

**Battle Hymn of the Republic, Examined
Or
Should Christians Sing What They Don't Believe
Just Because It Is An Old Hymn?
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1. Do we believe that the American Civil War was the Second Coming of Christ and the Battle of Armageddon?
2. Do we believe that the evening campfires of the Union soldiers were actual altars to Jesus Christ?
3. Do we believe that the Civil War was the “Day of the Lord” prophesied in Scripture?
4. Do we believe that we receive the grace of God only to the extent that we brandish literal swords against the enemies of God?
5. Do we believe that Gen. 3:15 speaks of the Messiah or of soldiers in the Union Army?
6. Do we believe that answering the call to serve in the Armed Forces will enable us to avoid condemnation at the Judgment Seat of God?
7. Does Christ's death on the cross inspire us to preach the gospel or to take up literal swords in a holy Jihad and die for the cause of political freedom?

These are questions we need to ask when we sing the Battle Hymn of the Republic.

Introduction: During July 4, Memorial Day and Veterans' Day, we repeatedly hear song that challenges sound Bible doctrine. It is not a rap song about violence or perverted sex although it is dominated by its beat and cadence. It is a “Christian anthem” entitled the *Battle Hymn of the Republic*. This song will be prominent at nationalistic celebrations and Christian rallies. Most seem to understand its words to be an image of a victorious Church dominating the world and bringing in the Kingdom of God (post millennialism). But I would like the reader to take a closer look at the song.

I. A hymn should incorporate theological truth into its text such as *A Mighty Fortress Is Our God*, *Great Is Thy Faithfulness* and *How Firm A Foundation*. However, the *Battle Hymn* is not about Christ *marching* against sin or the church being *victorious* in leading souls to salvation.

A. The *Battle Hymn* was written in the fall of 1861. While at the nation's capital with her husband, Mrs. Julia Ward Howe observed troops marching off to war singing *John Brown's Body* and she resolved to write a more inspiring military anthem. The *Atlantic Monthly* remunerated the amount of five dollars for the song. [Julia Ward How was born into a prominent New York City family in 1819, a strict Episcopalian Calvinist home. Her mother died when she was young and she was raised by an aunt. When her father died, a more liberal minded uncle became her guardian. This caused her to grow more liberal religiously and socially.]

1. As a young woman, she rebelled against the strong Calvinism of her parents then later married a Boston reformer, Dr. Samuel Gridley Howe. Her husband had become a radical Unitarian who had

distanced himself from the Calvinism of New England. She embraced his tenants of Transcendentalism, then Unitarianism from which sprang the writing of *Battle Hymn*. For Julia, religion was a matter of deed, not creed.

B. The Transcendentalists became the core of the radical abolitionist movement. Many Baptists in the North were part of a less radical abolitionism.

1. Dr. Howe, Julia and their Boston pastor, Rev. Theodore Parker, were members of the *Secret Six* who financed and armed the anti-slavery terrorist John Brown. Rev Parker often wrote his sermons with a handgun on his desk, ready if necessary to defend the runaway slaves hiding in his cellar

2. After his killing rampage in Kansas and at Harper's Ferry, Julia expressed regret, saying: *John Brown's death will be holy and glorious. John Brown will glorify the gallows like Jesus glorified the cross.*

II. The *Battle Hymn of the Republic* can be better understood within the framework of the Transcendental-Unitarian creed. The First verse reads: *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord. He is trampling out the vintage where the grapes of wrath are stored; He has loosed the fateful lightning of His terrible swift sword. His truth is marching on.*

A. Mrs. Howe interpreted the apocalyptic judgment of Revelation 14:17-20; 19:15 as applying to the Confederate States. She saw the Union army not only as that instrument which would cause the rebellion of the South to be extinguished but also the Union army as the very expression of His Word [sword] itself.

1. The Transcendentalist-Unitarians believed that the evil in man could be extinguished by government action. The South was evil and was thus deserving the judgment of its own Armageddon.

III. The second verse presents the Union forces as the dwelling place of their vengeful God: *I have seen Him in the watch fires of a hundred circling camps; They have builded Him an altar in the evening dews and damps; I can read His righteous sentence by the dim and flaring lamps. His day is marching on.*

A. The third verse is so contrary to the Gospel of Jesus Christ that many hymnals leave it out altogether: *I have read the fiery gospel writ in the burnished rows of steel. As ye deal with My contempters, so with you My grace shall deal; Let the hero born of woman crush the serpent with his heel. Since God is marching on.*

1. Mrs. Howe proclaimed a gospel of judgment pictured by rows of affixed bayonets.

2. Taking God's promise of deliverance of Genesis 3:15, instead of applying it to Christ, she applied it to the Union soldier who would receive God's grace by killing Southerners. This was a different gospel and yet the Apostle Paul said, *But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed* (Gal. 1:8).

IV. Verse four returns to the prose of the book of Revelation with trumpet and judgment seat imagery: *He has sounded forth the trumpet that shall never sound retreat; He is sifting out the hearts of men before His judgment seat. O be swift, my soul, to answer Him! Be jubilant, my feet! Our God is marching on.*

- A. Civil warfare was the instrument being promoted for determining the hearts of men. A man's positive response to the call for enlistment in the Union army was the action which would reveal their standing before God.
 - a. This verse describes a general judgment where the lost are distinguished from the saved in order to experience judgment.

V. The fifth and final verse gives the ultimate expression of an unbiblical theology proposed by radical abolitionists: *In the beauty of the lilies, Christ was born across the sea, With a glory in His bosom that transfigures you and me. As He died to make men holy, let us die to make men free, While God is marching on.*

A. To Julia Ward Howe, the work of Christ was incomplete. It was up to men through conquest and civil government to bring about a utopian society.

1. Her biography said: *Not until the Civil War did I officially join the Unitarian church and accept the fact the Christ was merely a great teacher with no higher claim to preeminence in wisdom, goodness, and power than any other man.*

VI. The *Battle Hymn* is a political and patriotic song about the destruction of the South, composed in religious terminology.

A. Mrs. Howe propagated the idea that the North was doing God's work and writes of a vengeful God destroying His enemies—the South, and the cause of the North emerges as that of a *Holy War*. This portrayed the South and its people as evil and the enemy of God and it became a successful portrayal.

B. As a Unitarian, Julia believed the Unitarian doctrine that man is characteristically good and that he can redeem himself by his own merits without any help from a savior who is God incarnate. She rejected a literal hell when she said: *I threw away, once and forever, the thought of the terrible hell which appears to me impossible.*

C. She also rejected the exclusive claim of Jesus, *I am the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through Me* (John 14:6) when she said, *Having rejected the exclusive doctrine that made Christianity and special forms of it the only way of spiritual redemption, I now accept the belief that not only Christians but all human beings, no matter what their religion, are capable of redemption. Christianity was but one of God's plans for bringing all of humanity to a state of ultimate perfection.*

Conclusion: The *Battle Hymn* would be more appropriate to inspire a Moslem to engage in an Islamic Jihad or the Catholic Church to launch a Crusade rather than to encourage Christians to take up arms to spread the cause of Christ.