal development but the culmination of a multi-year military effort to regulate religious assemblies. As early as March 1864, General Order No. 61, issued by the Department of the Missouri, mandated that no religious convention or assembly could meet unless the members provided 'satisfactory evidence of their loyalty to the Government of the United States.' This placed the burden of proof on the minister, effectively turning the pulpit into a privilege granted by the military rather than a right granted by God. (General Order No. 11, 1863) In forcing the clergy to take oaths of loyalty to the Union, the government aimed at guaranteeing that the religious bodies would not turn into focal points of opposition. Nevertheless, the reasoning behind the requirement posed an additional problem to the Baptists, as it implied the need for the ministers to reconcile their religious duties with governmental demands. This justification reveals how Union policy framed religious leadership as a matter of political security during the Civil War era.

In response to the Union's justification for the Ironclad Oath, Missouri Baptists largely interpreted the requirement as an intrusion into matters of conscience and religious authority. The imposition of the Ironclad Oath led to tension in the Missouri Baptist

community since most of them felt that it was an invasion of their right to freedom of religion and not patriotism. Baptists had long supported a policy of separating religion from state, and were opposed to any form of state intrusion in religious affairs. This resistance is demonstrated by Rev. A. P. Williams, a prominent member of the Missouri Baptist community, who refused to submit to the oath because he felt that the state had no jurisdiction over who was qualified to teach the gospel. In the month of August 1865, at the assembly of the Missouri General Association of Baptists in Boonville, Williams assisted in organizing a protest in which the Baptists stated, "We cannot and will not take this oath." This spirit of resistance was statistically widespread, historian Thomas D. Murphy notes that by the fall of 1865, hundreds of Missouri ministers had been indicted for their refusal to comply with the state's mandate. Murphy identifies the Baptist ministry as an especially defiant group, recording that many pastors went so far as to publish their formal refusals in local newspapers, effectively daring Union authorities to enforce the arrest warrants against them. (The Campaign to Purge Missouri of 'Disloyal' Clergy, 1937) Some Baptist preachers from Missouri, among which was Williams, continued to preach without swearing the Ironclad Oath even though they risked removal from their positions. (A history of the Baptists in Missouri, 1882) Some other ministers were fired from their pulpits or were prohibited from continuing their work as a consequence of their refusal toward the oath, as shown in *Martyrdom in Missouri* (Martyrdom in Missouri, 1870). Such defiance indicates that the Ironclad Oath served more as an instigator of conflict between religion and the government than as a mere security measure in politics. This resistance demonstrates that the

Ironclad Oath became a direct point of conflict between Baptist religious conviction and state authority rather than a neutral political safeguard.

The opposition to the oath among Missouri Baptist preachers was based on certain theological principles concerning the independent status of the church, as well as the supremacy of God above the secular authorities. Baptists traditionally held that the authority to determine the rightness of preaching and ministerial work belonged to God only, and that any government had neither the right nor the ability to define who should be admitted into the ranks of the clergy. From this standpoint, the oath was more than just a simple law to be obeyed, but rather a threat to the independent existence of the Church and to its members' religious freedom. Many Missouri Baptists considered the oath imposed upon their ministers a kind of interference into their spiritual activity and an attempt to turn a matter of conscience into a matter of politics, as if they were being asked to pledge allegiance to the government before they could begin serving God. Theologian Nicholas P. Miller argues that the Baptist resistance was based on a "dissenting Protestant" tradition that viewed any state oath regarding ministry as an act of "sacrilege." (The Religious Roots of the First Amendment, 2012) Such an approach was closely connected to the Baptist principle of religious liberty, which presupposed the absence of government control in purely spiritual affairs. The religious theory behind this is that Missouri Baptist ministers felt more comfortable being removed and persecuted than following the demands set upon them by the state.

