

The Agonizing Interlude

by Elton Trueblood

Abraham Lincoln's spiritual development gave him a greater sense of purpose and direction, and a deeper understanding of the importance of moral clarity and spiritual guidance.

Scripture: Psalm 37:5, Proverbs 3:5, Isaiah 41:10, Romans 8:28, Philippians 4:13

Topics: "Faith And Politics", "Spiritual Leadership"

Description

Elton Trueblood preaches about the transformative journey of Abraham Lincoln during his presidency, emphasizing his shift from a local politician to a world statesman dedicated to the achievement of freedom for all. Lincoln's deepening spiritual development and reliance on God's will are highlighted, culminating in his pivotal decision to issue the Emancipation Proclamation as a war measure. Through moments of grief, criticism, and internal struggle, Lincoln's faith and moral strength are tested and ultimately solidified, leading to his profound realization that he is an instrument in God's hands to accomplish a great work.

Transcript

It is a momentous thing to be the instrument, under Providence, of the liberation of a race.

ABRAHAM LINCOLN

There are many mysteries about the life of Abraham Lincoln, but no mystery is greater than that of the radical change which occurred in his public work after he had entered the White House. The change, which is evident in many ways, is most obvious in the realm of public discourse. The style of his last great utterances, beginning with the "Meditation on the Divine Will" in September, 1862, is of a totally different character from anything which Lincoln produced in previous years. The First Inaugural had a certain grandeur, but the sentences most often quoted, at the end, were partly the work of Seward. It was only after he took office, and after the terrible sense of division in his beloved country had fully come upon him, that totally new and unsuspected powers began to be made manifest.

Did Lincoln recognize a change in himself? Apparently so. He told Noah Brooks, the man who would have become his personal secretary had he lived, that "his own election to office, and the

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crisis immediately following, influentially determined him in what he called "a process of crystallization" going on in his mind." It is not that we can assign an exact date for the change, since the President could

not do so himself, but we can at least say that a new spirit was dominant after the middle of 1862. One evidence of the new firmness of conviction is that when Lincoln first shared with his Cabinet the plan of emancipation, on July 22, 1862, instead of asking their advice, he informed them. By that time the sad, contemplative man had been at the center of the storm for nearly a year and a half, and in that period he had changed from an Illinois politician into a world statesman.

The new Lincoln, though alive to many issues, was devoted primarily to the achievement of freedom for all. As we cannot rightly understand his opposition to slavery if we think of it as a merely political position, neither can we understand it if it is stated in only moral terms. His entire conception of morality was derivative, because he did not believe in an independent order of moral values. "The good for Lincoln," as Professor Wolf has so clearly said, "was ultimately anchored in the will of God, not subject to human likes or dislikes."¹

Most of 1861 was for Lincoln, as for the nation, a very bad time. Even after the die was cast by the attack on Fort Sumter and the very life of the nation endangered, the new chief executive had to spend much of his time dealing with office-seekers. Wherever he turned he found men who were thinking not of the national crisis, and not of the liberation of the slaves, but of their own personal careers in office. When the military struggle actually began, the news was almost wholly bad so far as the prospects of the Union forces were concerned. On the night following the Battle of Bull Run in July, 1861, Lincoln "lay awake," said his secretaries, "on a sofa in the Executive office."²

Already in the midst of the discouragement and the apparent

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indecision of his first year in the highest office, Lincoln was placing the struggle in a larger context and mentioning "the whole family of man." "The issue," he said, "embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man the question of whether a constitutional republic, or democracy -- a government of the people by the same people -- can or can not maintain its territorial integrity against its own domestic foes."³ The seed of the Gettysburg Address was planted.

During his first year as President, Lincoln was faced with public criticism of a bitterness which is hard to believe. All men in public life are forced to bear abuse, but few have faced as much as Lincoln faced day after day. The writers in the newspapers could sound smart because they did not have the responsibilities of decision, and they could sound bold by enunciating extreme positions which they were not required to implement. Lincoln, by contrast, in order to maintain integrity had to reject extremes because he was sworn to be faithful to the welfare of the entire nation.

