
Reformed and Presbyterian Christians in World War II

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World War II affected every part of the globe. As in World War I, the United States sought peace and desired to stay out of the global conflict. Opinion polls constantly underlined American citizens' desire to remain neutral and never to enter the engagement. Studying history before both world wars proved that the U.S. remained comfortable with its isolationist position.

However, public opinion drastically changed when the Japanese Empire struck the U.S. at Pearl Harbor. Historians note that the attack awoke a sleeping giant, and the world would never be the same. The U.S., situated in a distant land, undoubtedly played the most instrumental role in the Second World War. It left behind its neutralist doctrine to ensure such a clash never occurred again.

Americans united. Men headed to war, and women gained employment in factories, manufacturing weaponry and equipment, which provided extra momentum with which the German and Japanese forces could not compete. The war influenced every soul in America, including Reformed Christians. Within Reformed theology, the conceptualization of Providence provided comfort, understanding, and guidance. While the conflict challenged the emotions of Americans like never before, firm adherents to Reformed theology and those walking with God knew that the Lord's will would determine any outcome. Such questions remain essential to discover: How did the war impact Reformed Christians? What role did adherents to Reformed theology play in the war? Did the engagement serve as an evangelistic occasion? This article will present the Second Global Conflict from the lens of Reformed Christians. Some soldiers were faithful Christians; others became believers during the struggle. Similar to today,

different denominations within Reformed Christianity existed; this article covers a variety of churches and members, accentuating one common theme: united Americans seeking to bring the war to an end.

I. World War II

While the clash officially began in 1939, tensions had separated Germany and the prominent European nations of Great Britain and France since the end of World War I. Today, scholars continue to dissect the stringent requirements laid upon Germany following their defeat in the First World War. Two sides of history consistently appear – one of the victors and the other of the defeated. Unsurprisingly, another conflict emerged as the German people never willingly accepted the conditions imposed on them by the Allied powers.

Similarly, the Japanese Empire pledged that their people were at risk, defending their siege to East Asia. While historians note that the war started in 1939, conflict ensued much earlier as Japan attacked China in the early 1930s and occupied a substantial portion of Chinese land by 1937 – though it was the German attack on Poland on 1st September 1939, that changed the course of history. Chancellor of Germany, Adolf Hitler, attacked Poland at great speed, ‘utilizing the warfare technique of *Blitzkrieg*’.¹ This form of warfare, known as ‘lightning war’, concentrated on mechanized artillery, infantry, and air support.² By 29th September, it was clear that Hitler had succeeded in acquiring Poland.³ The Polish casualties comprised ‘70,000 killed and 700,000 soldiers’ captured.⁴ This was a brutal defeat for Europe and just the beginning of an aggressive campaign that exercised military manoeuvres that the world’s nations had never faced. Small European countries fell, with the most surprising defeat occurring in 1940, when the French forces surrendered to Germany. British forces who had been fighting in France evaded the bulk of the disaster, experiencing minor casualties and living to fight another day. A New York-based newspaper, *The Plattsburgh Daily Press*, reported British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s address to his nation: ‘We have now become the sole champions in arms to defend the world cause. We shall do our best to be worthy of this high honour.’⁵

¹ Marvin Perry, *World War II in Europe* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2013), p. 22.

² Ibid.

³ Geoffrey Parker, *The Cambridge History of Warfare* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 323.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ ‘11th Hour Proposal for a British-French Union Was Rejected’, *Plattsburgh Daily Press*, 18th June 1940, <http://nyshistoricnewspapers.org/lccn/sn84031094/1940-06-18/ed-1/seq-1/> (accessed May 10, 2023).

The established and tested empire, the United Kingdom, had the sole responsibility of facing tyranny in all of Europe and faced constant attacks from Axis forces until Hitler betrayed the Soviet Union, creating a war on two European fronts. The United States eventually entered the clash following the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Japan, like Germany, successfully invaded large parts of mainland Asia and surrounding islands, creating chaos anywhere their forces appeared. By 1941, Japanese troops had killed millions of people, mainly in China. For the U.S., isolationism was an idea of the past, and the nation entered war, committing to defeat German and Japanese forces in two different parts of the world. Opinion polls changed dramatically, underscoring anger from Americans regarding the recent attack at Pearl Harbor.