The enforcement of the Ironclad Oath produced lasting consequences within Missouri Baptist churches through the disruption of leadership and division within congregations. Refusal to take the oath often resulted in ministers losing their right to preach in their respective congregations. This loss of leadership caused serious instability not only within local churches but also across broader Baptist associations in Missouri. Congregations were frequently placed in positions where they had to choose between supporting their ministers' convictions or complying with state requirements in order to continue operating publicly. As recorded in *Martyrdom in Missouri*, Baptist ministers who refused the oath were barred from serving in their churches and preaching (Martyrdom in Missouri, 1870). Author Christopher Phillips believes that the Test Oath actually backfired. He explains that by forcing Baptist ministers to choose between their faith and their state, the Union accidentally pushed many neutral Missourians into a "Southern" identity. (The Civil War in the Border South by Christopher Phillips, 2016) This demonstrates that the Ironclad Oath had a direct and disruptive impact on Baptist church life by weakening leadership structures and intensifying internal divisions.

The imposition of the Ironclad Oath in Missouri in the midst of the Civil War and Reconstruction years became a critical moment when there was an obvious clash between the civil powers and the religious life of Missouri Baptists. An attempt by the Union to ensure loyalty to the government turned out to be a situation in which being a minister was associated with showing loyalty to the ruling authorities. As far as the Union members tried to prove that they acted reasonably in order to guarantee peace and stability, Missouri

Baptists saw it as an intervention into religion. Rev. A. P. Williams, among other ministers, refused to fulfill the oath despite the obvious consequences. The repercussions of this struggle were felt beyond the individuals involved and reached the Baptist congregations of Missouri, affecting their leadership and associations. The fact that Baptist ministers and churches were involved proves that the Ironclad Oath influenced religious practices, creating another layer in the discussion about the nature of this tool as one of state power. Indeed, this example shows that Baptist resistance was based on religious beliefs that recognized God's authority over any earthly power and stressed the importance of church independence from government regulation. Therefore, the experience of the Baptist churches in Missouri serves to show how the issue of loyalty had religious roots. In the end, the Ironclad Oath in Missouri was proof of just how rapidly concerns of loyalty could go from being a matter of political expediency to an open assault on religious legitimacy. Nicholas P. Miller, a modern legal historian who specializes in church-state conflicts, writes that the Baptist resistance was a pivotal moment in American history where "Religious Liberty" was redefined. He explains that Baptists viewed the oath not as a political test, but as "theological trespassing." (A Crisis of Spirit: Religious Conflict in the Civil War, 2007) The oath tied public office holders to their loyalty to the Union government, putting the Baptist preachers of Missouri in a perpetual position of conflict between the powers of government and religion.

#### Works Cited

Astor, Aaron. *Rebels on the Border: Civil War, Emancipation, and the Reconstruction of Kentucky and Missouri*. Louisiana State University Press, 2012.

Duncan, R. S. *A History of the Baptists in Missouri*. Scammell and Company, 1882. Internet Archive, [archive.org/details/ahistoryofbaptis00dunc](https://archive.org/details/ahistoryofbaptis00dunc).

Leftwich, W. M. *Martyrdom in Missouri: A History of Religious Persecution, the Seizure of Churches, and the Imprisonment of Pastors*. Southwestern Book and Publishing Co., 1870.

Miller, Nicholas P. *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

Missouri State Convention. *Constitution of the State of Missouri, 1865*. 1865. Missouri Digital Heritage, State Historical Society of Missouri, [digital.shsmo.org/digital/collection/mhc/id/52](https://digital.shsmo.org/digital/collection/mhc/id/52).

Murphy, Thomas D. "The Campaign to Purge Missouri of 'Disloyal' Clergy." *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 31, no. 4, July 1937, pp. 410-25.

Phillips, Christopher. *The Civil War in the Border South*. Praeger, 2016.

Root, Erik S. "The One American in a Thousand: The Story of John Cummings." *Missouri Historical Review*, vol. 101, no. 3, Apr. 2007, pp. 129-45.

Rosecrans, William S. General Orders, No. 61. Headquarters, Department of the Missouri, 7 Mar.

1864. Civil War on the Western Border, Kansas City Public Library,

[civilwaronthewesternborder.org/search/node/General%20Orders%20No.%2061](http://civilwaronthewesternborder.org/search/node/General%20Orders%20No.%2061).