

Lincoln and the Church

by Elton Trueblood

Lincoln's failure to join a church was not evidence of a lack of faith, but rather a reflection of his individualistic approach to Christianity and his reverence for the Church.

Scripture: Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:29, Luke 10:27, 1 Corinthians 1:10, Colossians 3:14, 1 Thessalonians 5:21, Hebrews 10:24, James 1:27, 1 Peter 2:17

Topics: "Church Membership", "Faith And Worship"

Description

Abraham Lincoln's theology did not require him to be a member of a particular church, as his faith was centered more in the Bible than in the Church. His failure to join a church was common in his time, where church membership was not as central as it is in modern times. Lincoln's respect for churches grew during his presidency, especially as he faced criticism from some church members and clergy. Despite not joining a specific church, Lincoln admired various denominations and recognized the importance of organized worshipping groups.

Transcript

Blessed be God, Who, in this our great trial, giveth us the churches.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

Did Lincoln's theology require that he be a member of a particular church? The short answer is that it did not; but, because the subject is a more complicated one than it at first appears to be, the short answer does not suffice. The subject of church membership is one which is often introduced whenever Lincoln's religion is discussed. That he never became a church member is the one phase of this subject which numerous people know. What is strange is that the failure to join a church is often interpreted as evidence that the Civil War President had no strong or vital faith. It is important to show why this popular conclusion is unjustified.

Lincoln's failure to become a church member is better understood when we realize how people generally felt about membership in his own lifetime. In our generation it is normally expected that a serious Christian will automatically join a particular congregation, but this was not so in Lincoln's day. The

Page 96

modern American is surprised to learn that only 23 percent of the population were church members in 1860, the year in which Lincoln won his first election to the Presidency. A hundred years later more than 60 percent were church members. In short, the President's lack of membership was something which he shared with the great majority of his fellow citizens. When we know this we begin to see that the issue has been inflated out of proportion to its true significance.

In the light of our own presuppositions, it would seem natural for Lincoln to have joined the Pigeon Creek Church as a boy, particularly when he served as sexton for the meeting house. We get new perspective, however, when we learn that in the pioneer churches few young people were accepted into membership. Parents who were church members, says Dr. Louis A. Warren, tended to assume the responsibility for the spiritual guidance of their families. On the whole, people were not expected to apply for membership apart from the contemplation of matrimony, which, of course, was no part of Abraham Lincoln's experience at that time. His sister Sally followed the general practice by being received into membership on April 8, 1826, but if Abraham had also applied that would have seemed strange. It was because membership was taken seriously that it was normally reserved for maturity.¹ This is one of the reasons why church membership was comparatively small in all of early America.²

Since, for Americans of a century and more ago, the idea of the Church was not so central as it is in the latter half of the twentieth century, Abraham Lincoln was following the expected pattern of thought when his religion was centered far more in the Bible than in the Church. We tend to forget how recent the emphasis upon the significance of the fellowship of a gathered

Page 97

society really is. In most American theological circles this emphasis is not much more than sixty years in duration. One of the first influential treatments of the subject appeared in 1912 from the pen of T.R. Glover with the then fresh title, *The Nature and Purpose of a Christian Society*.

We are familiar now with the idea that it is impossible to be a Christian alone, and that it is only in the gathered fellowship that Christ is truly known. But in Lincoln's day very few authors were saying anything like this. It is doubtful, in fact, if Lincoln ever heard such teaching at all. Instead, we know that he heard much discussion of creedal statements, sometimes in a manner calculated to alienate him from whatever fellowship might have been available to him. With his excellent mind, he reacted negatively to some of the preaching which he heard, with the natural consequence that his major field of religious service soon came to be the civil rather than the ecclesiastical order. He felt at home in the Illinois legislature as he never did in any Illinois church. Indeed, he reported that he hesitated to attend church in Springfield for fear that he would not know how to act.³

Part of Lincoln's reluctance to identify entirely with a Christian body, especially in his pre-Washington experience, was his keen sense of intellectual honesty. He was determined not to act a part in which he could not be involved with absolute integrity. Furthermore, in his Illinois days Lincoln had good reason to feel wounded by unfair opposition on the part of church members, including some prominent clergymen. When, in 1846, Lincoln was elected to Congress as the Whig representative of the Seventh District of Illinois, his Democratic opponent was the old-fashioned Methodist circuit rider, Peter Cartwright. It is to Cartwright's discredit that he sought to make political capital out of the fact that Lincoln was not a church member. Lincoln had

Page 98

faced this problem before, especially in 1843, when he reported of himself that there was the strangest combination of church influence against him. It was contended, he said, "that no Christian ought to go for me, because I belonged to no church."⁴