The Protestant reformers Luther, Calvin, and Knox all had different opinions on war. Several scholars refer to Calvin as a more peaceful reformer, while Luther and Knox held more aggressive beliefs. All three historically acknowledged that wars were to be part of the Lord's will in a fallen world. Knox proudly carried a Bible in one hand and a sword in the other to promote and protect the ability to worship. By the late 1930s, the reality of another world war was not just a possibility but a fundamental truth. In a 1936 publication, the Presbyterian journal *Christianity Today* shared:

The distinction between wars of defense and wars of aggression should be clearly made. The statement frequently made by pacifists that 'all wars are wars of aggression' cannot be sustained by history. Despite the fact that some profited personally through our entrance into the World War (first) and some were most anxious for this even before it took place, the fact remains that our participation in that war was not prompted by a desire for territory, extension of power, or extension of markets.⁶

Even within Christianity, believers in America differed on war and America's position or any potential involvement in current world affairs. Troublesome questions remained: How could Christians justify war? Could they partake in the conflict? After the Japanese attack in 1941, Americans had little choice, as many men found themselves drafted into service, and others volunteered willingly.

⁶ L. Nelson Bell, 'Some Dangers in the Present Pacifist Movements', *Christianity Today*, March 1936, https://www.pcahistory.org/HCLibrary/periodicals/CT/1935-36/06-10_mar.pdf (accessed May 11, 2023).

II. Experiences in WWII

Joe H. Light, a young man from the Pennsylvania Dutch community, remembered the German attack on Poland. Like many others in the community, his family was of German descent.⁷ He wrote the following of the invasion: ‘I can recall Grandmother Light, who generally did not express strong opinions, say, “I hope they get that Hitler.” Grandpa Light always referred to Germans as “the Huns”.’⁸ Light, a longstanding member of the Second Presbyterian Church (PCUSA) in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, knew by age sixteen that his future was in Europe, fighting for the U.S.

Reflecting on the Pearl Harbor attack, he shared, ‘We were all stunned on December 7, 1941, to hear about the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. The question about America’s participation in the war was answered on that day.’⁹ Light followed in his brother’s footsteps and joined the army soon after his eighteenth birthday. Strategically, the U.S. forces outlined a Europe-first battle plan, focusing on defeating Hitler. Soldiers like Light graduated from their assigned boot camps and headed to Europe to face darkness head-on. The Army Department provided soldiers with a ‘Short Guide to Great Britain’. The opening sentence declared, ‘YOU are going to Great Britain as part of an Allied offensive – to meet Hitler and beat him on his own ground.’¹⁰ A few sentences later, the guide stated, ‘America and Britain are allies. Hitler knows that they are both powerful countries, tough and resourceful. He knows that they, with the other United Nations, mean his crushing defeat in the end.’¹¹ The Army maintained one goal: to unite Americans and Brits as one. The guide further shared:

No Time to Fight Old Wars

If you come from an Irish American family, you may think of the English as persecutors of the Irish, or you may think of them as enemy Redcoats who fought against us in the American Revolution and the War of 1812. But there is no time today to fight old wars over again or bring up old grievances. We don’t worry about which side our grandfathers fought on in the Civil War, because it doesn’t mean anything now. We can defeat

⁷ Joe H. Light, *An Infantryman Remembers World War II* (Shippensburg: Beidel Printing House Inc., 1997), p. 1.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

¹⁰ War and Navy Departments, *A Short Guide to Great Britain* (Washington: War and Navy Departments, 1939), p. 1.

¹¹ Ibid.

Hitler's propaganda with a weapon of our own. Plain, common horse sense; understanding of evident truths.

The most evident truth of all is that in their major ways of life the British and American people are much alike. They speak the same language. They both believe in representative government, in freedom of worship, in freedom of speech. But each country has minor national characteristics that differ. It is by causing misunderstanding over these minor differences that Hitler hopes to make his propaganda effective.¹²

An emphasis on freedom of worship rang true for Americans. In the 1940s, most Americans recognized the Christian religion as their own. Historically, Americans fought for the freedom of religion and the right to worship freely. Within Reformed theology, the past ancestors of the Pilgrims and Puritans highlighted the significance of religious liberty. America, the melting pot of faiths and denominations, served as an example of a separation of church and state, a principle that permitted Christians to live free from tyranny. Undoubtedly, denominational doctrine and theological differences mattered; however, the ability to maintain freedom from religious persecution lay upon the hearts of Christian Americans.

