

“BULWARK”: Presbyterians and the War of 1812

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In 1815, Robert Easton told his predominantly American-born Presbyterian congregation in Montreal that the British Empire was the “Bulwark of safety and independence” and challenged his listeners to “maintain that loyalty and obedience to the laws, which have tended so much to the preservation of our country.”¹ To him, attention to those ideologies that he believed defined the British Empire would prevent the colonists from giving up “in times of peace what we would not surrender to the promises and threats of an enemy in the time of war.”² Having been raised in Scotland but educated in the United States, Easton was uniquely suited to speak about the tense and unusual cultural climate his parishioners found themselves in at the close of the War of 1812. The quick return of commerce between British North America and the United States, and the just as quick return of American-based Methodist itinerants caused concern for Easton and other Presbyterian clergy who believed that the enticing republican ideas of democracy and individualism could undermine the laws and traits that, they believed, defined the British Empire. Although the war with the American nation was over, Easton’s sermon revealed that the contest between American and British religion was destined to carry on.

This paper will explore the discourse of Presbyterian clergy throughout the contest that would come to be known as the War of 1812 to show how the denominational leaders celebrated the empire and called their parishioners to do likewise. Although several prominent clergy and many Presbyterian parishioners were either born in, or spent many years in, the United States, there existed only unanimous support of England in the contest against America. The imperial traits that they lauded during the contest provides scholars multiple academic opportunities as the clergy sought to explain a war, define an empire, and attempt to place their denomination upon the spiritual landscape of a colony in the midst of religious, national, and cultural upheavals. While the clergy desired to align their denomination with England, they were also influenced by peripheral concerns that were non-existent to their co-religionists closer to the metropolis of the empire. In such struggles unique to the colonial situation, British North American Presbyterianism offers a unique understanding of life as a colonial Presbyterian during the instability and tumultuous times of war.

Three major positions, each of them displaying the Presbyterian support for the war effort against America, will be espoused in this paper. The first looks at elements of Just War Theory in order to show how Presbyterian clergy believed that the American motivations for war showed that democracy bred violence and that British North America occupied the superior moral

¹ Robert Easton, *Reasons for Joy and Praise A Sermon Preached April 6, 1815; Being the Day of General Thanksgiving for Peace with the United States: In the Presbyterian Church. St. Peters Street, Montreal* (Montreal: Nahum Mower, 1816) 14-15.

² Easton 15.

position over their rivals. Next, providence and national sin were utilized not just as tools to explain the war but also to help further define colonial Christianity and unite the disparate people together in shared repentance and recognition that God only chastised those whom he loved and planned to use. Building on that, the final section will offer traits of loyalty, as described and extolled by various Presbyterian ministers, that not only shaped the desired attributes of loyal colonists but also displayed a concern that even something as cataclysmic as war was unable to wholly remove American influence from the British provinces. In all these ways, the Presbyterian clergy were celebrating their transatlantic connections and denigrating their neighbours to the south. In order to assert their denomination within the colonial landscape, the Presbyterian ministers became vocal and stalwart proponents of England in order to ensure that the “bulwark of safety and independence” maintained a strong presence within the Canadas.

I. “Blessed Not to be the Aggressor”

French Influence

The first way in which the empire was shown to be superior to the republic in the Presbyterian discourse was in the attack on the American motivations for declaring war. A substantial amount of energy was invested on the American side to explain the various motivations that led to the declaration of war in order to assure the citizenry of the United States that theirs was a just cause. This was of special importance as those in the northeastern states were opposed to the conflict and condemned it as unjust and dishonourable. American Presbyterian minister, and Federalist Congressman, Samuel Taggart officially denounced the justness of the intended war within the halls of congress when he asserted “We contemplate the invasion of a foreign territory, to which no one pretends we have any right, unless one to be acquired by contest” before arguing that the Orders in Council³ and maritime trade embargoes were poor motives because “It is to be a war of conquest upon land, undertaken with a view to obtain reparation for injuries we have sustained on the water.” He even took issue with the slight to national honour many Congressmen from the south claimed had been made by Britain. Because honour was about more than reputation, but was also indicative of moral character, Taggart argued: “although our honor is said to be concerned in it, and that it is a war which cannot, consistent with honor, be avoided, I can see nothing very honorable in it.”⁴

³ These were a series of orders (with new ones being added almost every year from 1783 to 1812) that prevented allies or neutral nations from trading with Napoleon’s France in order to crush the French economy and attack Napoleon’s Continental System. Napoleon’s system was attempting to do the same to Great Britain by preventing the empire from trading with the nations on the European continent. Given the British maritime strength, their series of blockades of French ports was fairly successful and American trade suffered terribly as well. This, along with the impressments of American sailors onto British vessels, was believed to be two of the strongest reasons for the American declaration of war in 1812. The point being made by the clergy was that even after the Orders in Council were repealed (prior to the declaration by Madison) the Americans still invaded British soil.