In our effort to judge the intensity of the conflict between the preacher and the young politician it is not necessary to rely on the folklore which developed and which some biographers have credited. We have Lincoln's own account of the controversy in a letter dated August 11, 1846, addressed to Allen N. Ford, who was editor of the Gazette, published at Lacon, Illinois. "Shortly before starting on my tour through yours, and the other Northern counties of the district," Lincoln wrote, "I was informed by letter from Jacksonville that Mr. Cartwright was whispering the charge of infidelity against me in that quarter . . . I incline to the belief that he has succeeded in deceiving some honest men." Lincoln continued with a discussion of moral philosophy in which the key sentence is, "I believe it is an established maxim in morals that he who makes an assertion without knowing whether it is true or false, is guilty of falsehood."⁵ Lincoln was too astute to condemn a denomination because of the act of one leader, but the lack of ethical sensitivity deeply shocked him. It seemed reasonable to him to expect that a sincere Christian would feel constrained to exhibit great care in guarding the reputations of others. The handbill printed in chapter one was produced as Lincoln's effort to counter what seemed to him to be an unfair attack, but he wisely refrained in the handbill from mentioning Cartwright by name.

This encounter with the circuit rider is highly revealing. At the age of thirty-seven Lincoln was not only somewhat anticlerical, but also reverent. He did not allow the ineptitude of the man

Page 99

who claimed to represent the Gospel turn him against it. Lincoln was looking for morality in religion and resenting its absence. His campaign ended with success, but the mark on his inner life which the encounter left was a permanent one. He was now, at thirty-seven, a truly public man, as the only Whig Congressman elected from the State of Illinois, and he was beginning to achieve maturity in his inner life. It is most remarkable that Lincoln, when he saw so much that was vulnerable in the leadership of the Church, did not move to the opposite error and become a scoffer.

One insight into Lincoln's reticence we owe to Mrs. Rankin, a close friend of both contestants. Our source in this connection, already mentioned above, is Henry B. Rankin, Mrs. Rankin's son. Henry Rankin was at one time employed in Lincoln's law office and in 1916 he published his recollections. Since his published account deals with conversations which occurred seventy years earlier, and which he knew only from what his mother told him, we dare not accept its details uncritically. But the main point seems highly credible, partly because it is coherent with other known elements in Lincoln's character. One evening this friendly woman, from whom Lincoln had borrowed books, told him that, while she knew the Cartwright charges were false, she was still puzzled about Lincoln's true position. The question made Lincoln restless. He rose from his chair, rested an elbow on the mantel of the fireplace, and began to say slowly, "I will not discuss the character and religion of Jesus Christ on the stump! That is no place for it, though my opponent, a minister of His Gospel, thinks it is."⁶

Lincoln did not seek church membership as he entered spiritual maturity partly because he took his faith so seriously that he approached it with extreme reverence and consequent restraint. "Those days of trouble," he told Mrs. Rankin, "found

Page 100

me tossed amid a sea of questionings. They piled big around me. Through all I groped my way until I found a stronger and higher grasp of thought, one that reached beyond this life with a clearness and satisfaction I had never known before. The Scriptures unfolded before me with a deeper and more logical appeal through these new experiences than anything else I could find to turn to, or even before had found in them. I do not claim that all my doubts were removed then, or since that time have been swept away. They were not."

The opposition of the religious leaders to a man of Lincoln's originality continued up to the time of his first election to the presidency. In 1860, of the twenty-three pastors in the City of Springfield, only three appeared to be ready to vote for their fellow townsman. The record of the churches on slavery, in 1858, was something which deterred Lincoln's wholehearted allegiance to their work. Referring to slavery, in his last debate with Senator Douglas, Lincoln asked, "Does it not enter into the churches and rend them asunder? What divided the great Methodist Church into two parts, North and South? What has raised this constant disturbance in every Presbyterian General Assembly that meets? What disturbed the Unitarian Church in this very city two years ago?"⁷ Lincoln was impatient with Christian organizations which could not unite in opposition to something as obvious as the sinfulness of human slavery. A man of less pronounced integrity might simply have joined the Episcopal or the Presbyterian Church, thereby stopping the mouths of some of his critics. Since Lincoln refused to do this, he was left in a difficult position politically. He was too perplexed to please the conventional and too reverent to please the infidels.