As the months of anguish and apparent failure wore on, the cruel criticism of Lincoln in the Northern states came from opposite directions. On the one hand, there developed the party of radicals, whom John Hay cleverly labeled "Jacobins." They constantly criticized Lincoln for not pushing the war more vigorously, crying "On to Richmond." Hay applied the term used in the French Revolution because of the similarity of mood, if not of doctrine. A major mouthpiece of this kind of criticism was the New York Independent.⁴

From the opposite side came the criticism expressed by the "peace" party, popularly labeled "Copperheads." This term

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came into general use in the crucial autumn of 1862 and was applied to those who, believing it was impossible for the Union forces to conquer the Confederacy, sought a political compromise and opposed the war measures which Lincoln felt he had to uphold if the Union was to be preserved. It is hard to know which of the two major kinds of criticism wounded the sensitive Lincoln the more. Lincoln listened to his critics, but as he fought the battle of his own mind, he became convinced that he dared not capitulate to either the Copperhead or the Jacobin. The price in terms of his own peace of mind, however, was high.

The early weeks of 1862 were dark indeed, partly because of the death of Willie, who was undoubtedly the President's favorite child. Willie died in the White House on February 20, 1862, at the age of eleven. In some ways the sorrow was like that produced by the death of Eddie twelve years earlier, but the new sadness was enhanced by the constant sense of the national tragedy which had not been present when the first death occurred in 1850. Lincoln's melancholy after Willie died was so deep that it seemed impossible to believe that the old buoyancy would ever return. The depression seemed complete! Yet, by midsummer, there was a new spirit in the man, marked by a confidence from which he never again retreated.

Of all of the interpreters of Lincoln no one has expressed the change better than did the late Nathaniel W. Stephenson. "Out of this strange period of intolerable confusion," he wrote, "a gigantic figure had at last emerged. The outer and the inner Lincoln had fused. He was now a coherent personality, masterful in spite of his gentleness, with his own peculiar fashion of self-reliance, having a policy of his own devising, his colors nailed upon the masthead."⁵ We cannot, of course, know precisely what went on in Abraham Lincoln's soul in the dreadful winter of 1862, but we do know something of what emerged.

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When President Lincoln was at the lowest point of his grief, in the late winter of 1862, one visitor to the White House made a lasting difference. This was Dr. Francis Vinton, rector of Trinity Church, New York.⁶ The insight which Dr. Smith had given the Lincolns in Springfield twelve years before was reaffirmed and made more intelligible by the spiritual help which Dr. Vinton offered the bereaved couple. His help came by the intellectual route, the only way in which it could come to Abraham Lincoln. The visitor showed that it is wholly rational for God to continue His interest in and concern for persons after the death of the body, just as before. Dr. Vinton called attention to Christ's own teaching on this point, especially as it is reported in Luke 20:38, "For he is not a God of the dead, but of the living: for all live unto him."

This approach seemed utterly fresh, as the rector of Trinity expounded it. Lincoln was struck especially by the visitor's confident words, "Your son is alive."⁷ As the President pondered, his entire outlook began to change for he realized that God cannot be defeated. If God cannot be defeated by the death of a little boy, it is also true that He cannot be defeated by a civil war. Ida Tarbell's insight at this point is as follows: "It was the first experience of his life, so far as we know, which drove him to look outside of his own mind and heart for help to endure a personal grief. It was the first time in his life when he had not been sufficient for his own experience."⁸ If there had not been the darkness of the late winter of 1862, it is not likely that there would have been the amazing burst of light at the end of the year. As he had done before, Lincoln matured best in sorrow. Miss Tarbell neglects the earlier experiences, especially those of 1841,

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but her emphasis upon Lincoln's recognition of his own inadequacy is helpful. The profound paradox is that the great man became more confident in his approach to other men, including the men of his own

Cabinet, when he recognized that his major confidence was not in himself but in Another.

That the new and stronger mood was the result of a fundamentally mystical experience is the conviction of one of the most thorough of Lincoln scholars, the late Nathaniel Stephenson. "Lincoln's final emergence," he says, "was a deeper thing than merely the consolidation of a character, the transformation of a dreamer into a man of action. The fusion of the outer and the inner person was the result of a profound interior change. Those elements of mysticism which were in him from the first, which had gleamed daily through such deep over-shadowing, were at last established in their permanent form."⁹

Central to the new spiritual development was an enlargement of the idea of vocation. Less and less did the President think that he was acting merely in his own will or depending upon his own meager resources. "Hate, fear, jealousy," as Sandburg put it, "were rampant"¹⁰ in the summer, but that was not by any means the total story, for Lincoln grew immeasurably as he came to think of himself as an "instrument" of God's will. He needed an idea of this magnitude to keep him going in the face of unjust criticism as well as of military defeat. The sense that there really is a Guiding Hand, which makes possible a genuine calling for both individuals and nations, gave a tremendous new sense of moral strength. It was not enough to watch events and to muddle along day by day. What was much more important, Lincoln came to believe, was the effort to discern a pattern beneath the seeming

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irrationality of events. He had come really to believe that God molds history and that He employs erring mortals to effect His purpose.