The engagement affected every citizen. Some church members volunteered, and others became drafted for service. Montford Owen Blackburn Jr., later a member in First Presbyterian Church of Richland, Michigan (PCUSA), was a tail gunner in the war. His plane, a B-17 named *House of Lourds*, completed 'twenty-five missions'.¹³ Blackburn replaced the gunner before him who was killed in action; Blackburn never asked how he died.¹⁴ Another member of the same church, Jack Gray, served in the infantry for the U.S. Army and shared, 'War is terrible. It's when man's nature gets out of existence as it should be, as we learn about it in the Bible. Yet, in the Bible, brother killed brother.'¹⁵ For such Presbyterians, they entered a conflict in which opposing worldviews influenced tyrannical behaviour. Historically influenced by Protestant sects of Lutheranism and Reformed theology, many Germans largely followed the Nazi Party in which Jesus Christ did not serve as the foundation of life. Both Hitler and Japanese Emperor Hirohito resembled deity-type figures within their prospective lands.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ First Presbyterian Church, *World War II Memories* (Richland: First Presbyterian Church, 2005), p. 9.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 37.

Heavily influenced by Shintoism, the Japanese closely followed Hirohito (1901–1989) while despising other organized religions such as Christianity. Japan idolized Hirohito. One ancient scroll read:

Three hundred years ago tablets were erected in Japan, on one of which was this inscription: ‘So long as the sun warms the earth, let no Christian be so bold as to come to Japan; and let all know that if the King of Spain, or the Christians’ God, or the great God of all violate this command, he shall pay for it with his head.’¹⁶

The German government ordered the Nazi flag to be flown outside every church in Germany. Hitler changed Scripture according to his Nazi agenda. The *Schwarze Korps*, a German newspaper, proclaimed Hitler had the ‘same power as the Almighty Creator’.¹⁷ An account recorded one German stating the following about Hitler:

My Fuehrer (Leader) gave me not only a political ‘Weltanschauung’ but also a religion. He gave me a faith, which even as a child I had never possessed. This faith is a faith in ourselves, in our strength and our greatness, in the mysterious power of Blood, our Soil, and the German nation.¹⁸

American Presbyterians knew Nazism could not function within the basic tenets of Christianity. An article in *Christianity Today* (Presbyterian Journal) shared such concerns:

Recent press reports state that the Confessional Churches and the Lutheran Churches have allied themselves together to oppose union with what is known as the German Christians, who are willing to discard Old Testament and mix with the New Testament the Nazi tenets of ‘race, blood and soil’.

Adding:

In the coming elections, they will stand for a new general synod which will draw up a new constitution for the whole German Protestant Church, wholly divorced from the so-called German Christians. This will be in opposition to the plan of Hitler for a new general synod uniting all the elements. Whether these true Christians will be successful in their opposition is still to be seen. Earnest prayer should be made on their behalf by Christians everywhere.¹⁹

¹⁶ Eugene C. Routh, *The Word Overcoming the World* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1941), p. 141.

¹⁷ Don Norman, ‘Nebuchadnezzar, the King, Made an Image,’ *Baptist & Reflector* (Franklin, TN), 20th July 1939, http://media2.sbhla.org.s3.amazonaws.com/tbarchive/1939/TB_1939_07_20.pdf (accessed May 10, 2023).

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Christianity Today, ‘The Church in Germany,’ *Christianity Today*, April 1937, https://www.pcahistory.org/HCLibrary/periodicals/CT/1936-37/7-12_apr.pdf (accessed May 11, 2023).

Sadly, such opposition to Hitler failed. Nazism governed the churches, and anyone who opposed such an agenda was an enemy of the state. While many American Reformed Christians had a deep history in Germany, such statements troubled them and separated them from radical humanism. Professor of Church History, James H. Smylie, wrote, ‘Presbyterians were assisted in dealing with these events of the 1930s and 1940s by a fresh theological movement often referred to as neo-orthodoxy. This movement began in the discouragement and despair of World War I, the Depression, and during the German Church’s struggle with Nazism. This produced the famous Barmen Declaration, affirming that “Jesus Christ is the Lord” in a challenge to the modern totalitarian state.’²⁰ The Christian worldview may allow nationalism, the love and devotion to one’s nation; however, it certainly does not condone the admiration and idolatry of a person or country over the Lord Jesus Christ. Reformed believers passionately felt that Providence had sent them to fight in Europe and the Pacific.

