Civil War Era Tensions for Baptists in St. Louis

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From 2020 to 2022, the Southern Baptist Convention dropped in membership by 6.1%. That was a total of 866,825 members (about the population of South Dakota) disbanding from the largest protestant denomination in the United States over the course of two years (Earls). Division among today's Baptist churches is a major issue, and especially in Missouri. While the SBC's average drop in membership was 6.1%, the state of Missouri lost 8.4% of its SBC members from 2020 to 2022 (Pipes). Missouri stands out as one of the nation's most divided regions of Baptists. Russel Moore, Editor-in-Chief of *Christianity Today*, wrote about the issue in a recent article:

> Several years ago, I asked an older, lifelong Missourian minister in my tradition why so much fighting seemed to happen in the Missouri Baptist Convention. Sure, there was fighting everywhere, but Missouri seemed even more on edge than most places. "It's because we were a border state in the Civil War,' he said. 'Nobody could be sure back then whose side anybody was on, so there was a kind of mistrust that just became a habit. That's affected the churches till this day." (Moore)

In 1908, a Baptist pastor named Galusha Anderson published a book recording his experience in St. Louis during the Civil war era. His book was titled, *The Story of a Border City During the Civil War*. In it Anderson described a variety of personal stories as well as records from significant meetings like Missouri's 1861 constitutional convention. Anderson's volume is unique in its first-hand descriptions of conflict and solution, making it practically helpful to today's Missourian Baptists. Dr. Geoff Chang of Midwestern Seminary said, "Church history is the pastor's best friend. As those who seek to serve the church, we don't have to be the ones to figure everything out for the very first time. No, rather, we can draw from the wisdom of faithful men and women who have come before us and learn from them" (Chang). Tensions in the 1860s between Unionists and Confederates were especially severe in border areas like St. Louis,

creating a historical context that showcased the wisdom of those shepherds who remained steadfast in their labor. By observing the way leaders like Anderson successfully handled the conflicts of Missouri Baptist churches during wartime, today's Christian leaders may better learn how to successfully work toward unity despite current disagreements.

The lives of the ministers in St. Louis who came before Anderson certainly demonstrate the way racial tensions grew over time. A steady gain in secessional momentum over much of the nation created a conflict that no one pastor could prevent or ignore; this is similar to the way major dissentions grow today. The First Baptist Church of St. Louis was founded 48 years before the Civil War by James John Mason Peck and James E. Welch. While these two ministers had come into the area primarily for the purpose of evangelism to native Americans, their work led to the establishment of the first African American friendly church within President Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase. This church, named First Baptist Church of St. Louis, began well under the leadership of Peck and Welch. John Berry Meachum, a former African American slave who had worked hard to gain his and his family's freedom, became a close ally in their ministry. As a young man, Meachum received an education at the Sabbath School of Negroes, a school established by Peck and Welch. Meachum became close friends with Welch and went on to begin a "colored branch" of First Baptist Church in 1822, which became known as the First African Baptist Church (Moore). This division was by no means ideal but became a necessity as the congregation's numbers grew alongside the racial tensions in St. Louis.

Meachum went on to teach literacy classes illegally to African Americans in the basement of his church. After the classes were discovered by authorities, threats were made to imprison Meachum, and so the classes ended. Still, Meachum did not give up, but found a loophole in the law when he began hosting classes on a steamboat. At this "Freedom School" a

man named John Richard Anderson received an advanced education for someone of his social class. Oddly, this was not his first, but his second formal education; he had already been under the teaching of John Mason Peck (Shipley 23). Through his Bible reading and intake of Meachum's Sunday sermons, Anderson made the choice to commit his life to Christ and was Baptized at Meachum's First African Baptist Church. Several years later, in 1846, Anderson planted the Second African Baptist Church of St. Louis, a daughter church to Meachum's. Anderson spent the rest of his life pastoring this new church.

Galusha Anderson, author of *The Story of Border City During the Civil War*, served as the pastor of Second Baptist Church in St. Louis from 1858 to 1866. During this time, he crossed paths with John Richard Anderson, and they became close friends in the Baptist ministry. G. Anderson's congregation was made up mostly of white persons, who came from "all walks and pursuits of life." (Anderson 122). The church members' makeup included both Federalists and Confederates. J. R. Anderson's congregation on the other hand (of Frist African Baptist Church), was made up of African Americans who predominantly sided with the North. Both pastoral positions came with many challenges, especially during the Civil War. Yet the variety of these difficulties was different for each shepherd, just as their flocks were different. To study both men's ministries is to gain a fuller comprehension of the various issues in the church today.