The final position of political mysticism which Lincoln reached as a solution of his intellectual problem was equally removed from two extreme positions. On the one hand, it was far removed from the arrogant nationalism which assumes that God is on our side. Lincoln's concern, he said, was whether he was on God's side. He did not identify the will of his own fallible administration with the will of Almighty God, because he saw everything, including his own Presidency, proceeding under judgment. On the other hand, Lincoln did not admire those who think it is a mark of sophistication to sneer at patriotism. He believed that God has a will for a country and that an honest man should rejoice in the effort to try to remake his country after the divine pattern, insofar as this pattern is revealed to him. He loved his country devoutly; he believed it had been brought into existence for a purpose; he believed that this purpose had something to do with the ultimate welfare of mankind.

There is no doubt that the early months of 1862 were months of indecision for President Lincoln. The clamor of voices urged him in many contradictory directions. He was told that any move to free the slaves would be disastrous, particularly in the border states; he was told that failure to free the slaves would cause him to lose European support. He was tormented in a manner hard to bear by senators who considered themselves wiser than the President and who, accordingly, organized the Committee on the Conduct of the War. The problems of finding able generals seemed insoluble. McClellan's retreat to the James River after the Seven Days' Battles near Richmond was an event which shook Union confidence.

Then, quite suddenly, in July, 1862, a new quality of presidential leadership became evident and continued to the tragic end.

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The ebb tide of Lincoln's moral energy had ended. One vivid evidence of the new firmness is that before the year was over Lincoln, on November 5, relieved General McClellan of his command. The best way for us to know what was transpiring is for us to listen, not primarily to others, but to Lincoln himself. "It had got to be mid-summer of 1862," he told Carpenter. "Things had gone . . . from bad to worse, until I felt that we had reached the end of our rope on the plan . . . we had been pursuing; that we must change our tactics or lose the game."

As we study now the events of these crucial months, we can see something of how the light arose. "History," says Bruce Catton, "does not usually make real sense until long afterward." For example, we know the effectiveness of an official message, written by English Quakers and transmitted to the President through Francis T. King of Baltimore. Lincoln wrote to King and his associates on January 7, 1862, acknowledging the receipt of "the memorial of the English Friends." One reason for Lincoln's respect for the judgment of English Friends was his admiration for John Bright, the most eminent of them at that period. "Although I trust," he wrote, "that any fears entertained of serious derangement of our amicable relations have been without foundation, I cannot but gratefully appreciate your prompt and generous suggestions in the interests of peace and humanity."¹¹

The Memorial, addressed to the British Government, was written December 9 and was signed by forty-one members of the Meeting for Sufferings.¹² By printing and distributing the document, the English Quakers hoped to influence their Government to seek a peaceful solution of the issues then separating America and Great Britain. The nub of the controversy was the Union blockade of Confederate ports, which severely affected England's supply of cotton. In his handling of the "Trent" affair, Lincoln

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had gone out of his way to soothe British irritation, but there was still more Southern sentiment in England than in any other European country. In the wave of anti-Union feeling, John Bright was almost the only major statesman who supported Lincoln's firm policy.¹³ Lord Palmerston wanted to see America divided, with consequent weakness, and even Gladstone said publicly that the success of the Confederacy was already assured. It was as a counterpoise to such sentiment that the Quaker memorial said:

There are, perhaps, no two independent nations on the face of the earth so closely united together as England and America by the combined ties of blood, of language, of religion, of constitutional freedom, and of commercial interest; and no two nations between whom a war would be a more open scandal to our common Christianity, or a more serious injury to the welfare and progress of the human race.

Such words were exactly suited to Lincoln's mentality and to his moral stance. Coming as they did early in his year of decision, they helped to stiffen his determination and to heighten his confidence. He understood thoroughly the real danger that the British Government might support the Confederacy and that, if this should occur, France would follow suit. In this delicate situation the knowledge that John Bright and his fellow Quakers were sympathetic with Lincoln's purposes gave him moral undergirding. On a portrait of Lincoln Bright wrote, "And if there be on earth and among men any 'Divine' right to govern, surely it rests with the Ruler so chosen and so appointed." Much as Lincoln sensed God's guidance, he valued also the support of such a man.