⁴ “No one pretends that the war in which we propose to engage is purely defensive. No hostile armament that I know of is upon our border, menacing invasion, or endeavoring to effect a lodgement on our soil. No hostile fleet is hovering on our coast and menacing our cities with either plunder or destruction. None of our cities are besieged, nor is our internal tranquility threatened by a foreign invader. As it respects any disturbance from the foreign enemy with whom we contemplate to be at war, we may both lie down in peace, and sleep in safety in the most exposed situation in the country without anyone to disturb our repose. We contemplate the invasion of a foreign territory, to which no one pretends we have any right, unless one to be acquired by contest. It is to be a war of conquest upon land, undertaken with a view to obtain reparation for injuries we have sustained on the water. In

From his Lower Canadian charge, Robert Easton agreed with his co-religionist south of the border when he proclaimed that “the very critical time, and hasty manner of de[c]laring war, together with the sudden disappearance of all its ostensible causes in the negotiations for peace” produced a feeling of suspicion in those critical of the American decision. Also citing the removal of the Orders in Council, Easton saw much more sinister machinations at work and went on to declare that “the authors of this tragic-comedy were actuated with motives, which they durst not avow, and that patriotism had less share in their conduct than blind devotion to the despot of France.”⁵ Joseph Clark likewise saw in the declaration the violence of the French revolution visiting upon the shores of the new world. He chided:

The vast southern continent, breaking away from its antient [sic] government, is now experiencing all the horrors of a revolutionary state. Heated by party rage, these miserable inhabitants are rushing on mutual destruction. Indeed, the general relaxation of the restraints of religion, which have taken place within the last half century, seem to have *let the world loose upon itself*, and rendered man, every where, the foe and scourge of man!⁶

Although there is no evidence to suggest the veracity of such claims, these writings bound France and America together as allies both militarily and, due to the revolutions both nations engaged in, ideologically.

Alexander Spark also saw in the American motivations a decidedly French influence. Preaching in 1814 he asserted “it clearly appeared that the *ostensible* cause of the war, was not its *real* cause” but that the war in British North America was a costly diversion that threatened to destroy England for the aggrandizement and material success of both France and America. He wrote:

A diversion was, therefore, wanted in favour of this expedition, something that might attract the attention of England, and withdraw a part of her force from the scene of operations in Europe. To form this diversion, and thus to second the views of the Ruler of France, was undoubtedly the real motive, which induced the Government of the neighbouring States to become our enemies, and to carry war into this remote corner of the British dominions.⁷

Because the Orders in Council were repealed with plenty of time to avoid warfare in British North America, Spark saw in this the devious desire of the Americans to ally with Napoleon with

the first place, although our honor is said to be concerned in it, and that it is a war which cannot, consistent with honor, be avoided, I can see nothing very honorable in it [. . .] we are disposed to select that nation alone for our enemy with whom we have the greatest interest in being at peace, and who is able to do us most harm in the event of war.” Congressman Samuel Taggart, qtd. in Murray Polner and Thomas Woods, ed., *We Who Dared to Say No to War: American Antiwar Writing from 1812 to Now* (New York: Perseus, 2008) 11-12.

⁵ Easton 6.

⁶ Joseph Clark, *A Sermon Delivered in the City of New Brunswick on Thursday July 30, 1812. The Day Set Apart by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church for Fasting, Humiliation and Prayer* (New Brunswick, NJ: J. Deare, 1812) 4. Italics in the original.

⁷ Alex Spark, *A Sermon Preached in the Scotch Church in the City of Quebec on Thursday the 21st of April, 1814, Being the Day Appointed for a General Thanksgiving* (Quebec: John Nelson, 1814) 13. Italics in the original.

no regard that such an act could destroy England, God's bastion of freedom, peace, and order in the world.

One of the tools of religion is to equate temporal events with the deeper spiritual power that undergirds them. In the case of the American invasion, charging that they were under the influence of French thinking was a moral challenge because France had, quite literally, attacked the church and attempted to destroy it in their country.⁸ Implicit in such dialogue was the question: "What hope did the people of the Canadas have if the Americans—those acting in accordance with the dark land of France—actually won and were placed in charge?"⁹ The fear of French governance reveals a more global political astuteness within the colonists than they are often credited with possessing. Such transatlantic awareness means that when clergy called France "dark" and England "light" they were not creating meaning but were adding other levels of meaning to ideas already in place within the culture. With that in mind, the clerical discourse chastising America for being too close in their sentiments to the French was a masterful rhetorical stroke.

A Defensive War is Just

Easton was appalled by the stated American motivations for invasion and offered his own interpretation of such beliefs which, he argued, "can be viewed in no better light, than as a rude attempt to force a contented child out of the fostering arms of an indulgent parent."¹⁰ Easton saw God's hand at work because the British were "kept from being the aggressors in the war"¹¹ and, due to that fact, the people of the land were set free from any residual guilt over the destruction occasioned by the war or lingering fears that they were under the judgment of God. In contrast to what was perceived as the anti-Christian joy the Americans took in the prosecution of the war,

⁸ The churches did not supply the only rhetoric that challenged the American assumptions about the loyalty of the colonists. Isaac Brock's response to Hull provides another source that used the threat of Napoleon's France to strengthen British North Americans' fidelity to England. Looking to the brief history of the colony, he proclaimed: "It is but too obvious that once exchanged from the powerful protection of the United Kingdom you must be re-annexed to the dominion of France." Not happy with simple conjecture, Brock went on to inform the inhabitants that "this restitution of Canada to the empire of France was the stipulated reward for the aid afforded to the revolted colonies, now the United States; the debt is still due, and there can be no doubt but the pledge was renewed as a consideration for commercial advantages, or rather for an expected relaxation in the tyranny of France over the commercial world." While there is no evidence to support Brock's charges that the Upper and Lower Canada were to be returned to France, his statements, along with the similar themes in the clerical discourse, do offer more insight into the transatlantic concerns that leaders believed weighed on the minds of the colonists. In his work on this, C. P. Lucas states, "Brock's words show what was the feeling of the time, and how in Upper Canada resistance to American invasion was identified with the world-wide struggle in which Great Britain was engaged against Napoleon." See C. P. Lucas, *The Canadian War of 1812* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1906) 16-17.