First, it is noteworthy that J. R. Anderson was an especially bright man in an especially dark time and place. G. Anderson wrote fondly of J. R. Anderson:

> His manner was quiet, suggesting reserved power; his thought was orderly and clear. He had great power over an audience... He was a born leader, but he led by the inherent force of his character. One of his deacons said, "He led us all by a spider's web." He was universally respected, and was welcome to all houses where the members of his church were employed. He never betrayed any confidence reposed in him. Like his Master "he went about doing good." (Anderson 12-13)

Alberta D. Shipley wrote of J. R. Anderson that, “No father was ever more fondly loved by his children than he by the poor of his flock” (Shipley 25). Such character and love were crucial to any African American minister laboring in that time and place.

One clear display of Anderson’s integrity is seen in the events of the winter of 1859-60. G. Anderson recorded that a bill was passed requiring all freed African Americans to leave the State of Missouri. If the bill was this bill made into a law, it would require the exodus of over a thousand black persons in St. Louis alone, around 500 of whom were a part of the Second African Baptist Church led by Anderson. During that Winter, though the bill had not yet become a law, the people of St. Louis generally accepted that it would be. This horrified the Unionists. Anderson wrote that, “the bill for the expulsion of free negroes from the State fell with greater severity upon [J. R. Anderson] than upon any other man in St. Louis. I met him expecting that he would be greatly agitated and cast down; but was surprised to find him absolutely unruffled.” At this meeting, J. R. Anderson calmly explained that he knew the bill would not be made into a law, and therefore, would not go into effect. When his confidence was questioned, he answered, “I know because I have asked up there.” Not long after this, it was reported that in a surprising turn of events the bill was pocketed by the State Govenor, who was a Confederate. To G. Anderson’s excitement, the calm minister’s confidence in the Lord proved to be well placed.

On many other occasions J. R. Anderson was faced with similar adversities. A few months after the political incident, in the Summer of 1860, A slave woman of Anderson’s congregation came to him “sobbing and wringing her hands” because her master planned to sell her to a man in New Orleans. She was a widow who held dearly to her daughter; being sold would result in permanent separation from her daughter. In response to her pleas, J. R. Anderson

went to her master, a Presbyterian Deacon, and begged him not to sell her. The man was unmoved. G. Anderson wrote:

> The day came when, with a hundred or more consigned to the same pitiless fate, she boarded the steamer at the levee to be carried to her doom. Her little slave daughter was there to give her the last tearful kiss and embrace. Her faithful pastor stood by filled with sorrow and deep down in his soul hot with righteous wrath. (Anderson 177)

This was the life of Missouri pastor J. R. Anderson. He faced “many sad, heartbreaking trials” (Anderson 177). The South held that: “black mothers and children did not much mind being separated; that they had little, if any, real affection for each other; it was very much like separating a cow and her calf,” and that, if a slave became emotional at the time of separation, he or she “could be quieted by a sugar plum or a whip” (Anderson 186). Such conflicting views formed the basis of many threats to unity among Missouri Baptist churches at the time. In churches of African American people, like J. R. Anderson’s congregation, members might be forcefully divided if the government lawfully expelled free persons from the state or if slave owners sold church members to other regions. In congregations like Galusha Anderson’s, division was just as probable.

Men who approved of treating fellow men like cattle often carried a quick temper against the opposing Union, and those opposed to confederate slavery often felt "hot with righteous wrath” (Anderson 177). Extreme tension between members of the North and South was inevitable, even within the church. For a congregation made up of both parties to continue existing, political talk was to be strictly off-limits. Andrew L. Pratt of William Jewell wrote:

> [The Baptists of St. Louis] maintained a silence about the morality of slavery for the sake of peace in the churches ...preachers felt their work was primarily spiritual, so they remained silent on political issues so as not to divide their congregations where diverse views were present. (Pratt 88)

G. Anderson faced a tough decision. Should he plainly address the great wickedness of slavery and risk dividing his church, or should he silently keep the church at peace? While J. R. Anderson had many trials in his church, the type of political division found at Second Baptist was a very different kind of problem; it required a different kind of solution. Investigating the work of Galusha Anderson reveals a fuller spectrum of the conflict resolution skills needed for past and present Missouri ministers.