Before entering the White House Lincoln had understood the evil character of human slavery, but in the agonizing months which followed his inauguration he came to see a still bigger

issue, of which the slavery issue was only one part. This was the issue of the perpetuation of the ideal of democracy. As 1862 wore on, the sharpening of the intellectual position became more evident until it reached a climax in the Message to Congress on December 1. What Lincoln was producing, in the month when some thought that he was doing very little, was an intellectual and spiritual clarification of the importance, for the whole world, of the American experiment in government.

When in July, 1862, Lincoln's new pattern of confidence suddenly appeared, he had just had another Quaker connection which bore upon his momentous decision. Three men and three women, official representatives of what were called "Progressive Friends," waited on the President on June 20, 1862. The chief purpose of their visit was that of urging immediate emancipation. In the dialogue which followed the presentation of their memorial, the President let the six American Friends see something of his difficulty. he agreed, of course, that slavery was wrong, but the practical question was the method of its removal. The main problem, he said, was enforcement. So far as he could see, a decree "could not be more binding upon the South than the Constitution, and that cannot be enforced in that part of the country now. Would a proclamation of freedom be any more effective?"¹⁴

While Lincoln disagreed with the members of the delegation in some details, he evidently respected them and was, consequently, influenced by what they said. In any case he set in action less than a month later the very strategy which these people proposed. Part of the reason why he was drawn to them was that they did not denounce the war. "We have no hesitancy," the Progressive Friends said, "in declaring that the government -- measuring it by its constitutional obligations -- had no alternative

but to seek to suppress this treasonable outbreak by all the means and forces at its disposal, or else to betray the sacred trusts committed to it by the people; and therefore, throughout this fearful struggle, it has had our sympathy, and desire for its success."¹⁵

An important feature of the meeting between Lincoln and the Friends delegation was that it called forth one of the clearest statements about the divine vocation that he had made up to that time. this statement indicated in miniature the grand theme which was to receive its full formulation in the Second Inaugural thirty-two months later. In short, by June 20, 1862, the spiritual pattern was already established. The New York Tribune of June 21 reported, "The President responded very impressively, saying that he was deeply sensible of his need of Divine assistance. He had sometimes thought that perhaps he might be an instrument in God's hand of accomplishing a great work and he certainly was not unwilling to be. Perhaps, however, God's way of accomplishing the end which the memorialists have in view may be different from theirs. It would be his earnest endeavor, with a firm reliance upon the Divine arm, and seeking light from above, to do his duty in the place to which he had been called." Thus, the essentials of his theological position were already formulated by mid-summer of 1862.

Another element in Lincoln's sudden growth in confidence in this crucial summer was a visit on June 24 to West Point, which included a long and confidential talk with General Winfield Scott. The day at the military academy, conferring with the venerable veteran of 1812, did not lead immediately to military victories, but it did lead to a new decisiveness on the part of the Commander-in-Chief. After that, events proceeded with great speed, many of them bringing added anguish, but not one of them

producing fundamental uncertainty in the sad-faced leader. On June 26 came the start of the Seven Days' Battles near Richmond, ending in the retreat of Union forces under McClellan. On June 27 the President ordered General John Charles Fremont relieved of his command, because, by freeing the slaves in Missouri, the military man had taken too much into his own hands. "Wendell Phillips, in a speech at New York, denounced the Administration as having no definite purpose in the war, and was interrupted by frantic cheers for Fremont."¹⁶

On July 1 the President made a call for 300,000 three-year men, convinced by this time that the struggle would be long and that capitulation was out of the question. Already, on June 28, in a letter sent through Secretary William Seward to the Union governors meeting in New York, Lincoln indicated the firmness of his own resolved. "I expect," he said, "to maintain this contest until successful or until I die, or am conquered, or my term expires, or Congress or the country forsakes me."¹⁷

On Sunday, July 13, riding in a carriage on the way to a funeral in the country near Washington, Lincoln confided to Secretary Welles and Secretary Seward his decision to issue a proclamation. Up to that time he had hesitated, in spite of much pressure, because of his great respect for the Constitution. He could not see how the Constitution could permit interference with practices which were legal in particular states. Now he had come to the momentous conclusion that emancipation could be declared on the ground of military necessity since, as Commander-in-Chief, the Constitution laid upon him the protection of the integrity of the country. An amendment to the Constitution could come later, but military necessity could be appealed to prior to the enactment of such an amendment. This is why the Emancipation Proclamation,

when issued, freed slaves only in those areas engaged in open rebellion. To go further and to emancipate slaves in the border states would have been unconstitutional, since such action would not have been covered by the war powers of the President.