Lincoln came close to membership when his wife joined the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield in 1852. At that time he

Page 101

rented a pew, for which he paid fifty dollars annually, and which he occupied when he was in the city. It is significant that Lincoln attended, not only the regular meetings for worship, but the inquiry meetings also. After becoming President, his relationship to the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, in Washington, was similar to the one experienced in Springfield. As before, he paid fifty dollars a year in pew rental, occupying the pew which had formerly been assigned to President Buchanan. He soon came to regard Dr. Phineas D. Gurley of the New York Avenue Church as his pastor, receiving him frequently in the White House. It has been reported that Lincoln had made arrangements to become a member officially on Easter Day, 1865, and that, apart from his assassination, he would have taken this step. Though this is possible, we have no way of verifying the truth of the report. The chief evidence against it is that Dr. Gurley, so far as we know, never mentioned it publicly. The determination to join, if accurate, would have been extremely newsworthy. It would have been reasonable for Dr. Gurley to have mentioned it at the funeral in the White House, in which he delivered the sermon which has been preserved. The only evidence we have is an affidavit signed more than sixty years later by Mrs. Sidney I. Lauck, then a very old woman. In her affidavit signed under oath in Essex County, New Jersey, February 15, 1928, she said, "After Mr. Lincoln's death, Dr. Gurley told me that Mr. Lincoln had made all the necessary arrangements with him and the Session of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church to be received into the membership of the said church, by confession of his faith in Christ, on the Easter Sunday following the Friday night when Mr. Lincoln was assassinated." Mrs. Lauck was, she said, about thirty years of age at the time of the assassination.⁸

Possibly no subject has developed more folklore than that of

Page 102

Lincoln's church affiliation. The claims which have been made are so numerous that it would be difficult to mention all of them. It has been asserted that Lincoln was baptized as a Campbellite, that he was a Swedenborgian, that he was a Spiritualist, etc., but no one such claim has been verified. Lincoln was sufficiently ecumenical in spirit to have connections with a great many different movements, but he was never much of a joiner. When asked directly whether he was a Mason, Lincoln expressed his admiration for the order, but went on to say that he had never joined it.

It has sometimes been supposed that Lincoln's failure to join a particular church was based upon his rejection of all denominationalism. But there is abundant evidence to show that this is not the case. We are far closer to the truth when we say that his admiration for many different denominations increased his problem in fastening upon any one to the exclusion of all of the others. Far from denigrating the rise of denominations, he expressed gratitude for the existence of each of several.

On one occasion one of Lincoln's friends lamented in his presence the divided condition of Protestantism and the consequent number of individual churches, only to find that Lincoln rejected the popular cliché. The essence of the response was that the man was wasting his tears. "My good brother," he said, "you are all wrong. The more sects we have the better. They are all getting somebody in that the others could not: and even with the numerous divisions we are all doing tolerably well."⁹ Essential to Lincoln's mature theology was what we may truly call a sophisticated ecumenicity. He did not think the proliferation of denominations was evil, provided each was sufficiently humble to learn from the others and also providing each preserved something of value which, apart from its corporate existence, might

Page 103

be lost. That he felt this about Quakerism was increasingly obvious, though he never seriously considered becoming a Quaker, as some of his ancestors were. Lincoln in his maturity outgrew any hostility he once felt toward the Methodism of Peter Cartwright. This is indicated by his generous and well-known words, "God bless the Methodist Church."

Lincoln sought to be even-handed in his treatment of Roman Catholics, as with the various Protestant denominations. Though he had no precedent for appointing chaplains to hospitals, Lincoln recognized the need and acted on his own responsibility. On October 21, 1861, he wrote to Archbishop John J. Hughes offering to appoint Catholic chaplains on the same basis as Protestants.¹⁰ Priests were assigned duties October 24, 1861.

The President's responses to the various denominational delegations became the occasions for some of his most quotable declarations. A splendid example of this occurred, as Lincoln's new firmness was beginning to assume shape, when on May 13, 1862, he received a Lutheran delegation of national scope. "I welcome here," he said, "the representatives of the Evangelical Lutherans of the United States. I accept with gratitude their assurances of the sympathy and support of that enlightened, influential, and loyal class of my fellow citizens in an important crisis which involves, in my judgment, not only the civil and religious liberties of our own dear land, but in a large degree the civil and religious liberties of mankind in many countries and through many ages." It was people of this character who could bring out the noblest strain in the President's emergent thinking. "You may all recollect," he concluded, "that in taking up the sword thus forced into our hands this government appealed to the prayers of the pious and the good, and declared that it placed its whole dependence upon the favor of God. I now humbly and reverently,