Galusha Anderson had received his education at the University of Rochester and started his first pastorate in Wisconsin in 1856 (Wikimedia Contributors). That same year he married his first wife, Selina Dorr. Relocating in 1858, God brought him to St. Louis where he served as the lead pastor of Second Baptist Church of St. Louis, a church of over 500 members which was located at the corner of Sixth and Locust Streets. He and his wife had three sons, Martin Dorr, William McPherson, and John Anderson. Tragically, by 1860 he lost his wife and all three of his children (Cramer). He persisted in his faith, though, and went on to become the first president of the Missouri Baptist State Convention in 1865. It was about four decades later that he began researching other records of the Civil War to record his own account, *The Story of a Border City During the Civil War*.

G. Anderson wrote of his faithful minister friend, J. R. Anderson, of course, but also of his own pastorate at Second Baptist. Though he, like all "but one clergyman in the city, who publicly spoke upon the great national issue," made a committed effort to preach nothing political, Galusha Anderson was disturbed to some extent in his silence (Anderson 121). He wrote, "I was full of unrest because I had not spoken concerning the duties that we all sacredly owed to our country. I felt that sooner or later every man, who had any influence whatsoever, regardless of his surroundings, must speak out boldly on the great national issue" (Anderson

124). Still, it was not as though his views were unknown to his congregation. In those days it was very hard for a man to hide his political opinions. A Confederate news editor wrote in an editorial that, “The devil preaches at the corner of Sixth and Locust Streets” (Anderson 166). As Anderson faithfully preached through the Scriptures week by week, his audience knew well which side he took politically. However, openly speaking of politics from the pulpit was not his practice.

The closest Anderson typically came to letting politics into his church was in his public prayer. When President Abraham Lincoln was first inaugurated, Anderson prayed for him at Sunday services; this was just as he had made a habit of praying for the previous President, the South-leaning James Buchanan. Many confederates in Anderson’s congregation felt challenged by the weekly prayer for the new Unionist President, and so they chose a friend of Anderson’s to send on their behalf, pleading to Anderson that the prayer might stop. The pastor’s reply to this was hardly disagreeable: “If Lincoln is as bad as they say he is, I am sure that both I and they ought to pray for him; he needs our prayers” (Anderson 125).

In another incident, a banker of the congregation made it a goal to convince Anderson of the righteousness of slavery. Inviting Anderson to his house for dinner, the banker spoke at length of the loyalty of his two black slaves, a strong young man named Wash and a woman named Mammy. He insisted that nothing could bring Wash or Mammy to desire freedom, since they so loved the labor and fellowship of the master family they belonged to. Anderson wrote that, “to hear mine host talk, if one had never known anything about slavery except what he set forth, it could not but have been considered in some respects a beneficent institution” (Anderson 179). Yet Anderson stood strong in the beliefs he had already held, which proved to be wise. Not long after the visit, it came out in the local newspapers that Wash had successfully run away

from his enslavement, escaping to the north. Two weeks later, the same was reported for the woman named Mammy, leaving the ex-slaveowner abashed.

Every so often political issues came between the members of Anderson's congregation. There came a time when a blood relative of Abraham Lincoln, a Union woman who loved the Lord, found herself in trouble with a Southern-leaning church sister. Days after meeting with Lincoln in Springfield, the Yankee returned to St. Louis and started in a friendly conversation with her church sister, in which it slipped out of this sister's mouth to call Lincoln "a clown and a mountebank" (Anderson 162). The relative of Lincoln defended her President as a gentleman, and immediately the Southern woman "burst into tears, and said in broken accents, 'I can never speak to you again'" (Anderson 163). Disunity like this is difficult for pastors to witness, yet Anderson continued in love for his congregation and his nation.

In March of 1861, shortly after Lincoln was inaugurated (in the same time frame as the prayer incident), a confederate flag was raised over Sixth Street of St. Louis. The gesture horrified many Unionists, who had only recently taken down the American flag to work towards peace with the Confederates. No one dared to take the confederate flag down, though, but waited for the authority of Union Military forces to do this when the right time came. Thus, G. Anderson often passed by this flag posted on a pole half a square from his church building. He described that it was "constantly rankling like a thorn in my side" (Anderson 126). This episode, and the accumulation of episodes like it, led Anderson finally to speak of politics from the pulpit. He wrote, "When the pews in opposition to good government go so far as to attempt to dictate the prayers of the pulpit and to repress all petitions for the President, the pulpit must either become subject to the pews, or squarely assert and defend its independence" (Anderson 126).