Such rhetoric from Germany and Japan blasphemed the Lord’s Holy Name. Magyar Reformed Church in New Brunswick, New Jersey, was home to many second-generation Hungarian Americans. With a connection to the PCUSA and Reformed Church in America (RCA), the church sent over one hundred members to enter the war. These Americans faced their lineal ancestors in combat, as Hungary largely supported Germany. Writing to his pastor, one soldier stated:

But I guess all of the lads feel as I do and furthermore we are doing our bit for a worthy cause and why not end it (war) so that all people and mankind shall feel towards one another as brothers and sisters, and not as enemies. In this way we shall have no more wars. Why cannot people be content with what they have? Why do they feel that hungry lust for power and money? I’ve been asking myself this for a long time and it seems that I cannot answer it. God alone is the only person I feel who is capable of answering this and I know that he will, that peace is once again restored upon this sinned world of ours.²¹

Writing to the same pastor (Rev. Andrew Kosa), another church member, Al Takacs, wrote, ‘We have a very good chaplain here, and I go to church every opportunity my time permits me. As you probably know that I am in a Coast Artillery (sic) outfit, and we are all by ourselves (sic), the main

²⁰ James H. Smylie, *A Brief History of the Presbyterians* (Louisville: Geneva Press, 1996), p. 118.

²¹ Ilona Kovacs, *Katona Levelek* (Budapest: Neprajzi Museum, 2012), p. 105.

camp is quite a ways from here, so for that reason the chaplain, at times, comes over here and holds a service for us.²² Pastor Kosa, clearly concerned about the spiritual life and attendance of church services, penned letters to congregational members and people of the New Brunswick community serving overseas. In response to Kosa, Joseph Bartha expressed his faith:

I found out that only those people who love God can only attend whole heartedly. It also build up a man's spirit and faith. (sic) And it gives him the courage to fight, and push forward till Victory is ours. Then and only then, will we have peace on earth, and live the life, we love so dearly. Life is too short and sweet to just throw away, just because a few greedy and jealous men, want to have all the profits of war, and take their strife away from us. But we must fight again walk the streets as a free man. (sic)²³

The soldiers knew the cost of fighting, yet most willingly volunteered and remained eager to end the global conflict. War makes the soul tremble like no other event in humanity. A Presbyterian from Michigan, Bob Miller, recalled his experience in the war, which played a role in his conversion:

I never knew how big the ocean was until I spent 52 days on that cussed boat! Before that, my faith was kind of haphazard. But I think I got it together when they fired torpedoes at us. You find out that you're all alone out there on that great big ocean, and somebody's trying to sink you. There's a few minutes where you really get to think about it. I think that's when your faith comes through. You look out over all that dark, rainy ocean, and that's the time when your faith either lets you down or changes you.²⁴

The First Christian Reformed Church (CRC) in Hull, Iowa, distributed a tract paying tribute to members who died in combat and those currently serving overseas. Some of the fallen included Pvt. Merle G. Klay killed in March 1944, and Pfc. William Vander Kooi, killed in action on March 6, 1945.²⁵ The secretary of the church, Miss Rose Nobel shared a prayer:

Dear Lord of Hosts, stretch forth Thine arm
And cause this war to cease;
For nations groan, war-weary,

²² Ibid., p. 109.

²³ Ibid., p. 123.

²⁴ First Christian Reformed Church, *Lest We Forget, Our Service Personnel* (Hull: First Christian Reformed Church, 1945), p. 110.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 3.