⁹ An Anglican example of this follows: "In the actual situation of Europe, in which every individual power has to wage a war, for existence, against the unprincipled and mad ambition of a military adventurer, the Americans ought, as a duty they owe to civil society and to the cause of liberty, which they affect to cherish, to make cheerful sacrifices to the common cause; and they ought by a magnanimous conduct, founded on principle, and not on the groveling views of temporary advantage, to avail themselves of this opportunity of acquiring the esteem of foreign nations." See John Strachan, *A Discourse on the Character of King George the Third Addressed to the Inhabitants of British North America* (Montreal: Nahum Mower, 1810) 87.

¹⁰ Easton 7.

¹¹ Easton 5.

the British subjects were identified as “those, who took up arms with reluctance, merely to defend their British character and rights.”¹²

The question of military morality would be ever-present throughout the war. Several of the clergy felt the need to answer the critique that the love of country was antithetical to Christian teaching. Therefore, the people—both civilian and military—were cautioned not to forget their Christian duty and were reminded to attend, and adhere to, a local church. Right living and the continued practice of God’s laws united the civilians with their soldiers as both sought to expel the invaders with all the tools at their disposal. For the latter it was the musket and the cannon, for the former it was prayer and piety.¹³

In deference to the 1814 defeat of Napoleon, the war with America was considered by Alexander Spark as a “minor consideration” even though he was preaching his sermon from Quebec. While celebrating the fall of the French tyrant he went on to state that the contest with the United States remained “very important to us, in this part of the British Empire” before noting that the loyal colonists of both provinces suffering through “the war lately declared, by the Government of the neighbouring States, and chiefly directed against these Provinces” should celebrate because they, like their imperial counterparts, had cause “for Gratitude to the Supreme Ruler of Nations, that our enemies have not been permitted to ‘rejoice over us.’”¹⁴ This was not intended to minimize the seriousness of the war in the colony but was meant to unite the two causes in order to show the connection between the military threats close to the imperial centre with the similar concerns that were prominent on the periphery.

Also in Lower Canada, Charles Stewart similarly argued: “Some persons have very erroneously supposed that friendship and patriotism are not consistent with the Gospel, but the best proof to the contrary [. . .] is the example of Jesus Christ himself. He shewed a particular regard for Nazareth [. . .] and for John among his disciples.”¹⁵ Although the “Mother Country” might be superior in justice to those who sought its destruction, the successful American war for independence in the eighteenth century provided a potent example that the demise of the British

¹² Easton 6.

¹³ “Our fleeing from these vices, and eternally abandoning them, will procure us the grace of heartfelt thankfulness to the only wise God; and we shall be enabled to feel as in duty bound, the surprising blessings he has of late bestowed upon us, and on our Allies; and ardently to hope, that such kind of good, such victories will be our portion in this part of his Majesty’s dominions. Thus helped by the strength and shield of the Lord, our hearts will greatly rejoice; our song, to use the language of the text, shall praise him.” See Jacob Mountain, *A Sermon Preached in the Episcopal Church at Montreal, On the 13th of September, 1814, On the Thanksgiving in Consequence of the General Peace in Europe* (Montreal: Nahum Mower, 1817) 13. Catholic Bishop Plessis singled out the people that were not able to fight in the altercation and invited them to wage a spiritual war on those who were threatening to remove Lower Canada from the empire. Naming his people “Warriors” he began his sermon extolling them “to stand like a wall against the attacks of the enemy” because while they were not called to carry arms they had a high calling nonetheless. In his address Plessis admonished the “priests, clerks, old men, women, invalids, children, [and] all you who are unable to serve as soldiers” to be united with their warring brethren and “not [to] wait in barren anxiety the development of the war” because they were called to “Join in heart and spirit with me your chief pastor. Serve your country all you can whether in private prayer at home or in church before the altar. Lift up your souls to God. Assault Heaven with a holy violence.” See Joseph-Octave Plessis, *Thanksgiving Sermon for the Victory of Great Britain at the Battle of the Nile. Preached in the Cathedral at Quebec, January 10th 1799. By Monseigneur Plessis*, trans. Henri Joly (Quebec: Dussault & Proulx, 1906) 36.

¹⁴ Spark 12.

¹⁵ Charles Stewart, *Christ the Chief Cornerstone A Sermon Preached to the Members of the Select Surveyors’ Lodge No. IX Held in the Seignory of St. Armand, Lower Canada, on their Celebration of the Festival of St. John the Apostle and Evangelist. A.D. 1811* (Montreal: Nahum Mower, 1812) 7-8.

Empire was not an inconceivable concept. Therefore, patriotism was of significant importance to a transatlantic nation with a potentially limited future.¹⁶

To wage war as a Christian nation necessitated many confusing and potentially contradictory beliefs and, with so much at stake, the churches were forced to take every aspect of the war seriously as they attempted to understand, and teach, what God was doing. Arguably, the most important question that needed to be answered was whether or not a Christian was able to knowingly engage in combat that would result in the deaths of other people. Building on the positive traits of patriotism, John Bethune offered the motif of defending one's home to alleviate any concern the colonists might have related to warfare for the sake of the empire. His challenge to those who insisted patriotism had no place in the Christian's consideration went as follows:

The Christian soldier loves his country. Were patriotism a determination to support our country when in the wrong, were it an inclination to do evil to promote her advantage, then might we admit it to be a narrow and illiberal prejudice; but the patriotism for which we plead, is an ardent and fixed disposition to promote our country's good by all the lawful means in our power; to sacrifice life, fortune, and every thing that we hold most dear, for its security and defence; not to seek its aggrandizement by the depression of other nations, or by doing any thing inconsistent with justice, piety, and virtue. It is that warm affection which a good man feels for the happiness of his kindred and friends, extended to the society of which he is a member.¹⁷

Bethune went on to caution that while the Christians of British North America could fight to "promote our country's good" they were not to delight "in the anguish of individuals, [nor approve] acts of hostility [except] what are necessary and conducive to the end and object of the war." His warning that the faithful fighter never forgets "that he is a Christian amidst the slaughter of the field"¹⁸ showed that not even the horrors of war superseded the Christian's duty to remain faithful and loyal to God.

