

Lincoln and the Bible

by Elton Trueblood

Abraham Lincoln's reverence for the Bible and his rational approach to its meaning had a profound impact on his public speeches and enduring legacy.

Scripture: Genesis 1:27, Matthew 5:48, Matthew 13:29, Matthew 25:40, Luke 10:29, Ephesians 6:5

Topics: "Biblical Influence", "Christian Leadership"

Description

Abraham Lincoln's deep reverence for the Bible is evident in his speeches and actions, acknowledging it as the best gift from God and the source of all that is good and desirable for humanity. His speaking style was greatly influenced by the Bible, particularly the Old Testament, with a focus on parallelism and monosyllables reminiscent of Hebrew poetry. Lincoln's familiarity with the Bible stemmed from his early encounters in schooling and his mother's recitations, leading to his profound understanding and application of biblical principles in his political decisions, especially regarding slavery. He believed in the importance of interpreting the Scriptures intelligently and in the context of human experience, emphasizing the need to choose the least damaging alternative in moral decisions.

Transcript

Nothing short of infinite wisdom could by any possibility have devised and given to man this excellent and perfect moral code.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

In the Fisk University Library, Nashville, Tennessee, is a copy of the Bible inscribed as follows: "To Abraham Lincoln, President of the United States, the Friend of Universal Freedom, from the Loyal Colored People of Baltimore, as a token of respect and Gratitude. Baltimore, 4th July 1864." The actual presentation of the Bible was made in Washington, September 7, 1864, the donors employing a memorable phrase as they presented the handsome Bible. "Since our incorporation into the American family," they said, "we have been true and loyal." Lincoln's response to this moving presentation afforded him the best opportunity he had ever had to state clearly his respect for the Holy Scriptures. "In regard to this Great book," he replied, "I have but to say, it is the best gift God has given to man." Then, as though seizing the opportunity to make his meaning even more clear, he concluded, "All the good Savior gave to the world was communicated

through this book. But for it we could not know right from wrong. All things most desirable for man's welfare, here and hereafter, are to be found portrayed in it. To you I return my most sincere thanks for the elegant copy of the great Book of God which you present."¹

Even a cursory study of Lincoln's speaking style makes the sensitive reader aware of the numerous ways in which the Bible influenced his style, both spoken and written. The Old Testament influence in this regard was greater than that of the Gospels and Epistles or any other part of the New Testament. Especially evident is the parallelism which characterized Hebrew poetry. A good example of such parallelism is the following from the Proclamation of the first Federal Thanksgiving: "No human counsel hath devised nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things."² Another illustration, already provided by the meeting with Mrs. Gurney, is: "If I had had my way, this war would never have been commenced; If I had been allowed my way this war would have ended before this."

The careful reader of the Gettysburg Address cannot fail to note the use of monosyllables, comparable to that exhibited by the Authorized Version, particularly in the Psalms. Of the 265 words in the Gettysburg Address 194 are of one syllable. Similarly, the Twenty-third Psalm, which Lincoln could repeat from memory, has 118 words in all, 92 of these being of one syllable. There is no reason to suppose that the similarity in style was produced by intent nor that Lincoln engaged consciously in imitation. Instead, the Biblical language was so deeply embedded in the great man's mind that it became his normal way of speaking. One of the first to see this clearly was Bishop Matthew Simpson, who gave the funeral oration at Springfield. "He read few books," said Simpson, "but mastered all he read. It was these few,

Page 50

of which the Bible was chief, which gave the bias to his character, and which partly moulded his style."

While it is generally recognized that young Lincoln heard many passages from the Bible both in his cabin home and in the Baptist meeting house, it is not equally known that he also encountered it in his fragmentary schooling. In this, as in so many aspects of his development, our most reliable evidence is that provided by the man himself. One day in the White House, as the President was speaking to Senator John B. Henderson, he was suddenly reminded of his early education. "Henderson," he asked, "did you ever attend an old blab school? Yes? Well, so did I, and what little schooling I got in early life was in that way. I attended such a school in a log schoolhouse in Indiana where we had no reading books or grammars, and all our reading was done from the Bible. We stood in a long line and read in turn from it." Thus, Lincoln read the Bible and heard it read before his father could afford to own a copy. According to his kinsman, Dennis Hanks, a family Bible was not purchased until 1819, when Abraham was ten years old.³

Carl Sandburg pointed out that before Lincoln had "learned to read as a boy, he had heard his mother saying over certain Bible verses day by day as she worked. He had learned these verses by heart; the tones of his mother's voice were in them; and sometimes, as he read these verses, he seemed to hear the voice of Nancy Hanks speaking them." How well he knew some of the verses is shown by the lawyer's response when he drove out into the country to make a will for a woman who was dying. After the will had been signed and witnessed, the woman asked Lincoln to read a few verses out of the Bible. A copy of the Scriptures was produced, but Lincoln did not open it. Instead, he recited

