Emeralds on a Tightrope: The Political, Religious and Cultural Tensions Faced by the Irish Baptists in World War II

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During World War II Irish Baptists, who considered themselves as a “comparatively small body of Christians,”¹ became embroiled in events taking place on the world’s stage. Through an examination of The Irish Baptist magazine, The Handbook of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland and other literature from World War II, this paper explores how the Irish Baptists – predominantly located in Northern Ireland – publicly declared loyalty and support to their Protestant king and the Allied nations, while simultaneously struggling to maintain healthy relations with their brothers and sisters in the faith who lived in neutral Southern Ireland. The paper also shows how the Baptist Church in Ireland continually adapted, revised and developed its wartime theology in order to explain adequately to its members what it meant to be a Baptist during such a long and brutal global conflict.

In the early years of the war, The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland was almost unanimous in declaring its desire not to be engaged in any type of military conflict.² In May 1939, The Union was still hopeful that a peaceful resolution could be met between the nations:

We welcome . . . the appeal of the president of the United States . . . and ask our Government to support him in his effort to avoid the disaster of war by securing guarantees of non-aggression and by removal of economic and other hindrances to good relations between

¹ Historical Papers 2005: Canadian Society of Church History

² Historical Papers 2005: Canadian Society of Church History
the peoples of the earth through methods of negotiation instead of resort[ing] to violence.5

However, as war became recognizably unavoidable, the Irish Baptists felt compelled not only to offer theological insights regarding the war, but also to address any lingering questions about their loyalty. Compounding this problem was the very public and defiant proclamation from Southern Irish Prime Minister Éamon de Valera that the Irish Republic would remain neutral in the conflict. Although the Baptists had been loyal to the Crown for centuries, they were also aware that many other countries viewed the North and South as one nation regardless of their separate governments. Ireland remained the one big question mark with regards to its loyalty to the British Empire and many speculated as to its future within the imperial federation.

Politically, such questions were put to rest in September 1939 when Lord Craigavon, speaking in Parliament on behalf of the Government of Northern Ireland, stated: “There is no falling off in our determination to place the whole of our resources at the command of the Imperial govern- ment . . . they have only just got to let us know.”4 The Irish Baptist followed suit from an ecclesiastical perspective in June of 1940 with this message from the president of the Irish Union to the Crown: “May it please your Majesty to receive from the Baptist Union of Ireland met in Belfast, this humble expression of loyal devotion to your person and throne. We thank God for your Majesty’s Call to Prayer in which we humbly unite.”5 It is worth noting that almost an entire year elapsed between the government proclamation and the Baptist one.

Parliament’s early response probably made this time of reflection possible for the Baptists. Had the government not made its policy of loyalty public at this time, the Irish Union may have had to print this remark earlier in order to assuage any critics who would have challenged Baptist allegiance. The Irish Baptist’s willingness to support the monarchy is evidenced by the fact that the issue in which the aforementioned article was published directly followed the Baptist Union of Great Britain’s official sanction of the country’s involvement in the war. The resolution read: “The assembly record their deep sorrow that Germany’s repeated assaults on the freedom and independence of smaller nations . . . had left our country with no honourable alternative to war.”6

That The Irish Baptist felt compelled to print its statement openly so soon after the (predominantly English) Baptist Union made its resolution
may indicate that Irish Baptists felt pressure to waylay any critics who may have associated them with their neutral neighbours to the south. In this light, the letter can be seen as *The Irish Baptist’s* method of unquestionably displaying its position of loyalty to its readers and, perhaps more importantly, to its monarch. This may be due to the fact that while Northern Ireland officially supported the king in the cause of the war, there is plenty of evidence that not all residents of Ireland agreed with this stance.\(^7\) Hostility towards the Crown was still prevalent in this corner of the empire, and one of the most notable disputes came as a result of the British government’s toying with the notion of conscripting Irish soldiers if the need should arise. Even the most loyal of Irish citizens refused this idea because any appearance of the British forcing their agenda unto the Irish people smacked of the imperialism Ireland had violently rebelled against only twenty years earlier. Prime Minister de Valera even cancelled a trip to the United States in order to combat conscription in the North.\(^8\) In his memoirs he stated, “We claim the whole of Ireland as national territory. The conscription of Irishmen we will regard as an act of aggression.”\(^9\)

