

Gettysburg vs Gods and Generals

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I first saw Gettysburg, the film to which Gods and Generals serves as a prequel, when it was originally aired on TNT almost a decade ago. My memories were of a movie closely focused on the battle itself, with little attention paid to details beyond that. However, with the more keen eye that age and taking a class on the Civil War in Popular Culture has given me, a more recent viewing to reacquaint myself with the film turned up many familiar elements. The seemingly requisite topics of states rights vs. slavery and of religion make their appearances, but despite common themes and an almost complete repeat of cast and crew, Gettysburg and Gods and Generals are not quite clones of one another in different years of the same war.

Gods and Generals delivers a very Southern slant on slavery vs. states' rights: slavery as a topic is largely avoided. Instead, from Robert E. Lee's refusal to accept command of Union armies onward, states' rights is touted almost without end. Gettysburg delivers a slightly different approach. Whenever causes come up there is a distinct North vs South slant. A variety of Southerners express their love of their home state throughout the film. Before his famous charge, Pickett reminds his troops that they let no man forget today, that you are from Old Virginia!" Armistead likewise says "Virginians! For your land - for your homes - for your sweethearts - for your wives - for Virginia!" But they also touch on a subject not mentioned in Gods and Generals: the right to rebel, as their forefathers did in the Revolutionary War. One Confederate general compares the United States to a gentlemen's club where you are free to leave at any time. A captured Rebel soldier says he is not fighting for slavery, just for his home and to live the way he wants. The South cares so little about slavery that Longstreet even suggests they should have freed the slaves then rebelled. On the Union side, the only cause mentioned is slavery. Chamberlain talks about it repeatedly. His unit finds a runaway slave. He has a conversation with Sgt. Kilrain who compares slavery to his homeland of Ireland. Kilrain

explains that he fights because he does not think you should be treated a certain way because of who your father was or what ethnicity you are. Confederate James Kemper sums it up by saying simply that the North is about slavery and the South is not.

The Lost Cause mentality is much stronger in Gettysburg than in Gods and Generals, where the only fluke accident in the latter is Jackson's accidental shooting and subsequent death. The Southerners describe themselves as "religious and mad". They would "rather lose the war than admit the mistake." Pickett's charge is a brave and noble, but ultimately the bravery of the Confederates is not enough. Heth blames the attacks on the first day of the battle before the rest of the army comes up as being the result of overeager Confederate soldiers. On the way to Gettysburg, successive scenes are shown with the camera looking toward the feet of Union and then Confederate soldiers, reminding the viewer that everything the Confederates are accomplishing is without shoes. JEB Stuart and his cavalry are missing at the worst possible time. A mention of slavery even falls in the Lost Cause category as one general notes that slavery is the one thing preventing the British from helping the Confederacy. Where it not for a institution which they do not even care about, the Confederates would be able to win.

As with Gods and Generals and variety of other Civil War writings like Bernard Covert's "Can I Go Dearest Mother", religion is an important part of Gettysburg. There is a scene with a preacher leading the troops in prayer before battle. Joshua Chamberlain quotes a piece of Shakespeare comparing men to angels. After Little Round Top, Sgt. Kilrain says they must have won because "the army was blessed". When Fremantle, the British observer, is comparing the Union and the Confederacy he notes that they are of the same religion. Robert E. Lee repeatedly mentions God and prays in his narration.

Robert E. Lee takes on the mythical status that Stonewall Jackson had in Gods and Generals. A discussion among Confederate generals on Darwin's theories is brought to an end when one general points out that none of them would be willing to suggest that Lee is descended from an ape. Lee is mobbed by cheering soldiers before Pickett's charge. Gettysburg features what could be considered Lee's only major blunder of the war, that being Pickett's charge. But he is portrayed as making the mistake due to lack of information due to Stuart's tardiness and overconfidence in the Confederate soldier. Truly, as Jim Cullen says, Lee's "ability to escape lasting criticism in the last 125 years has begun to seem more impressive than any of his military achievements." (Cullen, 12) Joshua Chamberlain says that there is "not quite so much as god on earth as a general on the battlefield" and, while the statement may have not been intended as such, it sums up the portrayal of Robert E. Lee perfectly.

The differences between Gods and Generals and Gettysburg can be attributed to changes during the ten years between the filming of the two movies. Most notably, in the late 1990s and into 2000, there was much debate over the Confederate flag. The former Confederate states who used it as part of their state flags, license plates, monuments, and the like were pressured by the NAACP and other groups to remove them. It was argued that the Confederate flag is a symbol of slavery and hate. Groups such as the Sons of Confederate Veterans argue it represents the sacrifice of Confederate soldiers. This debate stirred up a large amount of pro-Confederate sentiment in the south. Gods and Generals' trivializing of slavery as an issue seems a response to that as is its focus on the South and states rights. Gettysburg has Southern sympathies too as evidenced by its portrayal of states rights and the Lost Cause and the way it portrays slavery as only being an issue to the North. But in Gettysburg these sympathies are not as strong because at the time it was made slavery was not such an issue.

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Gettysburg. Produced and directed by Ronald Maxwell. 412 min. 1993. VHS.

Gods and Generals. Produced and directed by Ronald Maxwell. 216 min. 2003. Theater.