On Sunday, April 21, 1861, Galusha Anderson preached an evening sermon from Romans 13:1-2. This was two days before Galusha's own wedding ceremony, where he would remarry, taking Mary Eleanor Roberts as his second wife. The unexpected sermon raised the attention of many. Two of Second Baptist's deacons, both Unionists, were frightened away by the bold choice. One of them attempted to persuade Anderson away from preaching on this topic. His scripture choice read: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained by God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation." At the reading of this, the congregation became very quiet. One man, an unrecognized visitor, dared to give a hearty "Amen" as the preacher began his exposition, which Anderson took as a blessed assurance to continue. The ending of his sermon was recorded:

> I love my country. I love the government of my country. I love the freedom of my country. It was purchased by the blood of our fathers, and when I become so base, so cowardly, so besotted that I dare not speak out in behalf of that for which they so bravely fought, I pray that my tongue may cleave to the roof of my mouth. But, brethren, we need have no fears as to the ultimate issue. The Lord God Omnipotent reigneth. In this conflict your property may be swept away, and all may be reduced to a common level. Your life and mine may be sacrificed on the altar of our country, yet Jehovah, who presides over the scene, will bring the nation forth from the ordeal wiser, purer, nobler. (Anderson 129)

By the end of the sermon, many more visitors had come into the building. To end, they sang "My Country Tis of Thee," a song that Anderson said, "had not been sung for many months in St. Louis" (Anderson 129-130). Sadly, the Confederates of the congregation were exceedingly displeased by the service. Anderson wrote,

> My secession friends did not even deign to open their hymn-books, but stood dumb while we sang. But compensations for their silence had been providentially provided. A part of a congregation of loyal Methodists, passing our house of worship on the way home from their evening service, had crowded into the vestibule, and listened to the close of my discourse; lingering there, they sang the national hymn as only Methodists can. (Anderson 130)

Two days later, Anderson married in a private ceremony and left with his wife for Ohio on their honeymoon. While Anderson was still away, the following Sunday came, and a guest preacher by the name of H. M. Gallaher took the pulpit. The planned change in preacher was unknown to many who had heard of Anderson's previous sermon. Large crowds of Confederates came outside the building that Sunday morning hoping to mob Galusha Anderson, many of whom had only heard rumors of the offensive sermon. A brick was thrown through a glass window at the preacher, who was unharmed, so he ignored it entirely. Eventually the mob heard Galusha was not present, so they disbanded and went home. Friends of Anderson met him on his way home from his honeymoon to tell him what had happened. Anderson resolved to write the sermon out and publish it in the newspapers so that those who had heard false rumors would be corrected, and hopefully, less agitated. His solution was successful, and in the end, he was able to remain in his place as pastor of Second Baptist Church of St. Louis. Several families stopped in their attendance at Second Baptist, but Anderson wrote, "Their departure in some measure strengthened us. They had been a disturbing element, and after they had gone, we had that power that flows from unity of spirit and action" (Anderson 134). Though political silence had been beneficial for a season, there came a time when the best course of action was to preach from Romans 13:1-2. Anderson later remarked that his only regret was not speaking of politics sooner (Anderson 130).

A few weeks later, Union forces took control of camp Jackson, the main military outpost of the St. Louis area. The confederate flag on Sixth Street was replaced with an American flag, and so the political tides turned in St. Louis. Four years after this, while Anderson sat in on Missouri's 1865 constitutional convention, a telegram was received announcing the surrender of General Robert E. Lee of the South. In the same year Linoln's Emancipation Proclamation went

into effect, making every slave in the nation a free person. In God's providence, the Union won, and the Southern secession failed. Many thanksgivings were poured out to God that year.

Today, Baptists in Missouri face tensions tracing back to the Civil War. Though these conflicts may take different forms now, they come from the same root problem of sin, man's rebellion against the perfect Creator. The solution is found ultimately in Jesus, the One for whom men like John Berry Meachum, John Richard Anderson, and Galusha Anderson lived. By studying their examples, and the examples of other faithful ministers, Baptists can be better prepared for what the future holds. Until the final reign of Christ is established at His return, endurance and wisdom proceeding from God's love must continue in the souls of His ministers. By this, they will bring the church to unity while overcoming the enemy, all to the glory of God.

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