Such appeals were part of a larger argument about which nation could rightly claim the higher moral ground from the preceding war. Ascribing motivations to various actions was not merely an academic exercise but were tools through which the conflict was given meaning and such meanings were used not just to placate the people but also to further unite them together and construct a British world in the colony.

¹⁶ "[H]ad [Napoleon] succeeded against Great Britain, her fate would have been much worse than that of any other nation that submitted to his yoke; as his enmity against her was greater than against any other country in the world. The destruction of England was his great object, in all his wars." See James Reid, *A Sermon Preached in Trinity Church in the Seigniory of St. Armand, Lower Canada, on the Twenty First Day of May 1816; Being the Day Appointed by Proclamation for a General Thanksgiving to Almighty God "For His Great Goodness in Putting an End to the War in Which We Were Engaged Against France"* (Montreal: W. Gray, 1816) 10.

¹⁷ John Bethune, "St. Andrew's Church (Williamstown) Register 1779-1814," Archives of Ontario, Toronto, MS107, 43.

¹⁸ Bethune 43.

II. Providence and National Sin

Providential Protection

Despite the prolific clerical writings of 1812 and 1813 that charged democracy with breeding the violence and chaos occasioned by the war, the British victory over Napoleon in 1814 provided a compelling example to the people of Upper and Lower Canada that if they desired success in their own struggle, they needed to emulate Britain. Like David Bell's¹⁹ work on the construction of symbols and language suited to a particular time, place, and culture in order to make impersonal terms like "Empire" mean something to the pioneers of Upper Canada, the thanksgiving sermons of 1814, printed and disseminated throughout the land, offered spiritual hope based on an event that was too far removed to have much bearing on colonial life. However, the clergy were able to offer the victory over Napoleon as proof to their parishioners of God's providential care for the empire and challenge the colonists that if they desired similar success they needed to embrace imperial beliefs, repent of sins, and reject any religious or political construct that was deemed, in the words of James Reid, to be a "false philosophy" or "disorganized principle" that could achieve nothing except forcing the world to descend into a state, "worse than barbarians."²⁰

When, in the spring of 1814, the so-called French tyrant Napoleon abdicated, it allowed the clerical discourse to, in a way not available to them throughout the war, hold England's military supremacy aloft as evidence of God's favour for the empire. Morality lessons and cautions took on new significance, as the clergymen were able to remind those who heard or read the contents of their messages that imitating the characteristics of such an empire could result in the same blessed outcome for the colony in its struggles against its violent neighbour.²¹ The imperial victory in Europe was a crucial event in the further development of colonial Britishness because, in some aspects, it answered the question that had been dogging the confrontation—at least from a clerical perspective—from its inception: which nation does God favour?

Alex Spark's sermon from Quebec City in April 1814 would echo the theme of imperial unity and calls for spiritual fidelity among the colonists but would prove even more blatant in his comparisons between the colony and the empire. For him, the Atlantic Ocean provided little obstacle to his rhetoric as he ascribed the imperial traits of "success of our Arms,—the loyalty and unanimity, which prevail among all ranks, of people at home, —and the confidence placed in us, by foreign States" to the colony with no visible sense of discontinuity. For the Presbyterian rhetoric from the time, England was the bastion of liberty and stability for the entire world and, as the colonists continued to embrace Mother England, they, too, would be the recipients of that safety. However, the strengthening of the empire meant that each citizen had to do his or her part to maintain and enhance the spiritual integrity of the land.

Ultimately, the British celebrated the victory over Napoleon and the clergy believed—correctly as it would turn out—that it signaled a turning point in their own violent struggle.²²

¹⁹ David V. J. Bell, "The Loyalist Tradition in Canada," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 5 (May 1970): 22-33.

²⁰ Reid 15-16.

²¹ "Nations, like private persons, have their characters; and, according to their characters, so are they also dealt with by Providence" (Spark 16).

²² "[Napoleon] is made to tremble for the safety of his own throne. 'This is the doing of the Lord;' and it demands the affectionate gratitude of all the Friends of order, justice, peace and virtue After a dark night of terror,

Hope defined the clerical discourse from 1814 as the clergymen saw God's providence mightily present to protect the integrity of the empire and its remaining colonies in America. To that end, many clergy called their parishioners to retain their hope in a loving and just God; the same God who had protected England was sure to do the same for England's loyal subjects in their hour of need. In this section the final word will be given to John Burns who, in a somewhat liberal translation of Proverbs twenty-four, gave a strong biblical and practical reason for the people of Upper and Lower Canada to retain their faith in the British king and constitution:

'My son, fear thou the Lord and the King; and meddle not with them that are given to change'—Proverbs xxiv, 21. When a daring spirit of anarchy, and confusion seems to prevail through the world, it becomes the duty of every man, whose situation in life gives him the opportunity, to inculcate the lessons of obedience and subordination, contained in the words of the text; and to endeavor to extinguish that torch of sedition, which in the hands of a few misguided zealots is ready to scatter fire and devastation through the land.²³

The Revolutions of France and America were simply following their natural courses of violence and anarchy that defined them at their core. For the Presbyterian clergymen of British North America, the war with America proved the immorality of their governance and the victory over Napoleon presented proof that God agreed.²⁴