The famous Proclamation, which the President had for so long contemplated in solitude, was read in its preliminary form to the Cabinet on July 22, 1862. Except for Secretaries Welles and Seward, this came to the Cabinet as a surprise. The President's style, they found, had radically altered. He did not ask for advice, the decision having been made, but he nevertheless received some. Montgomery Blair opposed the Proclamation on the ground that it would cause the Administration the loss of the mid-term elections. It would, he said in a subsequent memorandum, "endanger our power in Congress, and put power in the next House of Representatives in the hands of those opposed to the war, or to our mode of carrying it on." The most helpful suggestion, that of Secretary Seward, concerned the date on which the Proclamation should be publicly announced. Seward proposed that publication be postponed until there was some military success to announce, and this counsel the President immediately accepted as wise. Accordingly, the public announcement was not made until after the Battle of Antietam and the subsequent retreat of Lee's army across the Potomac into Virginia. The Proclamation was made known five days after Antietam, on September 22, and became operative January 1, 1863. Thus ended a year of peculiar turmoil.

There was a curious quality about many of Lincoln's conferences during the two months between July 22 and September 22. The President and those in whom he confided had a secret to keep and it is really surprising that all of them succeeded in doing so. "The President," says Randall, "was under the embarrassing necessity of seeming to be non-committal or even hostile toward

a policy upon which he was in fact determined."18 Lincoln actually had the celebrated document in his desk drawer while various persons were trying to argue him into producing it. this, of course, appealed to Lincoln's keen sense of comedy.

During this period of necessary waiting, Lincoln rose to an unusual height in his answer to an editorial, "The Prayer of Twenty Millions," written by Horace Greeley. The editorial, printed in the New York Tribune of August 20, 1862, was addressed to Lincoln and expressed dissatisfaction with the policy which he was pursuing "with regard to the slaves of rebels." That Greeley's attack was offensive in tone did not deter the President from taking it seriously and using the opportunity, thus afforded, to state with new clarity the philosophy which he had come with such personal struggle to espouse. But before he stated his policy, he, with subtle humor, took Greeley's self-righteousness down a peg. Referring to the editorial, he said, "If there be in it any statements, or assumptions of fact, which I may know to be erroneous, I do not, now and here, controvert them. If there be in it any inferences which I may believe to be falsely drawn, I do not, now and here, argue against them. If there be perceptible in it an impatient and dictatorial tone, I waive it in deference to an old friend, whose heart I have always supposed to be right."

Then came Lincoln's matured statement of national policy. "I would," he said, "save the Union. I would save it in the shortest way under the Constitution." While there was no doubt about his "personal wish that all men everywhere would be free," he had also an official duty. While the official responsibility did not modify the personal wish, it necessarily took precedence over it. This is amazingly unambiguous when we hear Lincoln say it, but only by his inner struggle did he achieve such clarity of thought. Because of this inner development, Lincoln could with a complete

absence of confusion answer Greeley's judgmental mood with one which was radically different. "My paramount object in this struggle is to save the Union and is not either to save or destroy slavery. If I could save the Union without freeing any slave I would do it, and if I could save it by freeing all the slaves I would do it; and if I could save it by freeing some and leaving others alone I would also do that." Such a policy was not applauded by extremists on either side, but the Union was saved!

Only five days after Lincoln's reply to Greeley there began the Second Battle of Bull run, a battle which ended as disastrously for the Union forces as the earlier one on the same field more than a year before. On August 30 the army commanded by General John Pope was routed. It was after virulent complaints and a whole series of discouraging events that the "Meditation on the Divine Will," already reproduced in Chapter 1 (page 8), was written. "It was," Hay said later, "penned in the awful sincerity of a perfectly honest soul trying to bring itself into closer communion with its Maker."19