And people yearn for peace.
 Destruction reigns in many lands,
 We live in consternation.
 O wilt Thou hear our prayer, dear God,
 Have mercy on our nation.
 Forgive the wrong, remove all the hate
 May we Thy Name esteem;
 May all humanity confess,
 'Jehovah is Supreme!'²⁶

Joe H. Light, the Pennsylvanian Presbyterian, received the Purple Heart after sustaining an injury in Europe. Light and two other men fired upon German soldiers when they spotted a Panzerfaust projectile heading directly toward them.²⁷ Light recalled, 'It flew through the air with the speed of a well thrown football pass with a length of pipe wobbling behind it. The feeling I had was one of complete unreality.'²⁸ The explosion blew the three soldiers into a ditch, damaging a U.S. tank, the ultimate target.²⁹ The tank blast caused a gasoline spill, engulfing the soldiers in the fire. He recalled, 'Being on fire is a horrible experience. I frantically brushed off my face with both hands as I felt a searing heat smothering me. I could not breathe. There was some water in the ditch, and we rolled in it to get away from the flames.'³⁰ Bleeding profusely and suffering from temporary sight and hearing loss, Light struggled to crawl fifty yards, where a medic rescued him.³¹ The tested combat veteran served in Europe for two years and was an authentic war hero who served in the Battle of the Bulge, among other German encounters.

Like the handbook *Army Guide to Great Britain*, the Presbyterian Church in the United States provided a *Book of Worship and Devotion for the Armed Forces*. Modelling Oliver Cromwell's *Soldier's Pocket Bible* and the *Soldier's Pocket Book* during the English Civil War, the booklet assisted Presbyterian clergy in church order, hymns, and brief Bible reading plans. The book contained the Commandments, Beatitudes, a declaration of faith, and various Psalms. One such famous hymn read:

²⁶ Ibid., p. 36.

²⁷ Light, *An Infantryman Remembers World War II*, p. 131.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 132.

³¹ Ibid., p. 133.

Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, With the cross of
 Jesus going on before; Christ the royal Master leads against the
 foe; Forward into battle, see His banners go.

Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, With the cross of
 Jesus going on before.

Like a mighty army moves the Church of God; Brothers, we are
 treading where the saints have trod; We are not divided, all one
 body we, One in hope and doctrine, one in charity.

Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane, But the
 Church of Jesus constant will remain; Gates of hell can never
 'gainst that Church prevail; We have Christ's own promise, and
 that cannot fail.

Onward, then, ye people, join our happy throng. Blend with ours
 your voices in the triumph song; Glory, laud, and honour
 unto Christ the King; This through countless ages men and
 angels sing.³²

Another Reformed Hungarian-American soldier reflected on his duty, stating, 'It does make me feel better (serving) and I know I'm doing right.'³³ Pvt. Al Takacs expressed his relief that his younger brother was not allowed to join the Army due to medical reasons:

I realize that I'm being a little selfish and unpatriotic when I say that I was glad to hear that they exempted Julius from the Army, but I am sure that everybody would have the same opinion towards their brother if they were in his condition because unfortunately he is just a child and like him self and many others they are not capable of taking care of himself whenever the occasion should occur. Evidently this happens to be a man's war, and the only over that really know it is the ones who are serving overseas. (sic) A soldiers life back at home and during peace time is very easy because they have everything so convenient, where we have to go and do without so many things, especially food, unfortunately in this land doesn't grow any food, and the only time we do get any is when and if our boat gets here without any difficulty. (sic)³⁴

Christian traits of humbleness, love, kindness, and brotherhood commonly appeared. Such reflections resembled battle accounts of Joshua and David

³² Presbyterian Church in the United States, *A Book of Worship and Devotion for the Armed Forces* (Louisville: Board of Education, 1943), p. 87.

³³ Kovacs, *Katona Levelek*, p. 152.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 161.

in the Scriptures. While Christians existed in every nation, including Germany, Americans remained sincere and felt their service was one of faithfulness and deliverance of evil. Soldiers not only experienced the horrors of combat, but some also became prisoners. Presbyterian James H. Cox shared the story of his capture by Japanese forces:

They took all our clothes off except for our underwear – undershorts and undershirt. They took watches, and wallets, and everything. They cleaned us out good. Then they put us out on the runway, out in the hot sun, with no clothes except underwear. We stayed there for three days and two nights. We had no food. We had water, but they brought it in empty 55-gallon aviation gasoline drums, and of course those pumps don't suck everything out, so it was gasoline and water, mixed. Some of the guys threw up drinking it. It was miserable. They had us wired with communication wire – like telephone cable.³⁵

Fellow church member Jack Gray recalled his Okinawa experience, 'In those days, the Japanese were highly desperate. They had kamikaze fighters. They'd take an airplane and fly it right into the battleship or something, and kill the pilot and do a lot more damage than that.'³⁶ Such actions challenged each American and his worldview. Shintoism, the predominant religion of Japan, served as an entirely distinct set of beliefs – one that, according to General Douglas MacArthur, was a direct threat to Christianity and democracy.