National Sin

The identification of the war as punishment for national sin, and the accompanying call for the people to repent, also provided opportunities to define the empire in ways that were tangible for the colonial context. The summation of Alex Spark's entire sermon, in which he extolled the virtues of the empire as he saw it, was to remind the citizens of Lower and Upper Canada of the need to be "grateful to the Supreme Disposer of events" because the character of the nation was rooted in its ability to honour God or, in Spark's biblical explanation of the empire, "to adopt the words of Solomon, that 'The Throne is established in righteousness.'"²⁵ Although calling their people to personal repentance, these men maintained a constant view of how individual devotion provided an opportunity for the subjects to place themselves within the larger rubric of, and in service to, the empire. As Spark wrote, repentance was "part of the duty" which was to be enacted by the individual as he or she was called, "to examine our ways and our doings; and wherein we are conscious of having heretofore violated the Divine Law, or dishonoured God, by

suspense and alarm, we now behold a bright and cheering dawn of hope. In attempting our destruction, this implacable enemy hath brought ruin upon himself: The evil, which he had prepared for us, hath fallen upon his own head" (see Spark 12).

²³ John Burns, *A Sermon Preached in the Presbyterian Church in Stamford, Upper Canada on the 3rd Day of June, 1814, Being the Day Appointed by His Honor the President of Upper Canada, for a Provincial Thanksgiving* (Welland: W. T. Sawle, 1892) 3.

²⁴ "However deserving [the citizens of Lower Canada] have been of heaven's judgments [. . .] they were not the aggressors in relation to the United States. Canada did nothing to provoke hostilities. Nor was there anything new, oppressive and unnecessary in the measures of Great Britain, to justify the effusion of human blood" (see Easton 5-6).

²⁵ Spark 14.

our conduct, to repent and amend.”²⁶ Spark then went on to contradict Mandeville’s “Fable of the Bees,” in which, according to a note in Spark’s sermon, Mandeville attempted to show, “that ‘private vices are public benefits’”²⁷ For Spark, because society was both larger than, but comprised of, individuals each subject’s personal piety needed to be seen as part of the greater good. To that end he wrote:

Though individuals die the nation still lives, and is liable, as a nation [. . .] Everyone, therefore, who professes to love his Country, if he would act consistently, ought not only to abstain from vice himself, but also, to the utmost of his power, to discountenance and suppress it, wherever it appears. As the aggregate of the nation is made up of individuals, hence the vices of individuals have a certain influence on the national character; and, contrary to what a late sceptical [sic] writer hath endeavoured to maintain, we do not hesitate to assert, that even private vices are public and national injuries.²⁸

Robert Easton, though happy with the turn of events that had occurred in Europe also admitted the need for the people to “confess, with shame and sorrow our share in those sins, which procure his permission of public calamities” in the hopes that such prayers would cause God to act “in behalf of oppressed and suffering humanity.”²⁹ Using Jesus’ command to the woman caught in adultery as the text for his parishioners, Charles Stewart stated, “We ought to go and sin no more” out of fear that the temporal punishments of war were only a foretaste and that repentance was required “lest we be punished for our sins in the world to come.” For him, like others, the punishment of war visited on the land was both “one of the greatest of [God’s] judgments” but was also sent by God “to purify us from our sins, and to turn us from the vanities of this world.”³⁰ Stewart reminded the people that “when [the American soldiers did come to Lower Canada], I am sure, we suffered less than our sins deserved. We ought to consider these our sins and our provocations against God; and his goodness and forbearance should lead us to repentance.”³¹ The necessity to serve God, prayer, and repentance were seen as the tools needed to avoid further calamities, like war, from occurring and gave a twofold manual for future action: repent and live accordingly. Both repentance and proper living were united not just to Christian teaching, but also to the rules and regulations that defined the British Empire.

War Not as Disastrous as it Could Have Been

Building on Stewart’s claim that the people were not being punished as much as their sins deserved was another claim made by the clergy. James Reid saw God as the source of Napoleon’s strength and argued “No doubt the Almighty girded this man with strength for the

²⁶ Spark 15.

²⁷ See footnote on Spark 17.

²⁸ Spark 17. Italics in the original.

²⁹ Easton 4-5.

³⁰ Charles Stewart, *The Providence of God Manifested in the Events of the Last Year. A Sermon Preached on the First Day of January, A.D. 1815. In St. Paul’s Church, in the Seigniory of St. Armand, Lower Canada.* (Montreal: Nahum Mower, 1815) 14.

³¹ Stewart, *Providence*, 14.

battle; to be the scourge of nations for their wickedness; but when his purposes were, for the time, finished, he laid him aside.”³² Such statements placed even great threats like Napoleon under the sovereign will of God so that Charles Stewart could explain “[God] permits nothing to take place, and brings nothing to pass, but what in his good time shall manifestly contribute to his glory, and to the happiness of his people.”³³ Thus, while the war was seen as a calamity it was also not as disastrous as it could have been. This interpretation of God’s mercy once again reflected the special relationship God had with England. Easton, like his co-religionists, stated: “God certainly was just in hiding his face and leaving us in darkness and trouble” but for him, such a state of darkness did nothing to discount the superiority of British governance; rather he blessed God because “the sufferings of the war were [not] the fruits of disaffection to the government, under which we are placed.”³⁴ Likewise, Clark saw in the American invasion not the sign of cursing but the sign of blessing. He stated that “a people signally favored must expect the visitations of his righteous displeasure, when they fall away to high-handed iniquity.”³⁵

The tribulation was equated with the biblical character of Job and his ability to endure was held aloft as an example for the people of the Canadas to gain inspiration from in their own times of trouble. It would be remiss to overlook the importance these sermons, printed and dispersed throughout the colony in celebration of the victory, played in advancing a colonial desire to emulate the empire that had been blessed by God with military victory. During a time when the Canadas were reeling from the losses that 1813 had brought and an American victory seemed more certain, the British victory became something the colonists were called on to celebrate as their own; not just for the sake of morale or unity, but as a spiritual lesson in what it took to achieve victory in the empire blessed by God.