Page 104

in your presence, reiterate the acknowledgment of that dependence, not doubting that, if it shall please the Divine Being who determines the destinies of nations that this shall remain a united people, they will, humbly seeking the Divine guidance, make their prolonged national existence a source of new benefits to themselves and their successors, and to all classes and conditions of mankind."¹¹

One important factor in Lincoln's new appreciation for the churches was the growing contrast between their response to his efforts and the reactions of other sectors of the population, especially the press. At the same time that the members of the churches seemed to understand his predicament better, many of the editors understood it less. Some of the most cruel of all of the editorial criticism came in 1864, prior to his renomination and reelection. For example, the New York Herald, prior to the Baltimore Convention, referred to the President as "joke incarnated, his election a very sorry joke, and the idea that such a man as he should be the President of such a country as this, a very ridiculous joke." Even more strident was the New Year's, 1864, edition of the Crisis:

The people of the North owe Mr. Lincoln nothing but eternal hatred and scorn. There are 500,000 new made graves; there are 500,000 orphans; there are 200,000 widows; there is a bottomless sea of blood; there is the Constitution broken; there are liberty and law -- liberty in chains and in a dungeon; thieves in the Treasury, provost marshals in the seats of justice, butchers in the pulpit -- and these are the things which we owe Mr. Lincoln.

In reaction to such vituperation, Lincoln turned more and more to the Church rather than to the press. In the Church he found people who, though they hated war as much as the editors hated it, saw with clarity what the moral alternative was. Consequently,

Page 105

the beleaguered President went out of his way to be generous with church requests. This explains one of Mrs. Gurney's letters in which she wrote, "I think I may venture to say that Friends are not less loyal for the leniency with which their honest convictions have been treated, and I believe there are very few amongst us who would not lament to see any other than Abraham Lincoln fill the Presidential chair, at least at the next election."

Respecting all denominations as he did, President Lincoln was resolute in refusing to give special privileges to any or to interfere in ecclesiastical decisions. A difficult situation developed in St. Louis when the Reverend Samuel B. McPheeters was expelled from the pastorate of the Pine Street Presbyterian Church because of what the majority of the members considered "unmistakable evidence of sympathy with the rebellion." When President Lincoln was handed a harsh petition from the ousted pastor's supporters, he replied with a strong affirmation of his own policy of noninterference and the refusal to give privileges to a clergyman which would not be given to anyone else. "I directed, a long time ago," he said, "that Dr. McPheters was to be arrested, or remain at large, upon the same rule as any one else."¹² Lincoln was even more explicit in a letter written February 11, 1864, to Edwin M. Stanton, the Secretary of War. "When an individual, in the church or out of it, becomes dangerous to the public interest, he must be checked; but the churches, as such, must take care of themselves."¹³

Lincoln's final attitude, then toward the churches was respect for all, combined with refusal to interfere with any. His simple remark to Mrs. Gurney, "I am much indebted to the good Christian people of the country," went to the heart of the matter.

Indeed, Lincoln's new attitude toward the churches is one of the chief marks of the radical change in his spiritual life which occurred during the years of supreme crisis. To Lincoln's amazement he found that the Church, which had seemed to him for years to be perhaps worth while, but not very important, had become his strongest organized support. We have to reach into the twentieth century, with its fierce turmoil in the persecution of the German Jews, to find an adequate parallel. Those who know it will not soon forget Albert Einstein's appreciation of the Church as a strong moral ally, and his consequent laconic remark, "I am forced to confess that what I once despised I now praise unreservedly." The question of Lincoln's church membership is, in spite of the attention which it has received, relatively trivial, but his new admiration of the Church and its potent moral witness is not trivial at all.

Lincoln's mature conception of Church and State was not one of absolute separation. Complete separation would have forbidden the establishment of a Federal celebration of Thanksgiving, a point which some contemporary protesters are quick to see. We realize how far removed Lincoln was from a total separation between religion and the government when we note that no other President has called the nation to prayer, fasting, and thanksgiving as often as Lincoln did. That he was not trying to bypass the organized churches is shown by the fact that both of the remarkable Fast Day proclamations recognize the importance of the organized worshiping groups. In calling the first Fast Day in September, 1861, the support of the religious leaders was specifically solicited. The President recommended to all the people, and especially to all ministers and teachers of religion of all denominations, that they should gather on the day in question "according to their several creeds and modes of worship."¹⁴ Thereby, ecumenicity was encouraged by the chief theologian of

civil religion. The spiritual needs of the agonized state were not met by denying the values of the various denominations and congregations, but rather by exalting them.