Page 51

from memory the Twenty-third Psalm and the opening verses of the fourteenth chapter of John.⁴

Biblical references appeared in Lincoln's speeches in a variety of ways. Sometimes the reference was mildly humorous, as when he said, on October 15, 1858, "The Bible says somewhere that we are desperately selfish. I think we would have discovered that fact without the Bible."⁵ In short, he had acquired enough theological sophistication to understand that the essence of sin is self-centeredness, and that this is so pervasive that it can enter into all human undertakings, even idealistic and specifically religious ones. He was conscious of the ideological taint of self-interest that corrupts the decisions even of good men. He understood the temptation to self-righteousness which assails the moral crusader.

Frequently, Lincoln employed a verse from the Bible to clinch a point. He had been importuned to make a statement saying that he would not interfere with slaves or slavery in states where they were acceptable. "I have," he wrote to William S. Speer of Tennessee, "done this many, many times; and it is in print, and open to all who will read. Those who will not read or heed what I have already publicly said would not read or heed a repetition of it. If they hear not Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rose from the dead."⁶

An example of the way in which the President could combine his love of humor and the love of the Bible, with consequent devastating effect, is his reaction to the convention which met at Cleveland in 1864 to support Frémont as a challenger to Lincoln's reelection. The convention turned out to be a feeble affair, with practically no accomplishment except the organization of a political party having a single main objection, "the defeat of the

Page 52

Lincoln Administration." Attenders met on May 31, 1864, eight days earlier than the Republicans, in order to be able to notify the Convention that it must not nominate Abraham Lincoln for President. The Cleveland pre-convention was announced with fanfare and the confident prediction that thousands would attend. When the President was told, finally, that only 400 actually attended, the number immediately triggered in his well-stored mind a humorous Biblical parallel. Refusing to take the challenge seriously, Lincoln compared the Cleveland gathering with that at the Cave of Adullam, mentioned in 1 Samuel 22:2, where there was a similar number of discontents. "And every one that was in distress, and every one that was in debt, and every one that was discontented, gathered themselves unto him; and he became a captain over them: and there were with him about four hundred men."

Part of Lincoln's humor consisted of quoting Scripture in spirited repartee. This he could do because the Bible is sufficiently varied to balance one statement with another, and Lincoln was so familiar with it that he knew, without hunting, how to pull out the appropriate phrase. When Hugh McCulloch, an official of the Treasury Department, introduced a delegation of New York bankers deferentially, he spoke of their patriotism and quoted, in conclusion, what he thought was a suitable text: "Where the treasure is, there will the heart be also." Reacting quickly to this fatuous use of Scripture, Lincoln without hesitation replied, "There is another text, Mr. McCulloch, which might apply, 'Where the carcass is, there will the eagles be gathered together.' " The President did not need to say that he was quoting Matthew 24:28 and Luke 17:37, and he certainly did not have to hunt for these passages. They were part of the richness of his spiritual resources upon which he could call whenever he needed them.

New light on Lincoln's use of the Bible is now afforded us in

the discovery in 1957 of a devotional book made up of select Biblical passages, which was owned and used by Lincoln. It is called *The Believer's Daily Treasure; or, Texts of Scripture arranged for Every Day in the Year*. This book was first published in 1852, the year that Lincoln began to share regularly in Sunday worship and Mrs. Lincoln joined the church of which Dr. James Smith was pastor. We know something of the way Lincoln valued this volume when we remember that he seldom wrote his name in books he owned, but did write his name in this one. The selections reveal no denominational slant, but represent basic Christianity pointed to the enrichment of daily life. One evident reason why Lincoln appreciated the volume is that it includes much from the Psalms. In a letter to Mrs. Rebecca R. Pomeroy, nurse at the White House, the President wrote, regarding the Psalms, "They are the best, for I find in them something for every day in the week."

The fact that Lincoln could combine humor with his use of the Bible prepares us for the further fact that he did not feel the need to be literalistic in application. His rationalism was so deeply embedded in his character that he tried to interpret the Scriptures intelligently and in the light of accumulated human experience. To the Chicago clergymen who visited Lincoln in the White House prior to the public announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation, the President showed how, with all his faith, it was necessary that he employ all the intelligence he could muster. His visitors, having been given opportunity to state the case for emancipation more fully, pointed out to the President "that he could not deny that the Bible denounced oppression as one of the highest of crimes." Lincoln's response was that the matter was highly complex, that it could not be decided merely by an appeal to authority, and that, consequently, hard thinking was required. "I suppose it will be granted," he said, "that I am not to expect a direct revelation. I must study the plain physical

facts of the case, ascertain what is possible and learn what appears to be wise and right."