Despite tensions related to Irish involvement in the war, many of the issues of *The Irish Baptist* published from 1938-1941 have noticeably frequent passages referring to the multitudes of Baptists who have enlisted in “His Majesty’s Service.”\(^10\) Many articles related information to church members about the state of various congregants at war. The article titled “Not Forgotten” is an example of this as it reads, “All those members and adherents of the Antrim Road Baptist Church who have volunteered for service in His Majesty’s Forces, will receive a Christmas parcel . . .”\(^11\) In addition to this, *The Irish Baptist* assured its readers that they should be proud for the many young people who had answered the call and were willingly entering into the conflict for king and country. Several articles appeared in 1939 singing the praises of the Baptist young people, “Quite a number of young men in connection with our churches have joined the Armed Forces of the Crown.”\(^12\) In similar fashion, many articles appeared in connection with enlistment figures and requests for soldiers’ information so that Baptist chaplains could minister to church members while they were at war.\(^13\) Articles that so boldly favoured the Crown during such a tumultuous time show that Northern Ireland’s Baptists took their role in both the earthly and heavenly kingdom seriously. However, there remained a very real threat that their steadfast loyalty would effectively sever their ties with their southern counterparts.
In order to properly understand these tensions one must realize that, at this time, Ireland was actually made up of two countries, and both of them had been born from the blood and ashes of insurgency and civil war which had ended only two decades earlier. The North, known as Ulster, remained under English authority after Michael Collins and others bartered a deal that gave the rest of Ireland the power to rule itself. After this the South, known as Eire (the Gaelic word for the country), became a new republic with its own government and legislature. Those loyal to England, mostly Protestants, remained in the North and the predominantly Catholic, Republican Irish remained in the South. Ulster’s subjugation was one of the main reasons why the Irish Republican Army (IRA) and subsequent insurrectionist groups had been formed. Now the separation had been accentuated again as both sides took opposing stances with relation to the war.

*The Irish Baptist* relocated its head offices from Dublin to Belfast in May 1938, and, over the course of the war, some articles appeared that show distinct differences between Eire and Ulster. Prior to the 1940 Annual Assembly of Irish Baptists in Ulster, a concerned northern Baptist wrote “I have had a visit from some friends in Eire lately who did not understand that we in Northern Ireland are rationed in certain commodities.” This was to remind members from the South to bring some of their own food to billet homes since those in the North were being rationed due to the war effort. Constant “black-outs” and restrictions placed on personal freedoms seemed to weigh heavily on Baptists in the North and occasionally there was a slight hint from Ulster to Eire that the Northern family needed a little more support and understanding from the South.

Despite these occasional letters, there was never any direct mention of a conflict between Baptists on opposite sides of the border. In fact, the relationship seemed very cordial and the sharing of ecclesiastical duties seemed to bond the two groups together as evidenced in November 1940, “The President of the Baptist Union of Ireland (located in the North) . . . and the Secretary . . . have just completed a round of visits to centres of Baptist work in Eire.” And in early January of 1941, the acting president again visited the South and printed this: “Greetings to all friends, both North and South, that I have had the pleasure of meeting recently . . .” The report from the chair of the Southern Baptist Association appeared on page one of the November 1940 issue and *The Irish Baptist* featured a regular column dedicated entirely to details about the Southern churches.
Despite all of this, most of the announcements and upcoming events highlighted in *The Irish Baptist* were from the North and all advertising came from Northern stores. Some might argue that this shunning is evidence in and of itself of the state of relations between Ulster and the Irish Republic, but that seems to be an argument from silence. Throughout the war, book reviews and letters to the editor were still sent to the Dublin office, and in May of 1941, the magazine was printed in Dublin due to the damage Belfast received from German bombers the previous month. During the “Baptism by Fire” as *The Baptist* called the bombing campaign, the writers in the South showed nothing but the deepest concern for the well-being of their northern brethren “. . . our knowledge of details is very meagre, but we have heard enough to enable us to realize something of the horror of the nights through which our friends have passed.” Considering the amount of charity *The Irish Baptist* extended to Baptist churches in Axis countries, it seems illogical that they would turn on their own Baptist countrymen. A stronger argument can be made that because there were, on average, thirty-five to forty more Baptist churches in the North, they naturally received more attention.

No view of the Baptists in this war is complete without a careful look at how this epic battle impacted their theology and faith. There is insufficient space in this paper to adequately cover all the articles that deal specifically with faith issues, but some prominent themes can be discussed. The war obviously weighed heavily on the minds of the Baptists, and it is interesting to watch their wartime theology develop as the conflict continued to grow.