Lincoln grew markedly in his respect for the Church as an institution, but that did not mean that he was on good terms with all church people or with all of the clergy. Indeed, the late Reinhold Niebuhr concluded that many of the religious leaders of the period, in spite of their good will, were inferior to Lincoln theologically. Consequently, Niebuhr began his brilliant chapter "The Religion of Abraham Lincoln" by saying: "Analysis of the religion of Abraham Lincoln in the context of the traditional religion of his time and place and of its polemical use on the slavery issue, which corrupted religious life in the days before and during the Civil War, must lead to the conclusion that Lincoln's religious convictions were superior in depth and purity to those, not only of the political leaders of his day, but of the religious leaders of the era."¹⁵

The President found it hard to be patient with some clergymen, especially with those who were perfectly certain that they knew exactly how the nation should proceed. Prime examples of such certitude were provided by both the clergy who belonged to the peace party and those who were extreme Abolitionists. "I am approached," said Lincoln, "with the most opposite opinions and advice, and that by religious men, who are equally certain that they represent the Divine will."¹⁶ The Chaplain of the Senate, the Reverend Byron Sunderland, clearly irked the President by his tendency to turn his prayers into lectures, informing the Almighty on subjects of all kinds. In one prayer, for instance, he alluded critically to Lincoln's having been at the theater the night before. The Chaplain's performance led Senator Willard Saulsbury of Delaware to offer a resolution requesting the Chaplain "to pray to and supplicate Almighty God in our

behalf, and not

Page 108

to lecture Him." When the President was trying with all his might to bring the war to an end, he did not appreciate the cruel attacks of a few preachers who supposed they understood the situation better than he did. Even the famous Henry Ward Beecher said, in reference to Lincoln, "Not a spark of genius has he; not an element of leadership. Not one particle of heroic enthusiasm."¹⁷ We know now, of course, that this cruelly judgmental stance hurt Beecher more in the long run than it hurt the man against whom it was directed, but at the time it was not easy to bear.

In regard to slavery and emancipation President Lincoln felt and appreciated most keenly the support of church bodies. In all of the church conventions which met soon after the preliminary proclamation of emancipation announced on September 22, 1862, the President's crucial decision was greeted with the heartiest expressions of approval and support. This was doubly appreciated by the man at the helm because there were others who ridiculed his move. John Nicolay and John Hay saw that the growing affinity between Lincoln and church groups was produced by the common struggle against slavery. Indeed, as we read the record now, we are struck, not only with the number of church delegations who met with the President, but also with the unanimity of their concern. Lincoln did not always admire the quality of the remarks which he heard, and he felt that some of his visitors were oversure of themselves, but on the whole his admiration grew. "In a conflict which was founded on the quickened moral sense of the people," said Nicolay and Hay, "it was not strange that the Government received the most earnest support from the churches."¹⁸

Page 109

As Lincoln's respect for churches grew, religious people grew in their appreciation of him as their leader. That he had not actually joined a particular congregation was, in the outcome, a positive asset in this meeting of minds. Great appreciation was expressed for the numerous and profound calls to national prayer. Characteristic of the favorable response was that of Eliza Gurney, written on August 18, 1863, twelve days after the "Day of Prayer" which the President had proclaimed immediately following Gettysburg. "I can hardly refrain," wrote this devout woman, "from expressing my cordial approval of thy late excellent proclamation appointed a day of thanksgiving for the sparing and preserving mercies which, in the tender loving-kindness of our God and Savior, have been so bountifully showered upon us . . . And I rejoice in the decided recognition of an all-wise and superintending Providence, which is so marked a feature of the aforesaid document, as well as the immediate influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, which perhaps never in any previous state paper has been so fully recognized before."¹⁹

One of the most widely disseminated of all Lincoln stories is that of his outlining the one condition on which he would ever join a church. The essence of the story, in its many versions, is that he would join any church which would establish, as its sole qualification for membership, Christ's own summary of the law (Matthew 22:37-40, Mark 12:29-31, Luke 10:27). From his young manhood Lincoln had been chary of creeds, often referring to them as "man-made." In June, 1846, in his conversation with Mrs. Rankin at Petersburg Lincoln said, according to her son's report, that he had reservations about "the possibility and propriety of settling the religion of Jesus Christ in the models of man-made creeds and dogmas." Clearly, he was contrasting the creeds which he knew with the Bible, and he was well aware that

Page 110

not one of them could be found in it. "I cannot, without mental reservations," said Lincoln, "assent to long and complicated creeds and catechisms."²⁰

The most substantial source of the familiar story about the conditions of membership comes from an address given by Congressman Henry C. Deming before the General Assembly of Connecticut in 1865. Concerning Lincoln, the Congressman said:

I am here reminded of an impressive remark he made to me on another occasion, which I shall never forget. He said, he had never united himself to any church, because he found difficulty in giving his assent without mental reservations, to the long complicated statements of Christian doctrine which characterize their Articles of Belief and Confessions of Faith. "When any church," he continued, "will inscribe over its altar as its sole qualification for membership the Savior's condensed statement of the substance of both the law and the Gospel, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all they heart, and with all they soul, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself, -- that Church will I join with all my heart and soul."²¹

Even though Lincoln repeated the substance of these remarks several times, it is not easy to know how seriously to take him. It is always possible that he was partly joking, pulling the legs of his more orthodox associates. The remarks quoted are really out of character in that the mood is far more simplistic than Lincoln's mood usually was. The abbreviated creed he proposed is necessary for the survival of the Church of Christ, but whether it is sufficient is another matter. A scholarly critic is bound to observe that he included in this nothing about the life everlasting and nothing about Christ's own revelation of the Father. If we take Christ seriously, as Lincoln proposed, then we have to take seriously His words about Himself. Familiar as Lincoln was with

Page 111

the Bible, he was cognizant of this aspect of Christ's teaching. The reasonable conclusion is that his repeated remark was intended chiefly to shock his listeners and to draw attention to the danger of unnecessary complexity. His theology was not, in the end, oversimplified. He recognized the delicate balance between immanence and transcendence, refusing to settle for either of these alone. In his perceptive essay, *The Meaning of God in the Life of Lincoln*, Willard L. Sperry recognized that Lincoln, though he did not explicitly formulate a creed, clearly had one. Referring to transcendence and immanence, Sperry said, "Now the whole deeper significance of Lincoln's religion rests in the fact that he preserved, as few men in history and none in our own history have preserved, a working balance between these two ideas, and that he used Power in Perspective. His God was a God who was both in the world and above the world."²² A creed is what a person believes, and Lincoln believed something very specific. His was not religion in general. In his theological superiority "he laid hold with one hand upon the Power that comes from God at work in the world, while he clung with the other hand to God above the battle, who gave him moral and historical Perspective." Because they had superior opportunities to know the truth in these matters the tempered conclusion of his two secretaries deserves careful attention:

He was a man of profound and intense religious feeling. We have no purpose of attempting to formulate his creed; we question if he himself ever did so. There have been swift witnesses who, judging from expressions uttered in his callow youth, have called him an atheist, and others who, with the most laudable intentions, have remembered improbable conversations which they bring forward to prove at once his orthodoxy and their own intimacy with him. But leaving aside these apocryphal evidences, we have only to look at his authentic public and private utterances to see how deep and strong in all the latter

part of his life was

Page 112

the current of his religious thought and emotion. He continually invited and appreciated, at their highest value, the prayers of good people. The pressure of the tremendous problems by which he was surrounded; the awful moral significance of the conflict in which he was the chief combatant; the overwhelming sense of personal responsibility, which never left him for an hour -- all contributed to produce, in a temperament naturally serious and predisposed to a spiritual view of life and conduct, a sense of reverent acceptance of the guidance of a Superior Power.²³

Being neither a church member nor antichurch, Lincoln's behavior was often perplexing to both the orthodox and the heretical. While one group was shocked to find him so pious, the other was surprised to find him unimpressed by ecclesiastical rules and practices. An instance of the latter was his almost total inattention to the conventional Christian calendar. To this day there are people who can hardly believe it when they suddenly realize that Lincoln was shot while attending the theater on Good Friday, of all days. What a way, they say, to remember the Crucifixion! The obvious answer is that it was not his way of remembering the Crucifixion of Christ. Special days in the church year meant almost nothing to this man of the prairie, who voted to keep the legislature in session on Christmas Day. As we study his official letters, we find that he dated some of them on Christmas and apparently made no recognition of a special festival celebrating the birth of Christ. On December 25, 1863, he wrote to Bayard Taylor, Secretary of Legation at St. Petersburg, about his lecture "Serfs, Serfdom, and Emancipation in Russia."

Lincoln's unconcern about the ecclesiastical calendar is more understandable when we realize that his practice was consistent with the general cultural pattern of his time. Today nearly everyone puts great emphasis upon Christmas, but in earlier America this was not the case. A hundred years ago schools were sometimes conducted at Christmas, precisely as on other days. It is

Page 113

hard for us to remember how recent in American experience is the recognition of Holy Week, and especially of Good Friday. There are many now living who, in their childhood, were not reminded of these days at all. Indeed, in some church circles genuine pride was taken in the refusal to make a distinction between days, on the ground that all days should be equally holy. Lincoln appears to have felt this way to the end, and in this he was truly a man of the people.