A good example of the rational approach concerns the text on perfection from the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:48). In a long speech delivered at Chicago on July 10, 1858, as part of the Lincoln-Douglas Debates, Lincoln sought to interpret the meaning of what is widely recognized as a difficult text. "My friend," he began, "has said to me that I am a poor hand to quote Scripture. I will try it again, however. It is said in one of the admonitions of the Lord, 'As your Father in Heaven is perfect, be ye also perfect.' The Savior, I suppose, did not expect that any human creature could be perfect as the Father in Heaven . . . He set that up as a standard, and he who did most toward reaching that standard, attained the highest degree of moral perfection. So I say in relation to the principle that all men are created equal, let it be as nearly reached as we can. If we cannot give freedom to every creature, let us do nothing that will impose slavery upon any other creature."⁷

Lincoln's study of the Bible and of human life had taught him the practical value of operating in the realm of the possible. He saw the glaring flaw in the reasoning of those who, when they recognize that they cannot do everything, make the absurd conclusion that they will not do anything. He was keenly aware of the way in which perfectionism, wrongly conceived, cuts the nerve of all moral effort. He saw that the "ideal best" is frequently the enemy of the "concrete good," especially in the political realm. Freely cognizant that neither he nor his colleagues could at that time eliminate slavery where it was entrenched, he nevertheless determined to do what he could, viz., to oppose its extension. Here was the fundamental

issue which divided him and Senator Douglas, as the latter argued for the possibility of

Page 55

extension under the doctrine of popular or "squatter" sovereignty.

It is important to remember that, partly in response to the pioneer culture in which he was steeped, Abraham Lincoln's religion was centered far more in the Bible than in the Church. William J. Wolf's recognition of this fact is vital to his understanding of Lincoln's religion. He makes the point more than once that for Lincoln "the Bible rather than the Church remained the highroad to the knowledge of God."⁸ The great man's attitude to the Bible is indicated far more by the way in which he used it than by what he said about it. His method is not literalistic, and certainly he was not collecting proof texts to support his own pet opinions, but he was always reverent in his many references. A good example of reverent use is the well-known passage in the Second Inaugural, "let us judge not that we be no judged." Often, as in this case, he upheld the self-respect of his hearers by assuming that they were as familiar with the noble passages as he himself was. In referring to the two contesting sides in the terrible war he said, "Both read the same Bible."

The long train journey from Springfield to Washington gave the President-elect numerous opportunities to clarify his position by the use of Biblical references. Thus, in Indianapolis on February 11, 1861, he replied to Governor Morton and other citizens by saying, "When the people rise in masses in behalf of the Union and the liberties of their country, truly may it be said, 'The gates of hell shall not prevail against them.'"⁹ It would have been indelicate for the speaker to say that he was quoting Matthew 16:18, applying to the Union the words which Christ had applied to the Church. In a similar fashion, at Independence Hall, Philadelphia, on February 21, 1861, Lincoln said, in reference

Page 56

to the ideas involved in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States, "May my right hand forget its cunning and my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth if ever I prove false to those teachings."¹⁰ He did not need to say that he was employing, in a new connection, the words of Psalm 137:5 and 6. "America," by implication, was a substitute for "Jerusalem."

Often, in both Lincoln's private letters and his public addresses, the Biblical influence was oblique and subtle. Parts of phrases would appear without specific and overt references. Thus, in a letter written to Ward Hill Lamon on June 11, 1858, he wrote, "As to the inclination of some Republicans to favor Douglas that is one of the chances I have to run, and which I intend to run with patience."¹¹ The writer obviously knew by heart the beginning of the twelfth chapter of Hebrews. That he could combine the Old Testament with the New is indicated by the way in which, in the famous "House Divided" speech, he used the words of Ecclesiastes 9:4 about the superiority of a living dog over a dead lion.¹² In this, as was his custom, Lincoln did not say what the reference was; it was sufficient that he knew and that many of his hearers knew. Lincoln was experiencing one of his magnificent bursts of vitality in the summer when he was forty-nine years old, and he was in great form.

The "House Divided" theme is the most illustrious example of Lincoln's use of the Bible in a public address, the theme sticking in the public mind because it was so pertinent to the contemporary situation. By this teaching device, the speaker's point was made far more memorable. The address was delivered at Springfield, Illinois, on June 16, 1858, at the close of the Republican state convention. It was this

convention which nominated Abraham

Page 57

Lincoln as their candidate for the United States Senate and which led to the contest in which Lincoln was defeated by Senator Douglas. The address did much to bring the hitherto obscure lawyer to national attention. "If we could first know where we are," the speaker began, "and whither we are tending, we could then better judge what to do, and how to do it." These opening words were soon repeated and are widely used to this day, but it is doubtful if their impact would have been as great without the Biblical connection which followed so aptly.