Early on, it is obvious that the sobering reality of war had not hit home because *The Irish Baptist* functioned as little more than a reporter of wartime inconveniences. The magazine was still full of uplifting stories of courage and poems praising God’s ability to protect the faithful along with little verbal gems designed to ease the mind of the anxious reader: “Worry is like a rocking horse. It keeps on going but gets you nowhere.” It is somewhat amusing to read many articles that deal less with the war and more with how church social activities were inconvenienced due to the war, “We would not wish this year to be otherwise, despite the fact that, owing to war economies, we have to omit our customary cup (or more) of tea!” Another example of this follows: “Owing to the ‘black-out’ conditions the usual Sunday School Social was divided into two parts this year.” But even the ominous “black-outs” were seen as potential evangelistic tools because they afforded the opportunity to preach the
Gospel to a somewhat captive audience. The following quote shows that some young people were attending simply because they had nothing better to do:

I think the young people are enjoying the “black-out.” I stood on the outskirts of a five-deep throng outside Great Victoria Street Church one Saturday night and noticed many standing listening whom I think would not normally stop at an open air meeting.27

However, as the war progressed the questions took a more serious turn and *The Irish Baptist*, though with fewer pages due to wartime restrictions,28 used more of its precious space to act as a theological teacher for its readers. Many articles became more apocalyptic in scope and the most in-depth Bible lesson during the course of the war was, not surprisingly, on the Book of Revelation. This series began in April 1940 and, with the exception of a brief hiatus in late 1941, continued well into 1942!

As early as 1940, *The Irish Baptist* began to feature more writers who used scriptural teaching to alleviate concerns about a just God allowing atrocities such as those reported from the front. In February 1940, one article seemed to summarize the theological struggle this magazine faced for the duration of the war. The article titled, “How Can Such a Horror as a Major European War be Fitted Into the Christian Scheme of Things?” was one anonymous preacher’s battle with this very disturbing question. In it he spells out following four points in an attempt to put the readers at ease:

1) God did predict war: it has a steadying effect to realize that God did predict war; 2) God has explained war: He attributes it to human selfishness; 3) God can overrule war: God uses war to expose and punish sin, to awaken sinners and revive Christians; and 4) God will abolish war: His (Christ’s) return in glory is the world’s hope.29

Most articles published in *The Baptist* during the war were similar in structure and theme. In these articles the reader listened in on one half of a conversation where a pastor or prominent Baptist responded to questions they had been asked regarding the war. They used sin, greed, violence, spiritual conflict, the fallen nature of humanity and various other biblical reasons to explain the war, and most articles are fairly consistent with Baptist teaching in that they have three or four points that usually
start with the same letter and feature Bible verses to support their arguments. Writers usually began by giving voice to the multitudes wondering about the power of God in such a dismal time in human history; by the end of almost every article, the reader was reminded never to give up hope, continue to pray, study the Word of God, and to give all their fears and worries over to Jesus. By the end of 1940, the acting president, Herbert Lockyer, had some final words to give to Irish Baptists throughout the realm who had just come through a dark and violent year. These words seem to be representative of how Irish Baptists were told to deal with their concern: “this article may help those of you who are troubled about the terrible suffering in the world to-day because of the war . . . Cast (your troubles) upon Him, Whose broad shoulders are able to carry all our cares.”

As the war machine continued to roll with little hope for respite, the future of the conflict began to be viewed as the visible manifestation of unseen spiritual warfare. Articles such as “The Bow in the Clouds” appealed to Romans 8:31 and Genesis 9:14-16 to show that God was in control and was on the side of the Allies. The despair brought on by the war was given spiritual significance and the paper exhorted its readers to find their strength in their faith and in the biblical message of hope: “in the present distress may be the cloud . . . faith can see the bow in (the cloud) painted by God’s own hand.” By 1941 the message had changed very little, if at all: “But if it is true that the gloom is lingering, it is also true that the dawn has broken ‘We see Jesus crowned.’” The author used the Irish climate as a vivid metaphor to communicate the message of hope. Anyone from Northern Ireland knows that gloomy conditions can seem to endure for eternity but, without fail, the sun eventually comes through.

Many articles show a heightened awareness of the cosmic consequences of this earthly battle within the Baptist thinking as seen in this quote from the 1943 Baptist Union Handbook:

(The Assembly) acknowledge with gratitude the courage and wisdom of the leadership given to the nation . . . set by their Majesties the King and Queen who, in their words to the people, have laid stress upon the spiritual factors that must determine the quality of both national and home life in war and peace.