Reformed Christians were Americans and grew increasingly patriotic. Some were from recently migrated extended families; others hailed from original patriot ancestors. Regardless of their roots in America, the common theme underlined an emphasis on patriotic duty and the deliverance of Europe and Asia from authoritarian control. Further, their doctrinal background stressed the importance of God's sovereignty and providence, two elements that supported U.S. involvement in the war.

III. Ministry during the War

Ministers at home and abroad prayed for their soldiers, counselled, and shared the gospel. WWII left souls seeking answers in a fallen world like no other war before. However, the elders of the Reformed faith took such an opportunity to share the saving power and majesty of Jesus Christ. Reformed Chaplain Richard P. Schmitz (Evangelical and Reformed Church) recalled,

³⁵ First Presbyterian Church, *World War II Memories*, p. 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

‘Men in service do have an interest in religion;’³⁷ later commenting, ‘I have had more Bible classes in private talks with the men than would have been possible in any sort of organized class. These men have not only a desire to know more of religion but have vital problems which their little knowledge of faith cannot answer.’³⁸ The global confrontation showcased the darkness and evil of humanity. By the Lord’s hands, it also opened the hearts of souls who sought such godly understanding. Sgt. James Hester ‘learned to talk to God and pray while serving in Europe.’³⁹ Learning that both of his brothers had died in combat, and recovering from his own injuries in a hospital, he wrote to his parents:

The people over here don’t have that (freedom). And if we boys had not come over here and fought, you at home, would not have that either. I have seen many homes with people in them blown to pieces. You know Charles and Robert would not allow such things to happen to you.⁴⁰

It was not uncommon for siblings to learn of the loss of their brothers from their grieving parents. Don Janson shared a similar experience: ‘In late 1944 my youngest brother Lynn was killed in Italy. The army listed him as “missing in action.” It was very hard for my parents.’⁴¹

Chaplain William S. Brown (E&R) shared how a ‘Christmas Eve service was interrupted by a German attack on their location.’⁴² Another Chaplain, Robert H. Vitz (E&R), served in the Pacific and observed that, ‘Men from all branches of the military service have told me of their numerous experiences with those Christian people, and many of our own men owe their lives to the fact that the natives were Christian. I’m sure that the Kingdom Roll Call Budget would be over-subscribed many times if the people of the States could have but one day with these Christian natives in the Pacific area.’⁴³ Referring to natives of various Pacific islands in which the U.S. troops were fighting Japanese forces, Vitz rejoiced at the apparent Christian influence and customs of many local villagers.

³⁷ Harold Franklin Hafer, *The Evangelical and Reformed Church and World War II* (Boyertown: Boyertown Times Publishing Co., 1947), p. 115.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁹ ‘Wounded Soldier Says Cheer Up to His Parents’, *Biblical Recorder* (Cary, North Carolina), March 21, 1945, <http://digital.olivesoftware.com/Olive/APA/Wakeforest/default.aspx#panel=document> (accessed May 10, 2023).

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ First Presbyterian Church, *World War II Memories*, p. 61.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 116.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

At the Arlington Presbyterian Church in Virginia, a local congregation of the PCUSA, a service held on 4th July 1943 focused on prayer and sharing correspondence from soldiers. The bulletin stated, ‘We rejoice in the presence of the men of the armed services who worship with us from week to week.’⁴⁴ The congregation prayed for William C. Broyles, serving in the U.S. Navy. Pastor Walter F. Wolf shared a letter from one soldier: ‘Since being in the army I have run across almost all of the 48 states. Although we all have different opinions on many different subjects, there are 2 topics which find us standing solid to the man. One is to win this war, and the other is to receive mail.’⁴⁵

In the recently formed Orthodox Presbyterian Church (1936), the Committee on Christian Education made available free of charge a publication aimed at chaplains in the armed forces, entitled ‘God and the War’.⁴⁶ In the 1944 annual meeting, the OPC addressed techniques for evangelism. A personal approach to evangelism encouraged attendees to use the war as a means of sharing the Gospel:

The way to contact a stranger is to begin a conversation with him. Begin to talk about the commonplace as, for example, the weather, or the war. If the individual has any obvious interest ask him some questions along that line. There are times when the asking of some slight favor may prove to be an opening wedge.⁴⁷