In answering the question of where the country then stood, Lincoln found that it was best to tell the sorrowful truth and to admit that the nation was divided. To make this truth vivid he turned to the words found in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (Matthew 12:25, Mark 3:25, Luke 11:17). His reference, put in quotation marks in his Springfield address, is closer to the Marcan version than to any other. "A house divided against itself," he quoted, "cannot stand." Immediately he made the American application, I believe this government cannot endure, permanently half slave and half free." He hastened to say that in spite of the anguish the division was temporary, and that failure was by no means inevitable. With remarkable clarity he added to his warning, "I do not expect the Union to be dissolved -- I do not expect the house to fall -- but I do expect it will cease to be divided."¹³ Here was illustrated something of his genius in both style and content.

Though the "House Divided" theme is popularly associated with the nominating convention of June 1858, this was neither the first nor the last use of the reference in Lincoln's public life. He had already employed the theme a month earlier in an address at Edwardsville, Illinois, when he expressed dismay at the way in which churches as well as political bodies were dividing.

Page 58

Division seemed to be the order of the day, and this he deeply deplored. When Lincoln first made public the "House Divided" theme, it was already an old one in his own mind. This is indicated by what he said at Edwardsville. After stating, as he was to do later, the impossibility of divided endurance, he said, "I expressed this belief a year ago." ¹⁴ Later, in an address delivered at Columbus, Ohio, on September 16, 1859, the idea was repeated almost verbatim.¹⁵

Lincoln's acquaintance with the Scriptures, though well established in early youth when few books were available to him, increased during his mature life. He adopted at several states of his career the practice of daily Bible reading. One evidence of this practice, to which reference has already been made, came in the crisis of 1841 when Mrs. Speed gave Lincoln a Bible.

An important insight into Lincoln's character is the way in which he valued the printed word. This comes out vividly in his ambitious address, "Discoveries and Inventions." On April 6, 1858, he delivered this before the Young Men's Association of Bloomington, Illinois, and later, in a completely rewritten form, at Illinois College, at Decatur, and finally at Springfield. In this nonpolitical address Lincoln expressed the conviction that the written work was "the great invention of the world." It was the great invention, he concluded, because it liberates mankind from the bondage of both the present and the local. "When writing was invented," he said, "any important observation, likely to lead to a discovery, had at least a chance of being written down, and consequently, a better chance of never being forgotten."¹⁶ It was in

such terms as these that he valued the Scriptures so highly. He saw how intellectually and spiritually impoverished a person would be if he were limited to his own personal resources. The Bible,

Page 59

he recognized, vastly enlarged the area of experience on which an individual might depend. In this regard we learn even more from Lincoln's practice than from any stated doctrine. The Lecture on Inventions contains thirty-four separate references to the Bible.

Of all of Lincoln's affirmations indicating his deep dependence on the Biblical revelation none is more impressive than that made to his long-time friend, Joshua Speed, in the summer of 1864. Lincoln used the Soldier's Home, on the north edge of the District of Columbia, as a summer refuge from the heat of the Potomac Valley, riding there many evenings and sleeping there. One evening he was visited in his room by Joshua Speed of Kentucky. Speed had shared his room with Lincoln when the newcomer first settled in Springfield in 1837 and was the one to whom the developing Lincoln had confided intimately concerning his own intellectual and emotional struggles. In a lecture prepared by Speed, the doubts of Lincoln's early life were frankly recognized. Then came a passage which tells the modern reader a great deal.

The only evidence I have of any change, was in the summer before he was killed. I was invited out to the Soldier's Home to spend the night. As I entered the room, near night, he was sitting near a window intently reading his Bible. Approaching him, I said, "I am glad to see you so profitably engaged." "Yes," said he, "I am profitably engaged." "Well," said I, "if you have recovered from your skepticism, I am sorry to say that I have not." Looking me earnestly in the face, and placing his hand on my shoulder, he said, "You are wrong, Speed; take all of this Book upon reason that you can, and the balance on faith, and you will live and die a happier man."¹⁷

The President's words to his friend Speed are especially significant because Speed was not one of the many who were trying to make a case for Lincoln's religious orthodoxy. Indeed, he was

Page 60

on the other side though not, of course, as extreme as Herndon. We must remember that Speed sold his store and went back to Kentucky twenty years before Lincoln's departure from Springfield, so that apart from letters and occasional visits Speed had little opportunity of knowing very much about the spiritual growth which his friend was experiencing. For example, he did not know except at second hand the significant influence of Dr. James Smith, the Scottish pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield. Scant attention has been given to the fact that soon after his wife's admission to the church, Lincoln gave a lecture on the Bible in the church building upon the invitation of the Session. The lecture was sponsored not only by the First Presbyterian Church, but also by the Bible Society of Springfield, Lincoln's local popularity assuring a full house. Thoughtful people reported that the lawyer presented the ablest defense of the Bible ever heard from that particular pulpit.