Despite official records like these, there seems to be little desire by The Irish Baptist to become more involved in the political landscape of the empire. It appears that many in the Baptist camp believed that spiritually
weakening the nation through sin or loose morality was akin to bringing destruction and certain failure in the war effort. However, *The Baptist* records only one incident where the community felt the need to petition the Crown out of fear of divine consequences brought on by the nation’s actions.34 The incident in question was not over an official government policy, rather it was over the nature of a play. In January 1942, the Baptist Union banded together in order to have the production, *A Man Born to Be King*, banned from the stage because it was believed that portraying Jesus on stage was blasphemous. The Union appealed to the Crown’s faith stating that “the suggested play will call down Divine judgment upon our nation.”35

The effect of this boycott beyond Baptist borders is unknown. Further on in the article the comment is made that “…we would make this appeal to you to have this Play banned, and call the people of the Empire to humble themselves before the Lord.”36 This seems to indicate an underlying belief that destruction in the empire from the war may actually be the result of God’s wrath. Though this theology was not unique to Irish Baptists, it is interesting in that the idea of national sin being responsible, in some degree, for national disaster never fully developed beyond this veiled comment and the play itself was never mentioned again. Other than this, the vast majority of teachings about sin and the need to use this time of testing to increase spiritual discipline were directed specifically at Baptists and little attention was paid to the spiritual life of the government.

Finally, one of the most profound themes uncovered in *The Irish Baptist* is that of the official attitude towards fellow Baptists living in Axis countries. *The Baptist* condemned any idea that called for retaliation against another country and brought to mind the unity of the body of Christ when it explained its position: “Even if we are citizens of countries at war with one another, we have an abiding fellowship of faith and hope and love . . . we are one in Christ.”37 During the course of the war, the Baptists of Ireland espoused the idea that they belonged to a kingdom whose boundaries transcended human ones. In the very month that the air raids began over London, *The Irish Baptist* printed a list of churches in enemy nations with the words, “Let Us Not Fail to Remember Them,” underneath.38 Even at the end of the war, there was little published resentment against the Axis countries, and the official stance was one of peace and a desire to heal for “…no encouragement should be given to demands for indiscriminate bombing which arise from a spirit of retalia-
tion and vengeance.”39 The global tension was handled with remarkable grace and compassion and is indicative of the Christian theology that Christ transcends all national boundaries and that the Christian’s true battle is with sin and evil and not with fellow human beings.

Baptists remained outspoken and unwavering in their support of their monarch for the duration of the war. Although it is possible that this could have caused tension with Baptists in the neutral Irish Republic, both sides appeared to focus more on their religious similarities than on their political differences. Their tradition kept this small family united through the awkward strain placed on them by their respective governments and there is little evidence to suggest that these congregational churches had anything but the highest respect and love for each other. Their wartime theology evolved from an initial desire to placate worried church members to a real grappling with hard theological issues a catastrophic event like a war can have on a faith group. Through the battles, loss of congregants and even the bombing of Belfast, *The Irish Baptist* consistently reminded its readers to cast their cares upon Jesus and look to Him alone as the hope of this world. As Adolph Keller wrote in 1939, the role of the church in times of war is no different than the one it is called to fulfill in times of peace:

the church will continue to preach her message, pointing out that God is sovereign even over a world which believes in violence and the power of armies. She will continue, not only the helpful preaching of the Word of God, but also that service of love which she can render to suffering humanity.40

**Endnotes**

1. H. Corbett, “A Message From the Editor,” *The Irish Baptist* (December 1938): 1. In County Armagh Baptists are ranked sixth in total populace behind Roman Catholics, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist and Brethren. All statistics taken from *The Handbook of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland*.

2. “That this Assembly of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland, believing that all war is contrary to the spirit and genius of Jesus Christ . . .” (“Public Resolution #10: Participation in the War,” *The Handbook of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland* [1939]: 217).


6. P.W. Evans, “Public Resolutions,” Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland (May 1940): 212. It is interesting to note that the Rev. T.R. King wanted to add the amendment that the Baptists “humbly acknowledged due responsibility for their part in the failure to maintain peace in the world.” But that was “overwhelmingly” voted down (Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland [May 1940]: 212).