III. Loyalty from the Periphery

Easton’s understanding that the empire was the truest champion of liberty and safety directly contradicted many of the American clerical writings that held the same belief about their nation.³⁶ Both England and America celebrated the liberty and safety they provided for their inhabitants and lauded them as evidence of the truly Christian nature of their country. However, for the empire, stability was found in the submission to the King and Constitution whereas American Republicanism saw those as the embodiments of slavery and the antithesis of security.

³² Reid 9.

³³ Stewart, *Providence*, 4.

³⁴ Easton 7.

³⁵ Clark 6.

³⁶ One example of such rhetoric around the superiority of the American side is Rev. Shackelford of the Georgia Association, who wrote out these ideals thusly: “Teach them to feel a general interest in the lawful prosperity of all men; and to commiserate the cases of the distressed. The laws of nature, and of God, announce that all men ought to be equally free both in civil and ecclesiastical governments. They know no difference between the rich and the poor, the wise and the simple. Therefore, suffer not those committed to your care, to tyrannise over and reflect on those, who, in other respects, may be their inferiors, because they are such; but teach them the equal rights of man, and the love of liberty, according to the golden rule, ‘do unto all men as ye would that they should do unto you’” (Shackelford, “Georgia Circular Letter, 1814,” American Baptist Historical Society Archives, Atlanta, 3). Italics in the original. Within this is an understanding that the freedom of the individual is at the heart of Jesus’ so-called “Golden Rule” and that America, more than England, had enacted that principle in their national governance.

Refuse New Doctrines and Ideas

John Burns' interpretation of Proverbs twenty-four provides the core of this first trait of British North American loyalty. In his translation he stated a biblical injunction to "fear thou the Lord and the King; and meddle not with them that are given to change" and it was in the rejection of new ideas, both political and religious, that the colonists were instructed to cling to the time-tested ideals that defined the British Empire. Robert Easton said it like this: "Still consider political union, as the bulwark of your safety and independence. Beware of any new doctrine in politics; lest it comes, as a thief, to steal away your treasure, and rob you of the honor to which you have attained."³⁷ The "political union" was a comment on those who believed that the proper way to ensure the future prosperity of the colony was to adopt certain measures that were more akin to the Democratic ideas taught in the American Republic. While the combining of American and European ideologies would become one of the dominant traits of a Canadian culture, in the days immediately following the war such concepts were criticized. To incorporate American plans was to invite disunion from the empire and instability within the land because, as the war had shown, the newer concepts were proving to be more chaotic than helpful.

James Reid also harkened his listeners to reflect on the superiority of the government they already enjoyed rather than courting new ideas. In 1816, he reminded the people that "There remained so much virtue, talents, and religious zeal, on the side of our excellent Constitution, and our Holy Religion, as arrested the torrent of political innovation" and that such a proven record was the surest protection from "skepticism in Religion [. . .] in its daring, sweeping progress."³⁸ Not that progress was to be condemned but that it was to be found within the context of the British system was the deeper point these men were attempting to make. For Burns, the English royalty had a biblical mandate to govern as "God's deputies or vicegerents here on earth" and instructed the people that the system of government they lived under derived power not from itself but from God and that such a system was put in place "to govern and protect the world in peace and quietness."³⁹ Although citing God as the ultimate reason for the success of the military effort in the Canadas, Easton also saw the ineptitude of the American government as proof that the people who fought for England had been wise in their choice. He preached: "Let us glance at the means under God, by which the Canadas have been preserved entire notwithstanding every effort, in the power of political delusion, to alienate and subdue them. This was owing to disunion abroad, unanimity at home, and the active perseverance of those, to whom the defence of them was intrusted [sic]."⁴⁰

However, the people, eager to reestablish trade and commercial ventures were looking south to gain some of the prosperity of their American cousins. Such forgetfulness of the recent war caused fear that the "torch of sedition" was once again poised to "scatter fire and devastation through the land."⁴¹ Conservative political ideologies were needed to ward off the tendencies of the American goals and nowhere was this seen more than in the American pursuit of material wealth. The rejection of that, along with the ideas that inspired such a pursuit, was the next defining trait of British North American loyalty.

³⁷ Easton 15.

³⁸ Reid 16.

³⁹ Burns 6.

⁴⁰ Easton 8-9.

⁴¹ Burns 3.

Guard Against Luxury

The pursuit of wealth was not denigrated as much as the pursuit of wealth at the cost of social responsibility. John Bethune argued that while every society had rich and poor the mark of “all good governments, and salutary institutions, the rich always pay for the poor, and they have reason to bless God that they are able to do it.”⁴² Such a sentiment reiterated the understanding that material blessings were sought not just for personal aggrandizement, but also to be used to bless others. In the rugged landscape of the post-war Canadas community became even more important to survival. Given that the majority of the people still subscribed to an agrarian lifestyle, Alexander Spark saw in the earth a cautionary tale that he gave to his people. He instructed them with a simple lesson from their daily lives: “whatever promotes a mode or fashion of living, too remote from the simplicity of nature, in consequence of which men ruin their fortunes by extravagance, destroy their own peace, impair the health of their bodies and the faculties of their minds;—all these things do obviously diminish the strength and resources of the nation.”⁴³ The strength of the nation was located within the ability and the desire of the people to unite with their neighbours and share. Such unity and combined achievements did not diminish the individual but strengthened the nation, which, in turn, made it easier for all the inhabitants to realize their own dreams. In the submission to such principles the people of the Canadas could make the quality of life throughout the colony better than, as well as ideologically different from, America.