In the same month in which the Meditation was written, Lincoln conferred with Chicago men representing all denominations, who presented a memorial in favor of national emancipation. The President took seriously the message of his Chicago visitors when he met with them on September 13, 1862. His careful answer to them reveals both his determination to follow God's will, as revealed to him, and also his sense of perplexity because of the conflicting opinions of devout men. "The subject presented in the memorial," he responded, "is one upon which I have thought much for weeks past, and I may even say for months. I am approached with the most opposite opinions and advice, equally certain that they represent the Divine will. I am sure that either the one or the other class is mistaken in that

belief, and perhaps in some respects both. I hope it will not be irreverent for me to say that if it is probable that God would reveal His will to others, on a point so connected with my duty, it might be supposed He would reveal it directly to me; unless I am more deceived in myself than I often am, it is my earnest desire to know the will of Providence in this matter." Then the President added, with emphasis, "And if I can learn what it is I will do it!"²⁰ The men whom the President faced in this important interview were unaware that in only nine days the emancipation for which they pleaded would be announced.

The Battle of Antietam, September 17, 1862, was far more than a military engagement. The biographer of Jefferson Davis, Hudson Strode, stresses this point even more than most Northern scholars have done. "When Lee," he says, "crossed the Potomac back into Virginia on that September 19, 1862, the curve of the Confederacy's fortunes turned decisively downward. Never again was President Davis to know such golden prospects for independence."²¹ Apart from the Emancipation Proclamation, Lincoln could not have won such widespread foreign approval, and apart from Antietam, the Proclamation would not have been issued when it was. "And if Lee," writes Strode, "had been victorious the Emancipation Proclamation would certainly have been postponed and probably never have been issued."²²

Feeling sure that what transpired on the Maryland battlefield, indecisive as it was in some ways, constituted a signal to go forward, the President rewrote the Proclamation on September 21 and presented it to his Cabinet on September 22. Immediately thereafter it was known to the country and to the world. It did not go as far as one set of extremists wished, and it was

denounced by others as unjust to slave owners, but it accorded with Lincoln's sense of what was best under the circumstances.

When on September 22, 1862, President Lincoln met with his Cabinet in the scene depicted in Carpenter's painting, he deliberately began the momentous occasion with comic relief. Before making the announcement that was to become common knowledge within a few hours, he read, from a book which Artemus Ward had sent to him, a short chapter entitled "High-Handed Outrage at Utica." By such means the often sorrowful man relaxed both himself and others. He was demonstrating again the thesis propounded by Socrates at the end of Plato's Symposium: "the true artist in tragedy was an artist in comedy also."

After the comedy, Lincoln continued with the greatest solemnity, revealing for the first time the connection between his decision and his "solemn vow," which some historians have neglected. "Many," says Professor Wolf, "omit the specific statement of Lincoln about a 'solemn vow before God' and describe instead 'a solemn resolution.' This, however, is to substitute a black and white photograph with blurred focus for the rich colors of a masterpiece. The problem is not one of historical evidence. Few incidents in Lincoln's life are so well documented as this one."²³ The President uttered the solemn words, referring to his document as a declaration, thus, by a word, connecting his own thought with the main stream of American experience. Another declaration, that of Independence, which had been issued eighty-six years earlier, provided him with a theme which he now proposed to carry to its logical conclusion.

In a year filled with important decisions and encounters, one event which contributed greatly to the final outcome occurred on Sunday morning, October 26. At that time Lincoln was visited by Eliza Gurney and a

few others who sought to share with the

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President in the bearing of his burdens. What was originally understood by Lincoln as an ordinary interview turned out to be a genuine time of worship.²⁴ Even though the publication of the Emancipation Proclamation had already occurred, October was a very dark time. Oliver P. Morton, the wartime Governor of Indiana, wrote to the President, "Another three months like the last six and we are lost -- lost."²⁵

Eliza Gurney (1801-1881) was the widow of the famous English banker and Quaker minister Joseph John Gurney. An American by birth, President Lincoln at first took her to be English. She had lived in England, at Earlham Hall, Norwich, until her husband's death, after which she returned to her native land. Like any sensitive person, Mrs. Gurney was deeply wounded by the sorrows of the Civil War and felt especial sympathy for President Lincoln in his position of awesome responsibility. Accordingly, she was led, in October, 1862, to try to pay what she called a "religious visit" to the President, being accompanied on this visit by three other Friends, John M. Whitall, Hannah B. Mott, and James Carey. Not one of these sought anything for himself or herself, and none came either to criticize or to offer unasked advice. Because they came only to give spiritual support to one who sorely needed it, the President responded with unusual warmth. Consequently, he encouraged his visitors to stay much longer than the fifteen minutes originally intended, sharing with them in both silence and prayer.