8. Churchill biographers note that de Valera irked Churchill more than anyone else. He sent him into frequent rages; nowhere is Churchill’s disdain for de Valera more evident than during a BBC speech given by Churchill at the end of the war. In it he extols the virtue of Northern Ireland and their bravery while simultaneously condemning the neutral stance of The Irish Republic: “. . . if it had not been for the loyalty and friendship of Northern Ireland we should have been forced to come to close quarters with Mr. de Valera or perish forever from the earth. However, with a restraint and poise to which, I say, history will find few parallels, His Majesty’s Government never laid a violent hand upon them . . .” (BBC radio address given by Churchill on 13 May 1945; quoted in Winston Churchill, The Second World War: Personal Letters [Great Britain: Estate of Winston Churchill/Pimico, 2002], chapter 17). This address was followed up by de Valera two days later and was also broadcast throughout Ireland, “Mr. Churchill makes it clear that, in certain circumstances, he would have violated our neutrality and that he would justify his action by Britain’s necessity. It seems strange to me that Mr. Churchill does not see that this, if accepted, would mean that Britain’s necessity would become a moral code and that when this necessity became sufficiently great, other people’s rights were not to count” (BBC radio address given by de Valera on 16 May 1945; quoted in Robert Brennan, Ireland Standing Firm: My Wartime Mission to Washington [Dublin: University College Press, 2002], 455). No response was ever given by Churchill or England.

10. Although The Union did give full consent for its members to refuse to participate in war if they deemed it un-Christian, “[The Union] declares its full readiness to support to the utmost those members of the Baptist Church who decide to stand by the Christian faith and refuse to take any part in the preparation for or the prosecution of war” (“Public Resolution #10: Participation in War,” The Handbook of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland [1939]: 217).


13. In the December 1939 issue there is a request that The Irish Baptist forward personal information to the appropriate chaplain. It is of note that the title of this appeal is “To the Pastors of our Northern Churches,” which highlights the separation between the Baptists of the Loyalist North and the Neutral South.

14. This is a gross-oversimplification of what transpired in Ireland at this time. Even a cursory view of the political and social climate of Ireland in the early 1920s would require more space than this paper can afford. For an indepth view of the events surrounding Home Rule and the subsequent Civil War, assassination of Collins and the political maneuvering that saw de Valera go from traitor to prime minister, consult: Eamon de Valera, Memoirs; Ulick O’Connor, Michael Collins and the Troubles (London: WW Norton & Company, 1996); Ernie O’Malley and Cormac O’Malley, Prisoners: The Civil War Letters of Ernie O’Malley (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1991); Meda Ryan, The Day Michael Collins was Shot (Dublin: Poolbeg, 1989); and Bernard Share, The Emergency (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1978).

15. Once again, this is an oversimplification of the multi-faceted and incredibly complex socio-political issues at play in the country at this time, but will have to suffice for the scope of this paper.


21. The same can be said for the Irish people in general. After the “Blitz” in May, President de Valera sent fire trucks and equipment to the aid of his countrymen in the north. This act was a direct violation of the South’s neutral stance in the war. Most people agree that the 31 May bombing of North Strand in
Dublin was a German “reminder” to de Valera not to get involved. Though he understood why the Germans targeted Belfast, he still felt it was his duty to come to the assistance of his countrymen (see Robert Brennan, Ireland Standing Firm: My Wartime Mission to Washington [Dublin: University Press, 2002], 173-175).

22. All statistics are from The Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland. While the South had older churches, the North definitely had more of them. This is not surprising considering that the North was the Protestant-friendly zone and the South became occupied mostly by Catholics. In March 1940 the population of Ireland was recorded at 4,279,753 of which approximately only 4,000 were Baptists!

23. “Do not be downhearted, God is on the Throne. And tho’ war is raging He’ll protect His own” (John A. Thom, The Irish Baptist [November 1939]: 1).


28. In June of 1940 the magazine was compelled to reduce its size and, in the previous month, the popular column titled “Gleanings by Rover” (also known as Hugh Burrows) had its final run before being sacrificed due to scarcity of space.

29. “Notes and Comments: How Can Such a Horror as a Major European War be Fitted into the Christian Scheme of Things?” The Irish Baptist (February 1940): 2.


34. This is worth noting because the Assembly rebuked the government on several occasions, most notably for their lack of character displayed in the early stages of the war. The following quote highlights some of the problems the Union had with their government, “But this Assembly cannot but recognize that our own government has its full share of responsibility for the weakening of the League of Nations” (“Public Resolution #9: International Affairs,” *The Handbook of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland* [1939]: 217).