We wish, of course, that we could read Lincoln's lecture on the Bible, but we do not have it. We do, however, have something of genuine value in Dr. Smith's statement, which appears to be a synopsis of Lincoln's argument. Lincoln's conclusion, as reported by his pastor, was an early example of his speaking style which later became familiar. Part of this is the epigraph of the present chapter. "It seems to me," he said, "that nothing short of infinite wisdom could by any possibility have devised and given to man this excellent and perfect moral code. It is suited to men in all the conditions of life, and inculcates all the duties

they owe to their Creator, to themselves, and to their fellow men."¹⁸

The Lecture on the Bible was clearly influenced by the reasoning of Dr. Smith. That Lincoln held the Springfield pastor in high esteem is shown by the fact that their friendship continued to the end, and that during Lincoln's presidency, Smith was

Page 61

made consul at Dundee in his native Scotland. On January 9, 1863, Lincoln wrote in a note to Secretary Seward, "Dr. Smith, mentioned within, is an intimate personal friend of mine."¹⁹ Lincoln's nomination of James Smith for the consulship was confirmed by the Senate on February 18, 1863. That Dr. Smith had an enduring effect on Lincoln's mature thinking there is no doubt. Part of the reason for the mutual admiration of these two men is that the Scotsman, like Lincoln, had been a doubter. Lincoln's first serious contact with Smith's mind came during a visit to Kentucky in 1849, when Lincoln picked up Smith's book, *The Christian's Defense*.

There is much evidence of the impact of Smith's book on Lincoln's mind. Witnesses to this were John T. Stuart, the early law partner, and Lincoln's brother-in-law, Ninian W. Edwards. "I have been reading a work of Dr. Smith on the evidences of Christianity," Lincoln told Edwards, "and have heard him preach and converse on the subject and am now convinced of the truth of the Christian religion."²⁰ Lincoln admitted that his views had been modified, and even went so far as to declare that Smith's argument was "unanswerable."

As he examined the Bible carefully under Dr. Smith's tutelage, Lincoln looked at the entire Biblical record as a lawyer, who, eager to find the truth, investigates testimony. The Scotsman was naturally familiar with the argument of David Hume and answered Hume in a spirit similar to that of Dr. Samuel Johnson. He provided Lincoln with what, to a lawyer, was a wholly congenial approach. The familiar Johnson statement, made in Boswell's presence soon after their first meeting, was, "The Christian religion has very strong evidences. It, indeed, appears in some degree strange to reason; but in History we have undoubted

Page 62

facts, against which, in reasoning à priori, we have more arguments than we have for them: but then, testimony has great weight, and casts the balance." This was precisely the kind of thinking to which Lincoln was introduced by the pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield.

Lincoln's greatest interest in the Bible, and the spur to his steady reading of it, was the hope of finding light on the social and political problems which faced the nation. He was looking for light and by his perusal of the Scriptures he hoped he might find it. This was vastly more important than any effect upon his personal piety. Though he did not admire preachers who used their pulpits for political pronouncements, he saw the Biblical faith as something which influenced his own political decisions. God, he believed, was directing the social order through finite individuals who were His instruments.

Lincoln was drawn to the Bible partly because it deals so largely with events. The divine Ruler is seen throughout both the Old and New Testaments as the God of history. The chief way, Lincoln saw, in which God's will is revealed is not in abstract ideas, but in the development of the story of man's struggles, particularly his struggle to be free. The Israelites did become liberated from Egyptian bondage; they did occupy the promised land; they did prepare the way for the coming of Christ; the infant Christian fellowship

did survive. As Lincoln advanced in his religious thinking he put greater and greater emphasis, not upon the details, but upon the magnitude of the historical unfolding. Whatever criticism might be made of his faith, it could not be truly said that his God was too small. God, as the Bible revealed Him, seemed to Lincoln to be one who dealt not merely with isolated individuals for whom He cares, but for liberty and justice for the entire human race. His fundamental affinity was with the prophetic strain.

The magnitude of Lincoln's theology becomes evident when

Page 63

we recognize the degree to which he transcended the popular polarization of piety versus political action. The clear conclusion from his own words was that he was not willing to settle for either of these in isolation. He could not abide the kind of religion which made a man interested only in the salvation of his own soul without any reference to human injustice, such as that of slavery. His belief in God and his agonizing search for God's will had implications for the ways in which men live with and treat their fellow men. On the other hand, he had no admiration for the person whose religion was political and nothing more. His theology led him to say "and" rather than "or" when he faced the complexity of the Gospel. He was concerned about wider issues than personal comfort, yet he saw that the Gospel does provide personal comfort for the distraught individual. As we have already seen, Lincoln reminded his own father, as he lay dying, that God's eye is on the sparrow.