On more than one occasion President Lincoln was faced with the problem posed by the preaching of treasonable sentiments under the cloak of religious freedom. Feeling the delicacy of this problem, he deliberately practiced restraint. His policy was to make as little as possible of the issue. But in case there was flagrant defiance, he determined, as we have noted earlier, to maintain a single standard and to hold clergymen accountable to the law, exactly as in the case of other men. In regard to a congregation in Memphis, Tennessee, which was divided in loyalty, this combination of restraint and equality before the law was admirably illustrated. "I say again," Lincoln wrote on May 13, 1864, "if there be no military need for the building, leave it alone, neither putting any one in or out, of it, except on finding some one preaching or practicing treason, in which case lay hands upon him just as if he were doing the same thing in any other building, or in the streets or highways."²⁴ In short, his growing respect for the Church did not lead the President to favoritism. The freedom of religion, as he understood it, was a freedom that had to be exercised within the law.

One result of Lincoln's new respect for the churches was his eagerness to help church people perform services to which they felt drawn. This is why he made a pioneering decision to facilitate the work of ministers in military hospitals. He wrote to

Page 114

certain volunteers: "Having been solicited by Christian ministers, and other pious people, to appoint suitable persons to act as chaplains at the hospitals for our sick and wounded soldiers, and feeling the intrinsic propriety of having such persons so to act, and yet believing there is no law conferring the power upon me to appoint them, I think fit to say that if you will voluntarily enter upon and perform the appropriate duties of such position, I will recommend that Congress make compensation therefor at the same rate as chaplains in the army are compensated."²⁵ In similar vein the President agreed to help promote a plan for religious work among the armed forces adopted by a committee appointed by the Young men's Christian Association.²⁶ On August 21, 1863, he approved a plan of "colored ministers of the Gospel, who express a wish to go within our military lines and minister to their brethren there. The object is a worthy one, and I shall be glad for all facilities to be afforded them which may not be inconsistent with or a hindrance to our military operations."²⁷

Many of the churches with which Lincoln had had some connection were represented in his funeral arrangements. These included the services in the White House, the journey of twelve days and nights by train, and finally the concluding ceremony at Springfield. The long journey home reversed the trip from Springfield to Washington, more than four years before. Many remembered how he had said, as he left Springfield, "I now leave not knowing when, or whether ever, I may return." The scene was one for the depiction of which the gifts of Carl Sandburg were admirably suited:

From his White House in Washington -- where it began -- they carried his coffin and followed it nights and days for twelve days.

Page 115

By night bonfires and torches lighted the right of way for a slow-going railroad train.

By day troops with reversed arms, muffled drums, multitudinous feet seeking the pivotal box with the silver handles.

By day bells tolling, bells sobbing the requiem, the salute guns, cannon rumbling their inarticulate thunder.

To Baltimore, Harrisburg, Philadelphia, New York, they journeyed with the draped casket to meet overly ornate catafalques.

To Albany, Utica, Syracuse, moved the funeral cortege always met by marches and throngs.

To Cleveland, Columbus, Indianapolis, Chicago, they took the mute oblong box, met by a hearse for convoy to where tens of thousands should have their last look.

Then to Springfield, Illinois, the old home town, the Sangamon near by, the New Salem hill top near by, for the final rest of cherished dust.²⁸

There was no argument about Church and State on Wednesday, April 19, 1865, when six hundred people crowded into the East Room of the White House. One-tenth of all present were clergymen. For the

ecumenical President there was an ecumenical funeral service of genuine dignity. Chief among the participants were Dr. C. H. Hall, rector of the Church of the Epiphany, Bishop Matthew Simpson of the Methodist Episcopal Church, Dr. Phineas D. Gurley, the President's own pastor, and Dr. E.H. Gray, a Baptist, who at that time was Chaplain of the United States Senate.

It was appropriate that Dr. Gurley should give the sermon in the East Room. He knew the mind of the fallen leader so well that much of Lincoln's own mood entered into the sermon. Of Lincoln the pastor said, "He remembered that 'God is in history,' and he felt that nowhere had His hand and His mercy been so marvelously conspicuous as in the history of this nation. He

Page 116

hoped and he prayed that the same hand would continue to guide us, and that same mercy continue to abound to us in the times of our greatest need." Fortunately, Dr. Gurley could speak with firsthand experience, because he had been with the President many times. In the light of such intimate knowledge he added, "I speak what I know, and testify what I have often heard him say, when I affirm that that guidance and mercy were the props on which he humbly and habitually leaned; they were the best hope he had for himself and for his country."