"It was on the morning of the first day of the week, in a beating rain, that the little party repaired to the White House, where they were at once introduced into the private apartment of President Lincoln Deep thoughtfulness and intense anxiety marked his countenance, and created involuntary sympathy for

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him in this great national crisis."²⁶ The participants left a careful account of what occurred. they spoke of "the almost awful silence," which moved the President deeply. He was accustomed to hearing words, many of them boring, but he was not accustomed to group silence. "The tears," we are told, "ran down his cheeks," and when vocal prayer was offered, "he reverently bowed his head." After a time of silence Mrs. Gurney gave what was, in essence, a short sermon, which is reproduced in the Lincoln Papers. At the close of her sermon she knelt "and uttered a short but most beautiful, eloquent and comprehensive prayer that light and wisdom might be shed down from on high, to guide our President." After some further silence Lincoln himself spoke, uttering one of the most revealing messages of his entire career. While he obviously had no notes, and could not have had any advance intimation of what his visitors would say or do, the message turned out to be a remarkably finished one. This was possible because what he said was really a summary of what had been developing in his thought during more than a year of intellectual and spiritual struggle. The "instrument" theme here receives its finest expression.

We are indeed going through a great trial -- a fiery trial. In the very responsible position in which I happen to be placed, being a humble instrument in the hands of our Heavenly Father, as I am, and as we all are, to work out his great purposes, I have desired that all my works and acts may be according to his will, and that it might be so, I have sought his aid -- but if after endeavoring to do my best in the light which he affords me, I find my efforts fail, I must believe that for some purpose unknown to me, He wills it otherwise. If I had had my way, this war would never have been commenced; if I had been allowed my way this war would have been ended before this, but we find it still continues; and we must believe that He permits it for some wise purpose of His

own, mysterious and unknown to us; and though with our limited understandings we may not be able to comprehend it, yet we cannot but believe, that he who made the world still governs it.²⁷

The influence of Eliza Gurney on Lincoln's spiritual development is much more profound than has usually been recognized by Lincoln interpreters. Some biographers do not even mention her! Of especial interest is the fact that President Lincoln asked Mrs. Gurney to write to him, the request being transmitted through Isaac Newton, United States Commissioner of Agriculture. The President did this because he felt the need of spiritual support and had found a person who, without a trace of self-seeking, was able to give it. Accordingly, Mrs. Gurney wrote on August 18, 1863, from her new home in Atlantic City. The President's letter of September 4, 1864, which we have already quoted, was his response. In this it is important to remember he referred gratefully to the shared worship in the White House. "I have not forgotten -- probably never shall forget --," he wrote, "the very impressive occasion when yourself and friends visited me on a Sabbath forenoon two years ago."

The Lincoln-Gurney letters,²⁸ taken along with the "Meditation on the Divine Will," provide a genuine introduction to the theme completed in the Second Inaugural. The organ tones of that utterance are already suggested in Lincoln's letter to Mrs. Gurney, especially in the sentence, "The purposes of the Almighty are perfect, and must prevail, though we erring mortals may fail to accurately perceive them in advance." The expressions of the Second Inaugural would not have seemed novel to hearers if they had been able to read in advance the letters which passed between the struggling President and the widow of Joseph John Gurney. Most notable of all in Lincoln's letter is the

near-perfect style of the sentence, "Surely He intends some great good to follow this mighty conclusion which no mortal could make, and no mortal could stay."

However long we face it, the miracle of Lincoln never ceases to astound us. How can it be that a person devoid of the advantages of a formal education should achieve such perfection of written and spoken style? As was true at Gettysburg, however memorable the deeds may have been, the words were more memorable still. When Lincoln said "The world will little note, nor long remember, what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here," he was being gloriously inaccurate.

the dark and gloomy year, called 1862, turned out to be a year of genuine accomplishment. It was the year in which the Emancipation Proclamation received laborious thought and final publication, going into effect on the first day of 1863. After that there were more months of discouragement, but the big change had already come, because the basic philosophy of Union had at last been formulated. Above all, Lincoln had completely outmaneuvered the troublesome radicals. Many of these, putting their entire emphasis upon the elimination of slavery, had neglected the need to preserve the Union. By making the Emancipation Proclamation a war measure, and not merely one of detached idealism, Lincoln spiked the guns of his severest critics. The war measure as declared was of limited application, but it was hailed by the Abolitionists as good news, and no one could doubt that, with one condition, slavery was doomed in the entire nation. That condition, as Lincoln shrewdly saw, was the successful completion of the war, with the consequent restoration of the Union as a single country. The practical consequence of this action was that nothing that threatened to limit the efficiency of the President, as Commander-in-chief, had the slightest chance of gaining Abolitionist support.