It was in connection with the institution of slavery that Lincoln's experience of the Bible made the greatest single difference, and in which the complexity of the problem became most apparent. He had to face the fact that the Bible does not contain a single overt condemnation of human slavery. If Lincoln had not known this in any other way he was bound to be faced with the fact through the insistence of proslavery advocates. We know, for example, that he was familiar with the ideas of the Reverend Frederick A. Ross, author of *Slavery Ordained of God* (Philadelphia, 1857). In a fragment on proslavery theology, which may have been produced October 1, 1858,²¹ Lincoln mentioned Dr. Ross and lampooned his position. The basic question, Lincoln recognized, is not whether we should follow the will of God, but what the will of God really is. Does God will that the slave should be free? Lincoln was sufficiently honest to admit that the Bible

Page 64

provides no explicit answer to this question. He was well aware that the Hebrew patriarchs owned slaves and that when slavery is mentioned, even in the New Testament, it is not clearly condemned. In fact, the slave is enjoined to be obedient to his earthly master (Ephesians 6:5). Thus Lincoln was forced to admit that when we look for a simple answer about God's will in this particular, "his revelation -- the Bible -- gives none -- or, at most, none but such as admits of a squabble, as to its meaning."

Lincoln's appeal to the Bible on the question of slavery sought an answer below the surface. While the Bible does not directly condemn slavery, he saw that it does stress both justice and mercy and moves toward an emphasis upon helping any who are in need. He summarized the Christian "rule of charity" as "Give to him that is needy." This is evidently based on Christ's words, "Verily I say unto you, inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40). The same conception is expressed by the parable of the Good Samaritan which teaches that my neighbor is the one who needs me (Luke 10:29-37). The practical answer to slavery, Lincoln thought, starts with compassion, which was, he held, intrinsic to the Biblical message.

On a still deeper level, Lincoln saw that the Biblical revelation really undermines slavery by its conception of the nature of man. The first strong indication that this line of thought would be followed by Lincoln came in a little noticed address given at Lewistown, Illinois, August 17, 1858. Early in his two-and-a-half-hour speech, the relatively unknown Lincoln called attention to the ethical neutralism of his famous adversary. Referring specifically to slavery, he said that "to Judge Douglas belongs the distinction of having never said that he regarded it either as an evil or a good, morally right or morally wrong." The heart of Lincoln's argument was an appeal to the deeper meaning of the Declaration of Independence. Speaking of the thirteen original colonies,

Page 65

he said, "These communities, by their representatives in old Independence Hall, said to the whole world of men: 'We hold these truths to be self evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.' This was their majestic interpretation of the economy of the Universe. This was their lofty and wise, and noble understanding of the justice of the Creator to His creatures. [Applause.] Yes, gentlemen, to all His creatures, to the whole great family of man. In their enlightened belief, nothing stamped with the Divine image and likeness was sent into the world to be trodden on, and degraded, and imbruted by its fellows. They grasped not only the whole race of man then living, but they reached forward and seized upon the farthest posterity. They erected a beacon to guide their children and their children's children, and the countless myriads who should inhabit the earth in other ages."²²

In this address, fortunately preserved in part by the Chicago Press and Tribune, August 21, 1858, we come very near to the heart of Lincoln's theology as it applies to human betterment. Here we are far removed from sectarian competition or from emphasis upon the presence or absence of proof texts regarding slavery or any other human practice. Lincoln, in marked contrast to most of his contemporaries, reached back to the very roots of the faith which sustained him. Central to everything else was the conviction that the dignity of man is derivative. Man's glory lies not, Lincoln thought, in his goodness, for this is often nonexistent. He derives glory, instead, from his being made in the image of the Living God. Poring over the Scriptures, Lincoln had found his clue in the very first chapter: "God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him" (Genesis 1:27). It followed that no person, of whatever color or nationality, was a

Page 66

mere thing to be bought and sold. Here is perhaps the most revolutionary idea in the world because, if it were ever truly followed, it would overcome all barriers to human development.

The debate between Douglas and Lincoln in the summer and autumn of 1858 was bound to include some aspects that were unlovely. Judge Douglas thought, for example, that he had a good opportunity to attack Lincoln at a vulnerable point by accusing him of encouraging the intermarriage of the races. If he could have made this stick he would have dealt Lincoln a severe blow. The people, generally, were opposed to racial intermarriage. The Judge's argument was not that Lincoln had openly advocated the mixing of the races, since he had not done so, but that this was where Lincoln's position would necessarily lead.