That the final funeral sermon at Springfield should be delivered by Bishop Matthew Simpson was a natural result of Lincoln's personal admiration for the Methodist leader. When Simpson preached in the summer of 1864 in the Methodist Church at the corner of 4½ Street and F Street, the President had been able to attend. It was fortunate for the later preparation of the Second Inaugural that the topic of the sermon was "The Providence of God as Seen in Our War." In the summer of 1864, though Grant was advancing, peace still seemed endlessly elusive. After the sermon, the Bishop and the President conferred in a friendly fashion.

Matthew Simpson (1811-1884) was exactly the kind of leader whom Lincoln could admire. Before coming into Lincoln's life, Simpson had already performed a wide variety of public service. He was president of Indiana Asbury (now De Pauw University) from 1839 to 1848, and was elected Bishop in 1852. Lincoln admired not only Simpson's eloquence and his patriotism, but also his reliability as an observer. Consequently, he listened carefully to what the Bishop reported about the mood of the country. When Simpson early reported to the President, and to some of his Cabinet members, that seventy-five thousand men were but a beginning of the number needed, he was one of the first to predict that the struggle would be long and severe. Secretary Seward minimized the credibility of Simpson's remarks, asking

Page 117

what opportunity a clergyman could have to judge of such affairs. Edward Bates, the Attorney General, took the opposite view, maintaining that few men knew so much of the temper of the people as Bishop Simpson did. After the Cabinet meeting, Simpson and Lincoln remained together for a long time. The Bishop gave in detail his opinion of the mood, as he knew it, throughout the country.

One result of President Lincoln's high regard for Matthew Simpson was that the Bishop was asked to preach, on the day after Lincoln's second inauguration, to a distinguished congregation which filled the Hall of Representatives. The Bishop's assignment in Washington was an excellent preparation for the still more demanding assignment only a few weeks later in Illinois. The high point at Oak Ridge Cemetery, Springfield, on May 4, 1865, was the reading aloud of Lincoln's greatest speech, followed by the sermon

of Bishop Simpson. The witness of the State and the witness of the Church were not the same, but they were perfectly joined at the end.

Chapter Six || Table of Contents

1. See Warren, Lincoln's Youth, Seven to Twenty-one, pp. 151, 213. [BACK]
2. See Franklin H. Littell, From State Church to Pluralism (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1962). [BACK]
3. His misgiving in this point is revealed in a letter addressed to Mary S. Owens, written May 7, 1837. Collected Works, I. p. 78. [BACK]
4. Letter to Martin S. Morris, dated March 26, 1843. Collected Works, I. pp. 319-321. [BACK]
5. Collected Works, I., pp. 383, 384. [BACK]
6. Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, p. 323. [BACK]
7. This debate was held at Alton on October 15, 1858. Collected Works, III, p. 310. [BACK]
8. See Frank E. Edgington, A History of the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church (Washington, D.C., 1961), pp. 244, 245. [BACK]
9. The Making of a Minister: The Autobiography of Clarence E. McCartney, edited by J. Clyde Henry (Great Neck, N.Y.: Channel Press, 1961). [BACK]
10. Collected Works, IV, p. 559. [BACK]
11. Collected Works, V. pp. 212, 213. [BACK]
12. Collected Works, VII, p. 86. Lincoln spelled the controversial pastor's name "McPheters." [BACK]
13. Ibid., pp. 86, 178, 179. [BACK]
14. Collected Works, IV, p. 482. [BACK]
15. Nevins, p. 72. [BACK]
16. Collected Works, V, pp. 419, 420. [BACK]
17. Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln, the War Years, I, p. 555. [BACK]
18. The material collected by Lincoln's two private secretaries was published first in the Century magazine, August, 1889, and later in Abraham Lincoln: A History, VI, pp. 314-342. [BACK]
19. Eliza Gurney, Memoir, p. 315. Quaker visitors to President Lincoln were more numerous than any other group, Eliza Gurney being only one of many. [BACK]
20. Rankin, Personal Recollections of Abraham Lincoln, p. 326. [BACK]

21. Deming, Eulogy upon Abraham Lincoln before the General Assembly of Connecticut (1865), p. 42. [BACK]
22. P. 10. [BACK]
23. Nicolay and Hay, VI, pp. 339, 340 [BACK]
24. Collected Works, VII, p. 339. [BACK]
25. Collected Works, V, p. 53. [BACK]
26. Ibid., p. 67. [BACK]
27. Collected Works, VI, p. 401. [BACK]
28. Abraham Lincoln, The War Years, IV, p. 388. [BACK]

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

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