The sharp tension between the effort to restore the Union and

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the effort to abolish slavery was something which Reinhold Niebuhr found enduringly intriguing. It was largely because of the way in which Lincoln handled this tension that Professor Niebuhr asserted the eminence of Lincoln as a theologian. "It was significant," Niebuhr said in his West Lectures at Stanford University, "that though Lincoln was prepared to save the union 'half slave and half free' it soon became apparent that this could not be done. The union could be saved only by abolishing slavery. This is a nice symbol of the fact that order precedes justice in the strategy of government; but that only an order which implicates justice can achieve a stable peace. An unjust order quickly invites the resentment and rebellion which lead to its undoing."²⁹

It is fortunate that the leader of the nation in its time of greatest internal division was a thinker as well as a politician. As the agonizing months wore on, he saw, increasingly, that there could not be a merely military solution of the conflict. Union was one idea and emancipation was another, but he came to see the intricacy with which these two conceptions were intertwined. The way in which the Emancipation Proclamation was originated, developed, and superbly time, far from being accidental, was the product of reasoning concerning both order and justice.

The real climax of the year of decision came one month before 1862 was ended, in Lincoln's Message to Congress. In this utterance there appears the true character of the final plateau. "And while," Lincoln began, "it has not pleased the Almighty to bless us with a return of peace, we can but press on guided by the best light He gives us." This was not calm after the storm, it was calm in the midst of storm.

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1. William J. Wolf, Lincoln's Religion, p. 91. [BACK]
 2. Nicolay and Hay, IV, p. 368. [BACK]
 3. Message to Congress in Special Session, July 4, 1861. Collected Works, IV, p. 426. [BACK]
 4. See T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and the Radicals (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1960). [BACK]
 5. Lincoln (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1922), p. 257. [BACK]
 6. Our most reliable account of this visit is provided by artist Francis B. Carpenter in his book, Six Months in the White House. [BACK]
 7. Learning that Dr. Vinton had published a sermon on eternal life, Lincoln asked that a copy be sent to him. Carpenter said he read it many times. [BACK]
 8. The Life of Abraham Lincoln, II, p. 92. [BACK]
 9. Stephenson, Lincoln, p. 261. The reader who wishes to see a brief statement of Stephenson's conclusions is advised to study his essay on Lincoln in the Encyclopaedia Britannica, 14th edition, Vol. 14.

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10. Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln, The War Years, I, p. 501. [BACK]
11. Collected Works, V, p. 92. [BACK]
12. The three-page printed document is in Friends House Library, London. [BACK]
13. Bright had, however, the strong support of Queen Victoria and the Prince Consort. Prince Albert's effort to secure an alteration in the peremptory dispatch to Lincoln was the last act of his life. He died December 14, 1861. [BACK]
14. Collected Works, V, p. 278. [BACK]
15. Proceedings of Progressive Friends, 1862, p. 11. [BACK]
16. Stephenson, Lincoln, p. 199. [BACK]
17. Collected Works, V, p. 292. [BACK]
18. J. G. Randall, Lincoln the President (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1945), II, p. 156. [BACK]
19. Nicolay and Hay, VI, p. 342. [BACK]
20. Collected Works V. pp. 419, 420. [BACK]
21. Jefferson Davis, Confederate President (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc. 1959), pp. 306, 307. [BACK]
22. Ibid., p. 307. [BACK]
23. Lincoln's Religion, pp. 17, 18. [BACK]
24. This aspect of the gathering is mentioned in White House Sermons, with introduction by Richard Nixon (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), p. 214. [BACK]
25. Quoted in Sandburg, Abraham Lincoln, The War Years, I, p. 590. [BACK]
26. Memoir and Correspondence of Eliza P. Gurney, edited by Richard F. Mott (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott and Company, 1884), pp. 307, 308. [BACK]
27. Collected Works, V, p. 478. [BACK]
28. The entire Lincoln-Gurney correspondence is available in the Library of Congress. [BACK]
29. The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. 181. [BACK]

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