Lincoln had thought upon this subject too long to be caught in a trap which his opponent sought to set. "I protest, now and forever," countered Lincoln, "against that counterfeit logic which presumes that because I do not want a negro woman for a slave, I do, necessarily, want her for a wife." Lincoln, grounded as he

was in the Biblical conception of equal justice, kept the emphasis there, and refused to be drawn into questions which were extraneous to the basic issue. "There are white men enough to marry all the white women," he said, "and enough black men to marry all the black women, and in God's name, let them be so married."²³

The Judge, who claimed to respect the Declaration of Independence as truly as Lincoln did, interpreted its key propositions in a different manner. He pointed out, as Lincoln had already admitted, that the Founding Fathers did not abolish slavery. And why not? Was it because when they said "all men," they meant "all white men"? Lincoln's repudiation of this narrowed interpretation illustrates clearly an important feature of his own political

Page 67

philosophy: in moral decisions human beings choose positions which are less than perfect, because the only available alternatives are worse.

Lincoln's acceptance of the philosophical conceptions of comparative evils is so crucial that it requires elaboration. It was their failure to appreciate this sophisticated idea which actuated many of his harshest critics in his own generation, as it activates many critics even now. The crucial idea is that moral decisions are always made in the light of alternatives. Because all positions have something wrong with them, the task of the good person is to choose the least damaging among those that are possible. It is wrong to pull up the tares if, in so doing, we pull up the wheat also (Matthew 13:29); it is wrong to eradicate a particular evil practice if, in doing so, we create another harm which outweighs the good. One of Lincoln's illustrations of this principle was drawn from the life of Henry Clay whose eulogy he gave on July 6, 1852, in the Illinois Hall of Representatives. "Cast into life where slavery was already widely spread and deeply seated, he did not perceive, as I think no wise man has perceived, how it could be at once eradicated, without producing a greater evil, even to the cause of human liberty itself."²⁴ Lincoln was well aware of the delicacy of such an intellectual operation and of the difficulty of weighing comparative evils, but he also saw that there is no escape from this operation, provided we try to live wisely and well.

The framers of the Declaration of Independence, including even Thomas Jefferson, had to face comparative evils. The upshot of the situation, as Lincoln analyzed it, was that an uncompromising stand against existent slavery in 1776 would have had no important effect except that of eliminating the possibility of creating a nation at all. The lesser evil, Lincoln thought as he

Page 68

supposed the Founders thought, was that of allowing entrenched slavery for a time in the hope of its ultimate extinction. At this point his study of the thinking of Thomas Jefferson was exceptionally productive.

In the same address in which Lincoln presented the idea of "relative perfection," i.e., the kind which is in the realm of the possible, he was explicit about the choice which the framers of the Declaration were, unfortunately, forced to make. "It may be argued," he said, "that there are certain conditions that make necessities and impose them upon us, and to the extent that a necessity is imposed upon a man he must submit to it. I think that was the condition in which we found ourselves when we established this government. We had slavery among us, we could not get our constitution unless we permitted them to remain in slavery, we could not secure the good we did secure if we grasped for more, and having by

necessity submitted to that much, it does not destroy the principle that is the charter of our liberties."²⁵

Very few of the words of Abraham Lincoln repay study more than these which were uttered at Chicago on July 10, 1858. Here, in some of the most careful reasoning in which he ever engaged, Lincoln began by realizing that ethics is, and must always be, the science of the possible. Choices are made, not in some ideal or abstract situation, but in the realm of the real. The best, consequently, must always be the best under the circumstances, i.e., in the light of actual alternatives. This is why, as Lincoln understood moral philosophy, decisions are never really simple. Since any conceivable choice involves difficulties of its own, a position is accepted not because it is wholly satisfactory, but because there is no better one available. In loyalty to the Biblical heritage, which meant so much to him, Lincoln was forced to oppose interpreters of the Scriptures

Page 69

on both sides of the slavery issue. Just as he rejected the oversimplification of the apologist for slavery who could point out that the Bible mentions slavery without specific condemnation, so equally he rejected the oversimplification of the fanatical Abolitionist of the John Brown variety. The problem, as Abraham Lincoln saw it, had to be faced at a deeper level than any provided by Biblical literalism. In concentrating upon the profound idea of the divine image, Lincoln discovered this deeper level.

Much as Lincoln admired Thomas Jefferson, it is important to see how the sixteenth President differed from the third. Jefferson, for all his brilliance, was never wholly liberated from his deistic prejudices. Lincoln, though he willingly accepted the leadership of Jefferson in political affairs, consciously separated from him in religious perspective. Consequently, Lincoln saw even more clearly than Jefferson the deep significance of what he called "our national axioms." When Lincoln repeated the phrase, "all men are created equal," he understood thoroughly that these words need not imply factual equality, which, of course, does not exist. In a factual sense, people are conspicuously unequal. To understand this we need only to contrast Jefferson's own achievements with those of his neighbors, white or black. The equality to which our national axiom refers is not that of talents or of accomplishments. It is an equality of derivative value, according to which each person, regardless of color, gender, or status, is precious in God's estimation because each is His peculiar creation. In short, the Declaration of Independence makes sense in a theological context, but fails to make sense in any other. It is a mark of Lincoln's greatness that he saw this so clearly and that he saw it so early.