Furthermore, the Committee recommended connecting spiritual warfare to the ongoing conflict:

After talking with a soldier concerning the problems of physical warfare would it not be an opportune moment to turn the conversation to the subject of spiritual warfare? Surely this should afford one the opportunity to discuss such subjects as, the enemies of the soul, man’s inability to cope with them, God’s plan and power in respect to them and salvation in all its aspects.⁴⁸

Like any other Evangelical church, the OPC knew that the current atmosphere formed great evangelistic opportunities. While many non-

⁴⁴ Arlington Presbyterian Church, *Church Bulletin of July 4, 1943*, Arlington, Virginia.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Franklin S. Dyrness, ‘Minutes of the Tenth General Assembly’, General Assembly Minutes OPC 1943, June 1-4, 1943, <https://opcgaminutes.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/1943-GA-10.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2023).

⁴⁷ Orthodox Presbyterian Church, ‘Minutes of the Eleventh General Assembly’, General Assembly Minutes OPC 1944, May 16-19, 1944, 36, <https://opcgaminutes.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/1944-GA-11.pdf> (accessed May 11, 2023).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

churched people remained baffled at war and massive destruction, Christians maintained the answer to the problem of evil, which correlated to sin and a fallen human race. Placing one's faith in humanity, such as following a person like Hitler or Hirohito, resulted in destruction. On the contrary, submitting to Jesus as Lord and Saviour provided heavenly wisdom and understanding.

The world received an answer to their prayers when the war officially ended in 1945. Millions of souls perished, and lands lay in ruins. Nevertheless, Providence determined the victors of the war. Reflecting on the war, Rev. Dr R. L. Haan (CRC) wrote, 'God gave us peace after the loss of many lives and of much material. In the way of God's providence, we had to make great sacrifices. For a long time, there was much worry, anxiety, bitter grief, and sorrow in ever so many homes. Oh, what sacrifices have been laid on the altar.'⁴⁹

Rev. J. Hannenburg (CRC) similarly reflected:

Now that the war is won and those in service are returning, we would want to forget most of those dreadful years of war that lay like a dark shadow over us. We want to forget the pain, the anguish, the tears, the privations, the terrors of battle and of the prison camp. We want to forget all the sights, the noise and the smell of war.

He concluded:

And we will remember in sacred honor those who died for us, and those wounded, and all those who served so well. But mostly will we remember the mercy and the grace of God who upheld us in the strife, who permitted so many of you to return, who gave the victory.⁵⁰

Hannenburg correctly called attention to the grace that the Lord showed toward his nation. The war ended, and the U.S. remained fortunate that most of the conflict did not touch American soil. As with any other confrontation outcome, it was the Lord who purposed the Allied forces to achieve ultimate victory. WWII resulted in the most bloodshed in human history. It also challenged existing Christians to depend on their Saviour more than ever before. Additionally, it served as an evangelistic opportunity to reach the lost. Americans united to end a conflict that forever changed the world and the nation of the United States.

⁴⁹ First Christian Reformed Church, *Lest We Forget, Our Service Personnel*, p. 34.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

IV. Conclusion

Though a relatively young nation, the United States of America has consistently proved itself in various altercations. The original principles of liberty and justice promote independence and democracy. Today, the country still encounters and confronts tyranny in the name of liberty. While American ideals differ among its citizens, freedom of religion lies at the heart of any Christian. Migrants across the world continue to seek the American Dream.

Americans, by all accounts, remained reluctant to enter the world war, seeking peace. The attack at Pearl Harbor changed public opinion. Christians, including those of the Reformed faith, proudly embraced their patriotic duty and headed to war. Americans rescued Europeans and Asians from dictatorship. The remnants of the war remain. Germany changed, as did Japan. Both are free-thinking societies. Sadly, new enemies appeared, largely embracing communism, historically at odds with Christianity.

Reformed Christians have a long history in the nation. From the early Pilgrims to the Puritans and to every war fought, they have honourably served their nation. While America is not exclusively of the Christian faith, the country remains unique as the ability to worship freely is one of the fundamental differences from any other nation. Reformed Christians followed in the Founding Fathers' footsteps and played their part in establishing and protecting religious liberty for future generations.