Easton also feared what the cessation of hostilities could mean to the spiritual lives of his parishioners and, using the tales of scripture, spoke the following:

Peace has its dangers as well as war. Jeshurun, living at his ease, and having plenty to eat and drink, became vain and profligate: he ‘waxed fat and kicked: then he forsook God who made him, and lightly esteemed the rock of his salvation.’ Selfishness, pride, and dissipation, are the very worst diseases, which can seize the members of a community [. . .]. Recollect that public virtue is public happiness. Never let the syren [sic] voice of unlawful pleasures, never let the deceitful charms of vice carry of your hearts from those duties, which, in general practice, form the strength and glory of a nation.⁴⁴

As was quoted earlier, Easton feared that peace would undo all that the people had fought to defend. Nowhere was the threat greater than in the “siren song” of material gain. In the days before and during the war, the churches with stronger English connections used their access to crown funds as proof of their superior ability to care for the struggling farmers of the Canadas. However, with the war over, the lure of American business was once again threatening to usurp Britain’s place in the colony. Therefore, a new concept was needed if the royal purse was no longer a strong enough motivation for loyalty and, as before, the clergy attempted to underpin their understanding of British governance through the use of Christianity. It was their hope that

⁴² John Bethune, *The following impressive Letter was addressed to the Congregation of WILLIAMSTOWN, in Upper Canada, by their late Reverend and ever to be lamented Pastor, a few days prior to his decease: To the Members of the Presbyterian Congregation of Williamstown, and of the other Presbyterian Congregations Connected with them in Glengarry. 16th September 1815*, MS 881 Reel 4, p. 2, Archives of Ontario, Toronto.

⁴³ Spark 17.

⁴⁴ Easton 16.

the people would recognize the Christian principles that undergirded all public policy and, as such, that they possessed all they needed to succeed without ever having to look beyond their own border.

Christianity as Surest Guide of Public Policy

Robert Easton would state the issue of the role of religion in shaping public policy plainly when he preached: "As christianity [sic] is both the purest source, and surest guard of public manners; so I would recommend the faith and practice of it, as essentially important."⁴⁵ That statement provides the strongest argument for the public role of faith within the colony. It was Christianity that provided motivation for true loyalty because, as Sydney Wise states, "society is incapable of sufficiently rewarding its members to ensure its own preservation"⁴⁶ But, as Charles Stewart understood society, the role of the individual was to live in such a way that he or she could garner the favour of God and the more people who did so, the more the entire nation could, and would, improve. He told the people "we ought to improve general and national providences. The public mercies and judgments of God concern every man; and every one of us ought to endeavour to make them profitable to himself and to all around him."⁴⁷ The nation was about more than just the individual and the nation was about more than just the community; it was about a collective of people honouring God and God honouring them. That was an idea that a secular explanation of nationalism could neither capture nor understand.

The God who "saw what was done in secret"⁴⁸ rewarded such moral attributes and it was through such ways that the individual character strengthened the nation. Because, as Easton explained it, "The wisdom of God is certainly greater than the wisdom of men" the people were called, through faith, to act in ways that honoured the will of God because only the plans that had divine sanction were "effectual for the right formation of human character" that were brought about by "an enlarged knowledge, and a steadfast belief of the gospel." Therefore, for the sake of the nation, Easton beseeched the people to "study your Bible, to make yourself familiar with the word of God [. . .] By being able to act in this wise manner, you will reap the advantages, and so will your country."⁴⁹ Christianity was not placed in the private sphere of individual tastes and proclivities but was considered, from the perspective of Easton and many others, to be on public display in order to strengthen the nation.

That was how loyalty to the empire was manifest in ways that united Great Britain with the Kingdom of God without necessarily equating the two as one and the same. Because of the ubiquitous belief in the power of providence, faith could not be left to the personal decisions of people without a deeper understanding of how faith impacted the formation of the nation. Religion and loyalty were enmeshed with each other and both informed the content and discourse of the other in ways not conceived of in the modern setting. That was why there existed so much concern within the ranks of the clergy who truly believed—along with all their other less than noble goals—that the strength of British North America lay in its connection to

⁴⁵ Easton 17.

⁴⁶ Sydney F. Wise, "Sermon Literature and Canadian Intellectual History," *Pre-Industrial Canada 1760-1849*, ed. Michael S. Cross and Gregory S. Kealey (Toronto: McLelland & Stewart, 1982) 86.

⁴⁷ Stewart, *Providence*, 5.

⁴⁸ The Gospel of Matthew 6:4.

⁴⁹ Easton 17-19.

England and England's strength lay in its connection to, and worship of, God. With such an understanding in place it became impossible, from this perspective anyway, to be a good subject of the empire without also being a faithful follower of Jesus Christ. And it was equally difficult to be an adequate follower of Jesus Christ while also subscribing to the selfish and chaotic doctrines practiced and taught by the American-based churches. The national goals of both America and England altered their various denominations' theologies and what had been societal concern for the spiritual integrity of the Canadas in the pre-war days became a deeply important political issue as peace once again visited the land.

