Christianity played a commanding role in American life during the mid-19th century, as seen in church attendance, denominational affiliation, the ubiquity of religious publications, and the common feature of religious leaders speaking in public venues. As Eugene Genovese put it, “At the least, the country’s most socially and politically influential leaders were either committed Christians themselves or demonstrated that they knew their politically decisive constituents to be so.” More specifically concerning the focus of this essay, is the nature of the role Christianity played during the Civil War period. As Mark Noll explains, both North and South, even during the war, maintained a strong sense of the divine calling of the nation: “What was by now the standard American identification of the United States as ‘God’s New Israel’ served only to heighten religious conceptions of the conflict.”

Noll argues that while religion was not the cause of the Civil War, “Christianity was everywhere present in the crisis.” The war did not diminish the role of religion in general and Protestant faith in particular during the war; it may, in fact, have increased it. George M. Frederickson notes that, after the Civil War, “the national government seemed to be giving more support and recognition to Protestantism as the majority religion of the American people.” This is seen most

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3 Ibid., p. 314.
4 Frederickson also contends that this presumed recognition of religion by the government had a counter to it in that “religion itself was in danger of becoming completely identified with the secular interests of the nation and thus losing its critical autonomy” (George M. Frederickson, “The Coming of the Lord: The Northern Protestant Clergy and the Civil War Crisis,” in Religion and the American Civil War, p. 124).
dramatically in Lincoln’s second inaugural, to quote but just one famous line: “Both read from the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes his aid against the other.”

Mark Noll’s *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* describes the manner in which American Protestant faith in general and understandings of God’s providence in particular were tested by the events of the Civil War. He begins by documenting the American commitment to providence, that is, God’s sovereign rule over all events in creation, including the choices of human beings. Among 19th-century American Christians there was a strong commitment to God’s providence. What is more, there was confidence in Christians’ ability to see and to understand the operation of God’s providence in the world around them:

Standard Christian teaching about God’s control of the world and all events taking place in the world sprang vigorously to life as the dramatic events of the war unfurled. Belief that God controlled events had always been foundational wherever biblical religion prevailed. Yet in nineteenth-century America confidence in the human ability to fathom God’s providential actions rose to new heights.

However, as Noll explains, the manner in which American theologians applied their understanding of God’s providence to the events of the Civil War was quite narrow. The result was a theological crisis because “the war – with its clash of armies and ideologies, with its unprecedented moral, legal, governmental, and social complications, with its avalanche of death and destruction – should have posed insuperable difficulties.”

In a similar fashion, Daniel W. Stowell documents how, specifically in the south, the death of Confederate General Stonewall Jackson created a spiritual crisis for “a people committed to the belief that an omnipotent God controlled the destiny of men and of nations”. The case of Jackson was heighten not only by his battlefield successes, but also – and especially – by his personal character and public actions:

A Presbyterian deacon and Sunday school superintendent, Jackson had encouraged revivals among his troops and had often inquired about the

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7 Ibid., p. 94.