The contemporary Lincoln scholar who seems to have grasped the delicate relationship between Jefferson and Lincoln better than any other is William J. Wolf, who makes the following observation: "Jefferson was Lincoln's mentor in political philosophy, but Lincoln's religious perspective was more concrete than

Page 70

Jefferson's. Lincoln went deeper than 'self-evidence' for these truths, even further than the somewhat deistic phrase 'endowed by their Creator.' For Lincoln the Creator was the living God of history, revealed in the Bible, Whose judgments were continuously written on the pages of history and recorded in the human conscience."²⁶

Because he was aware of another dimension than that of politics, Lincoln was amazingly liberated from the dangers of idolatry, including the idolatry of the nation. No nation, he held, is wholly sovereign because

every nation is under judgment. In his enduring love of the Psalms he was familiar with the words, "the Lord is high above all nations" (113:4). In like fashion, he would not accept the ultimacy of "popular sovereignty" as proposed by Douglas in defense of the extension of slavery to the territories. Douglas had, indeed, fastened upon an axiom, but, since it was not sufficiently basic, it was itself under judgment. It was not even sufficient, Lincoln thought, to appeal to liberty for this may mean many different and even opposite things. In an address at Baltimore in the spring of 1864 the President affirmed that "the world has never had a good definition of liberty." "With some," he continued, "the word liberty may mean for each man to do as he pleases with himself and the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor."²⁷

There is no possibility of understanding Abraham Lincoln if we do not understand how deeply the fundamental teachings of the Bible had entered into his mature mentality. In consequence the astute politician was always more than a political thinker. He was more than a political thinker because he was always appealing to a higher moral code. He believed, as he said at Clinton, Illinois, that the principles for which he struggled would eventually

Page 71

prevail, and the reason for his hope was that "there is a just and righteous God in Heaven."²⁸ In the light of this conviction he concluded his most famous address before election to the Presidency with the memorable words: "Let us have faith that right makes might, and in that faith, let us to the end, dare to do our duty, as we understand it."²⁹

Chapter Four || Table of Contents

-
1. Collected Works, VII, pp. 542, 543. [BACK]
 2. Collected Works, VI, p. 496. [BACK]
 3. The Lincoln family Bible is now exhibited at the Visitors' Center near the birthplace, Hodgenville, Kentucky. See Albert J. Beveridge, Abraham Lincoln, I (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1928), p. 70. [BACK]
 4. Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln, The Prairie Years, I, p. 416. [BACK]
 5. Collected Works, III, p. 310. [BACK]
 6. Nicolay and Hay, III, pp. 276, 277. The Biblical reference is Luke 16:31 [BACK]
 7. Collected Works, II, 501. [BACK]
 8. Lincoln's Religion, p. 75. The July 1, 1964, issue of Presbyterian Life features a careful article by Professor Wolf, "Lincoln and the Bible." [BACK]
 9. Collected Works, IV, pp. 193, 194. [BACK]
 10. Ibid., p. 239. [BACK]
 11. Collected Works, II, p. 459. [BACK]

12. Ibid., p. 467. [BACK]
13. Ibid., p. 461. [BACK]
14. Ibid., p. 452. [BACK]
15. Collected Works, III, p. 407. [BACK]
16. Ibid., p. 362. [BACK]
17. Speed, Lecture on Abraham Lincoln, pp. 32-33. [BACK]
18. Letter of December 24, 1872, from James Smith to William Herndon. This was first published in Daily Illinois Journal, March 12, 1867. [BACK]
19. Collected Works, VI, p. 51. [BACK]
20. See William E. Barton, The Soul of Abraham Lincoln (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920), p. 164. [BACK]
21. Nicolay and Hay assign this date. See Collected Works, III, pp. 204, 205. [BACK]
22. Collected Works, II, p. 546. [BACK]
23. Collected Works, II, p. 498. See also p. 405. [BACK]
24. Ibid., p. 130. [BACK]
25. Ibid., p. 501. [BACK]
26. Wolf, Lincoln's Religion, pp. 95, 96. [BACK]
27. Collected Works, VII, pp. 301, 302. [BACK]
28. Collected Works, III, p. 448. [BACK]
29. Ibid., p. 550. [BACK]

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/elton-trueblood/lincoln-and-the-bible/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net