Since providence was seen as the source of all human hope, religion could never belong to only one but had to be considered in light of the larger community and the transatlantic world. In his celebration of Napoleon's defeat, Alexander Spark saw God at work not just to vanquish a foe but also to defend the beloved British Constitution, the document that sought to honour God through the governing of the English nation. Spark preached:

This great scheme was to be the death warrant of the British Constitution, and to secure universal empire, to this new unprincipled Power, which affected to be the Arbiter of nations. But here, we behold interposed, the hand of a just and avenging Providence. We see the wicked caught in the snare, which he himself had spread. To adopt the language of the Psalmist, (Ps. 7:14), 'Behold he travaileth with iniquity, and hath conceived mischief, and brought forth falsehood. He made a pit, and digged it, and is fallen into the ditch, which he made. His mischief shall return upon his own head, and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate' [. . .] By the just judgment of, Heaven, defeat and ruin were the rewards of his temerity.⁵⁰

Napoleon received justice for his actions but it was not just historically significant leaders that needed to heed the warnings of providence, it was every person who desired to remain within the will of God. In addition to that, the clerical discourse now added the idea that it was not just for personal benefit that such attention should be paid to the state of religion, but for the greater sake of the common good of the entire nation. Charles Stewart explained that "the first and best way of serving the public is, watchfully and diligently to perform our own duty."⁵¹ The concept of doing one's duty served to unite the people in an understanding that what took place within their own home and even within their own consciences impacted their neighbours. Conversely, the beliefs and actions of their neighbours also impacted their own lives. In these ways, theology was used to construct community and give community definitions and traits around which people could gather and grow. Implicit in all of this dialogue was a challenge to the people of the Canadas to be wary of whom they welcomed as their neighbour. If too many American ideas and people began to infiltrate the British colony there was a chance that this bulwark of safety and independence for the entire world could be corrupted by notions of wealth and personal freedom that led to war and chaos and the rejection of what these churchmen believed was essential and inspiring about the British Kingdom.

⁵⁰ Spark 11.

⁵¹ Stewart, *Providence*, 4.

Although Robert Easton's sermon provided the outline for this paper on the unique character of British North American loyalty, the final word will be given to Charles Stewart. This Presbyterian minister recognized that it was in actions that reflected the care and heart of God that the people could expect continued blessings from God. To that end he wrote:

Previous to the war we laid out some of our property, which God had given us, in building this house of worship, sacred to his worship; and we also erected places of education for our youth [. . .] we have studied to prevent injury and injustice taking place on our frontier, and to maintain peace and good will with our neighbours [. . .] The providence of God has smiled on these measures [. . .] We have also exercised charity, in commiserating the sufferings and contributing to the relief of our distressed brethren in Upper Canada; and this good work, no doubt, has tended to bless and secure our property [. . .] The public circumstances which I have mentioned, have in some degree, I am persuaded, recommended us to the particular favour of Providence.⁵²

God had blessed the people of Upper and Lower Canada, God had prevented the flood of war from washing away all that they held dear, and, as long as the people continued to grow and define their land through the inspiration of scripture, so Stewart argued, they had no cause to believe that God would not also care for them and bless them in the unsure days that awaited them.

Conclusion

The War of 1812 was foundational for Presbyterianism in British North America because the ways in which the clergy condemned America and celebrated England allowed them to shape religious discourse in the Canadas for decades to come. What changed in the colony after the war was that all those who desired to serve God had to do so as loyal subjects of both George III and Christ. This would prove difficult for the American Methodist and Baptist Churches as they were forced to contend with the definitions of loyalty, definitions largely created by Presbyterian and Anglican clergy, who sought to expel them from the land. Presbyterian ministers were unanimous in their condemnations of the American declaration of war and their belief that England truly was uniquely blessed by God to further the divine mandate in the world.

With such understandings in place, the clergy of the Presbyterian Church were able to explain the war as both chastisement from God but also show the people that they could ease their suffering through repentance and the shared rejection of faulty, American theology. Arguments were made that Christians could fight in war without fear of divine reprisal because Jesus had shown partiality to certain disciples and Jerusalem as well. Finally, the rejection of new doctrines and ideas, the denigrating of the pursuit of wealth and the cost of social responsibility, and the use of Christianity as the guide for public policy were all utilized to both please God and separate the colonists from their American neighbours.

Ironically, it would be events from the war that would create one of the more prominent struggles for Presbyterians in the generations to come. Finances and access to crown resources would instigate a new dimension related to which church could rightfully and legally be considered the established church of the colony. As John Moir correctly summarizes:

⁵² Stewart, *Providence*, 15.

Coming controversies over co-establishment in the Canadas first cast a seemingly innocent shadow in 1819 when the Presbyterian congregation of Niagara-on-the-Lake petitioned Lieutenant-Governor Sir Peregrine Maitland for financial assistance in obtaining a minister. The American invaders had burned their church in 1813 and had wasted the property of members of the congregation, so that they now asked for charity [. . .] The petitioners did not care where Maitland might find the money, but suggested that the Clergy Reserves fund was one possible source.⁵³

From such a seemingly “innocent” position was triggered a new contest that had been noticeably absent before and during the war. Although the Presbyterian Church had proven its loyalty and fidelity to England throughout the contest in the colonies, the Anglican Church of British North America fought against the possibility of co-establishment status with the Presbyterians; desiring to be the only established church in the colony. Such tensions would continue to manifest and divide the churches throughout the nineteenth century and, as such, are beyond the scope of this paper. For the topic at hand, it should be noted that the War of 1812 granted new prominence to this denomination and allowed the clergy of these various churches, attempting to function without an official Presbytery, to align with England, educate their adherents, and begin forging an identity within the struggling colony. Their official teachings reflected a celebration of England over America but the post-war years were the first time the Presbyterian Church came into its own and really began to assert itself as a necessary element on the cultural and religious landscape of the increasingly British, British North America.

⁵³ John S. Moir, *Early Presbyterianism in Canada: Essays by John S. Moir*, ed. Paul Laverdure (Gravelbourg, SK: Gravelbooks, 2003) 88.